

You, me and the future of brie: Getting the balance right for a sustainable diet

Overview

Achieving a healthy, sustainable dietary pattern relies on a balance between nutrition and the environment, but also social, cultural and economic factors.

As the dairy sector strives to get the balance right for a sustainable diet, Australians are yet to strike the right balance when it comes to eating for their own health and that of the world.

In November 2023, internationally renowned nutrition scientist and dietitian Dr Joanna McMillan hosted an event that explored Australia's current eating habits, the changes needed for a healthier and more sustainable diet and the dairy sector's focus on sustainability, continuous improvement and practice change on farms and in manufacturing.

Keynote speaker CSIRO research scientist Dr Gilly Hendrie, an expert in diet, nutrition and obesity prevention, and panellists, dairy farmer Trish Hammond and dairy manufacturer Emily Best, were joined by stakeholders for the Australian Dairy Sustainability Framework at the event.

Five themes of interest to nutritionists and dietitians emerged:

1. The quality of Australians' diet overall is worse than ever.
2. Shifting eating habits needs more marketing and education.
3. There is more to 'sustainable food' than planetary and human health.
4. All food and every diet has an impact on the environment.
5. Dairy is committed to producing nutritious food sustainably.

The event concluded that getting the balance right for a sustainable diet goes beyond nutrient content, health outcomes and benefits for the planet. It also covers economics and society.

Sustainable diets are those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources.”

- Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN

The quality of Australians' diet overall is worse than ever

Australia is failing when it comes to a healthy diet. Of the 235,000 adults who completed the CSIRO Healthy Diet Score survey between 2015-2023, the average score was 55/100.

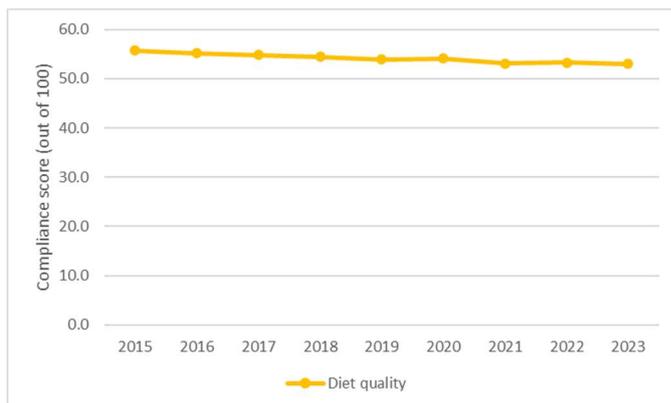
The Australian Dietary Guidelines promote a variety of “*different types and colours*” of vegetables and “*the wide variety of foods*” within the meat and alternatives group. The typical Australian diet contains higher than recommended amounts of discretionary or junk foods.

Research reveals that milk, cheese and yoghurt play an important role in healthy dietary patterns, with the dairy sector contributing positively to healthy outcomes for people and the planet.

Key points

- A variety of foods, types and colours is promoted in dietary guidelines.
- Whole foods and balanced diets are better than ultra-processed foods.
- Australians are not eating enough dairy foods, healthy fats or vegetables.

The quality of the Australian diet is worse than ever



Source: the CSIRO Healthy Diet Score survey

“The overall diet quality of Australians is poor. We’re meeting half the dietary recommendations. The poorest performing areas are discretionary food intake (we eat two to three times more than what’s recommended), dairy foods, healthy fats and vegetables (we’re not eating enough).”

- CSIRO scientist Dr Gilly Hendrie, an expert in diet, nutrition and obesity prevention

How do we get the balance right for a sustainable diet?

- Eat to our energy needs – choose a nutrient dense diet with adequate, not excessive, kilojoules.
- Consume a wide variety of foods – eat a variety of foods, types and colours.
- Eat a balance of foods across food groups – don’t depend on any one food group.

Did you know? The diet recommended by the Australian Dietary Guidelines, which includes milk, cheese and yoghurt, is more affordable than the typical Australian diet.

Shifting eating habits needs more marketing and education

Like Australia, many countries have food based dietary guidelines. They are designed to influence policies that shape the food system and population diets.

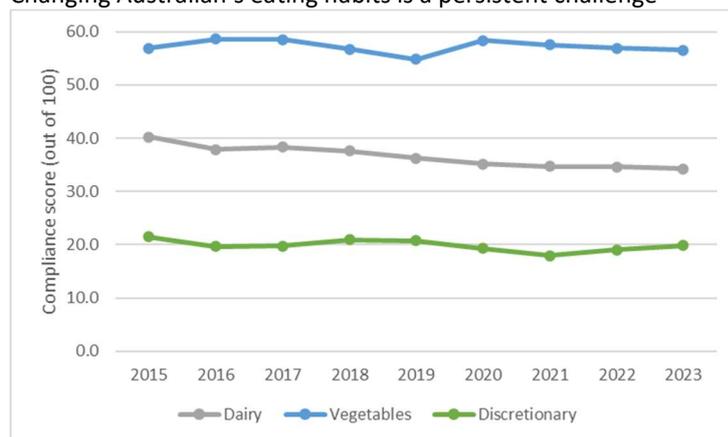
Achieving multiple dietary goals concurrently can be difficult, however eating more in line with the Australian Dietary Guidelines helps contribute to a lower impact, higher quality diet.

While changing dietary behaviours could reduce the impact of food production on the environment, it's the food production sector where the opportunity to reduce impact is greatest.

Key points

- A low awareness of dietary guidelines is a barrier to better eating habits.
- Food labelling and star ratings are unlikely to nudge eating behaviours.
- Education, practical guidance are needed to support a change in eating habits.

