

Snapshot of food in the Illawarra

This content has been informed by the [Illawarra Regional Food Strategy 2013](#).

Background

The Illawarra refers to the coastal local government areas (LGAs) of Kiama Municipal Council, Shellharbour City Council and Wollongong City Council. Together, the Councils are responsible for an area of approximately 112,000 hectares and a population of almost 290,000 people. The relative land and population distribution between the three LGAs is summarised below¹.

	KMC	SCC	WCC	TOTAL
Land Area (ha)	25,779	14,739	71,544	112,062
Population	20,832	66,054	201,215	288,101

In our region, as across Australia and the rest of the world, there is a growing movement focussed on rebuilding a relationship with good food, which is ethically produced, and with minimal ecological impact. A fairer and more sustainable regional food system will contribute to an enlivened, enterprising, connected and ultimately healthier community.

What is the status of the food system in the Illawarra?

The Illawarra is blessed with abundant natural resources, a great climate, and fertile soils that have helped to feed and house populations of contemporary, colonial, and traditional Indigenous communities over many thousands of years.

Since European settlement, coal mining, dairying and metal manufacturing have dominated the regional economy. However, substantial economic readjustment has changed the region's employment and industry landscape in recent times, with the transition² offering opportunities for growth in a range of areas.

Economic transition has the potential to positively influence the future of food in our region. The Tourism, Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry, and Education sectors present opportunities to make a major contribution to regional food security and food system sustainability³. With leadership and investment, local food production and food-oriented service delivery will emerge as part of a more diversified regional economic future.

A key challenge will be the increasing demand for residential development and lifestyle land, which can compete with agricultural diversification, and protection and retention of land to produce food. In the Illawarra today, most agricultural land is used for grazing and cropping, with a significant proportion of land set aside for conservation⁴.

¹ ABS Census of Population and Housing 2011 cited in profile.id.

² RDA Illawarra, Regional Plan: 2010-2015 (Updated) (RDA Illawarra, Wollongong, 2011), p.12

³ ABS Census of Population and Housing as cited in Wilkinson, John 'The Illawarra: An Economic Profile' e-brief, NSW Parliamentary Research Service, December 2011.

⁴ ABARES Agriculture and Fisheries in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, 2013.

The gross value of agricultural production in our region, however, is only around \$30 million, representing less than 1% of total gross agricultural production in NSW. This is significantly lower than comparable regional areas⁵. Kiama's contribution to the total figure is significant, due in large part to the high value of agricultural operations attributable to a relatively small number of large milk producers.

	KMC	SCC	WCC	TOTAL
Total Land Area (ha)	25,779	14,739	71,544	112,062
Population	20,832	66,054	201,215	288,101
Gross Value Agricultural Commodities (GVAC) (\$m) ⁶	20.4	8.2	2.3	31.1
% contribution to total Illawarra GVAC	66%	26%	8%	100%
Total area of agricultural holding (ha) ⁷	-	-	-	17,729
Number of agricultural businesses (no.)	-	-	-	191

The Illawarra is connected to a complex globalised system of food production and distribution. Whilst there are still strong local sectors such as beef and dairy, and emerging niche producers and suppliers, most of what we eat comes from elsewhere. Food produced locally (and in the broader region) is quite likely to be transported out of the area in order to reach a market or for processing, before returning to our plates. Supply of food in the Illawarra is highly dependent on daily import of perishable foods via long distance refrigerated transport.

We are however blessed with pockets of highly productive land, and in theory have excellent geographic access to the significant food supply produced within the wider bioregion, including greater Sydney, the Shoalhaven, and the Southern Highlands.

The hospitality and retail sectors show signs of a renewed and energetic focus on good food, and innovative food-related experiences. There is an increasing interest from operators of all sizes in showcasing local produce, both as a point-of-difference for the consumer as well as to support the local economy. There is an emergent, and growing, interest in community-based food initiatives (for example community gardens and food cooperatives).

⁵ ABS Value of Agricultural Commodities Produced, Australia, 2010-11.

⁶ ABS Value of Agricultural Commodities Produced, Australia, 2010-11.

⁷ ABS, Agricultural Commodities Australia, 2010-11.

Issues affecting the Illawarra by Theme

FOOD PRODUCTION + CONSUMPTION

There are relatively low levels of local fruit + vegetable production, and distribution is not localised

Producers need training, financial assistance and technical support

Retailers, restaurants, and individuals have trouble accessing local produce

Farmers are not well supported by research, investment, and extension services to enable a sustainable livelihood

There is too much distance between farmers and consumers

Sustainable agriculture skills are not funded to enable farmers to respond to NRM and other challenges

Product prices do not reflect the true cost of production

Supermarket duopolies and corporatisation of the food system marginalises producers, creating unrealistic consumer expectations, and promoting wasteful practices

Cheap imports undermine fair food systems both locally and overseas

International trade agreements which commodify food frequently distort markets, undermine food sovereignty, promote wasteful 'parallel trade' in identical goods

Food production and consumption is inherently yet unnecessarily wasteful

Price and convenience drive food purchases

Distribution systems are not established, and favour transport to Sydney rather than local markets

Agricultural land is under threat from competing uses

Future production value of agricultural land is under-represented

Transportation of fresh produce is expensive

There are conflicting priorities for resource management (water, natural resources)

The ability to interpret and apply controls or mechanisms to enable food security and food production is limited by State planning systems

PLANNING + INFRASTRUCTURE

**GOVERNANCE +
ADVOCACY**

Councils are expected to provide leadership in enabling food security and food sustainability

Political leadership and policy support is essential to drive change

The State and Federal government should be urged to limit corporate control of food, and ensure that food labelling, marketing, retail and economic impacts are managed for the benefit of our community

There are no taxation incentives to farm

Extractive and other industries threaten agriculture: food production needs to be prioritised

State and Federal governments should be urged to enable Councils to protect prime arable land from development and extractive industries, and to create the planning mechanisms to enable this

**COMMUNITY
CAPACITY**

There is a low level of food literacy in our community

Income, skills, knowledge, gender, age and other factors contribute to pockets of high food insecurity

Many people in the Illawarra have poor transport access to retailers

Access to land to grow food is an issue

There is a need for training in basic skills, knowledge and values

The Illawarra is home to above-average numbers of people vulnerable to food insecurity, obesity and chronic diet-related disease

Access to funding for community initiatives is often ad-hoc or unavailable

Advertising and marketing of unhealthy food, particularly to children, requires controls

Affordability and availability of seasonal fresh locally grown food is poor

Community food initiatives and urban farming needs to be promoted, supported, resourced and celebrated in schools, public places and on private land

There is a low level of knowledge of local food production, and limited connection between producers and consumers

Identified Opportunities

Growing the Local Food Economy

Providing leadership to maximise the economic, tourism, employment and ecological benefits possible through increasing local food production is a key opportunity. Employment in the agriculture, fishing and forestry sector at around 1.7% of the overall economy still remains below the State average of 2.5%. Tourism is dominated by domestic day visitors, and has experienced a net growth of 77% in ten years to 2011. These sectors, along with new opportunities in food retail, hold opportunities to make a major contribution to the local food economy.

Success will depend on investment in training, the use of web-based technologies to create innovative marketing and distribution options, the promotion of regional food tourism, and strengthening the links between producers and consumers.

Research and Data

Gaining a more thorough picture of the extent of hunger and food insecurity is essential to plan future service and infrastructure delivery. Understanding food distribution and supply systems relative to population and infrastructure must inform future transport and residential planning. More accurate regional information on local producers is required to identify growth and diversification opportunities in the sector.

Reduce Food Waste and Ecological Footprint

Capitalising on existing waste programs and the proximity of productive land, our region is ideally placed to facilitate best practice food waste avoidance, food aid and rescue, and the return of organic material to the soil. Community education to promote sustainable consumption of food can improve health, whilst directly targeting the behaviours responsible for the majority of our ecological footprint.

Access to Land to Grow Food

There are opportunities to facilitate links between growers and land owners, improve processes for community and market gardens, and ensure that arable land is conserved for current and future food production.

Identified aspirations

Improve health and reduce inequities of locally available food

Reduce the negative ecological impacts of the current food system

Leadership to support a vibrant local food economy

Celebrate and grow a regional food culture

Support diversification and regional food security

Protect agricultural and other land and retain for future generations

About the Illawarra Regional Food Strategy

In 2009, the Illawarra Councils received a grant from the NSW Government's Environmental Trust to deliver a regional project called the Illawarra Biodiversity and Local Food Strategy for Climate Change (IBLFSCC).

The Illawarra Regional Food Strategy 2013 was the final output of this grant, and followed with three years of direct investment in an ambitious and wide-ranging project. Activities have included the establishment of new school and community gardens, facilitation of skills-based community education, development of resources to provide information and access to services, policy review, and the establishment of fruit tree groves and bush food gardens.

Through this Strategy there was the opportunity to recognise the community's ambition for a healthier and more sustainable future, celebrate and support emerging initiatives, and to identify clear and targeted actions to progress.

Unfortunately, the strategy has expired without a verified plan to evaluate its outcomes or renew the strategy.

Ways to connect

Learn more and access our resources at foodfairnessillawarra.org.au

Join the conversation [FB/Food Fairness Illawarra](https://www.facebook.com/foodfairnessillawarra)

For more ways to get involved email us at mail@foodfairnessillawarra.org.au