Changing Australian's eating habits is a persistent challenge



Source: CSIRO Healthy Diet Score survey

“Focusing on changes in one aspect of a diet doesn’t necessarily mean a healthier dietary pattern overall. A low awareness of the dietary guidelines and the impacts of food production is a real barrier to improving people’s eating habits and the health of the planet.”

- CSIRO scientist Dr Gilly Hendrie, an expert in diet, nutrition and obesity prevention

“I don’t think we’ve been all that good at marketing our dietary guidelines. You can’t blame the dietary guidelines for the state of our health because invariably nobody is following them.”

- Dr Joanna McMillan, renowned nutrition scientist and dietitian

How do we get the balance right for a sustainable diet?

- Improve the food literacy, meal planning and culinary skills of Australians.
- Promote diets with a balance of food groups, in line with recommendations.
- Focus on changes in food production where opportunities for making an impact are greatest.

Did you know? Australian research reveals that high nutritional quality, low emissions diets typically feature milk, cheese and yoghurt as a key constituent.

‘Sustainable food’ is more than planetary and human health

A sustainable diet is not as simple as eating food that is good for the climate and human health. It must also consider cultural and humanitarian aspects of sustainability or food affordability.

Buying locally produced dairy foods in Australia ensures money goes back into regional communities and families through income and job creation within and beyond the dairy industry.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommended diet (which includes milk, cheese and yoghurt) is a low impact, high quality diet and is more affordable than a typical Australian diet.

Key points

- A sustainable food system enhances the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health for all.
- A one-size fits all diet does not consider cultural and humanitarian aspects of sustainability or food affordability.
- The impact of food on the environment expands beyond GHG emissions to water, land, deforestation and biodiversity.

“Today, when we think about healthy eating, we must consider not just what is best for the human body, but what is best for our planet, economics and society. The challenge is for us to change our food systems to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health for all.”

- Dr Joanna McMillan, renowned nutrition scientist and dietitian

How do we get the balance right for a sustainable diet?

- Think more holistically – consider cultural and humanitarian aspects of sustainability or food affordability.
- Buy dairy foods produced in Australia – the money goes back into regional communities and families.
- Follow the Australian Dietary Guidelines – the recommended diet is more affordable than the typical Australian diet.

Did you know? 33,500 people are directly employed by Australian dairy industry.
(Australian Dairy Industry In Focus, 2023)

All food and every diet has an impact on the environment

All food production has an impact on the environment. But foods have varying impacts depending on which environmental metric you are considering.

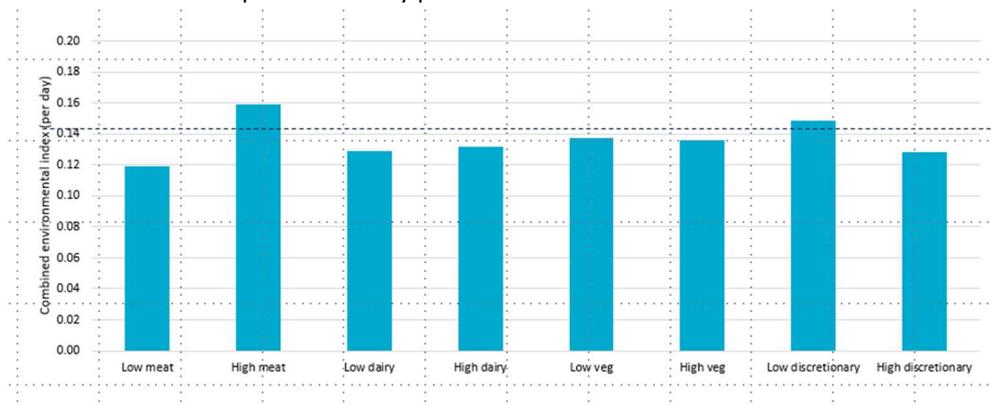
The impact of food production on the environment expands beyond greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to impacts and metrics for water, land, deforestation and biodiversity.

While changing dietary behaviours could reduce the impact of food production on the environment, it's the food production sector where the opportunity to reduce impact is greatest.

Key points

- All food produced, for every diet, has an impact on the environment.
- The biggest impact of food on the environment is made in production.
- Dietary choice is not the only way consumers can reduce their impact.

The environmental impacts of dietary patterns



Source: CSIRO

“The food system is a complex web of activities involving the production, processing, transport, and consumption. Issues concerning the food system include the governance and economics of food production, its sustainability, the degree to which we waste food, how food production affects the natural environment and the impact of food on individual and population health.”

- CSIRO scientist Dr Gilly Hendrie, an expert in diet, nutrition and obesity prevention

How do we get the balance right for a sustainable diet?

- Consume energy to meet personal needs – limit overconsumption of kilojoules.
- Think beyond GHG emissions – consider the impacts of food on water, land, deforestation and biodiversity.
- Reduce household food waste – it's a simple way for consumers to reduce food GHG emissions.

Did you know? GHG emissions generated by dairy manufacturers in Australia are down 27% since 2010/11.

Dairy is committed to producing nutritious food sustainably

Sustainable diets have a low environmental impact. They are healthy, and affordable and acceptable to society. The Australian dairy sector plays a role in each of these domains of sustainability.

The Australian Dairy Sustainability Framework sets out the industry's promise to provide nutritious food for a healthier world. The framework pledges four commitments to the environment, people and communities, animals and human health and nutrition.

The framework covers dairy farming and manufacturing and includes goals and targets for sustainable production. Each year, the dairy sector reports progress towards the goals and targets.

Key points

- Dairy's sustainability promise: to provide nutritious food for a healthier world.
- The dairy sector openly reports progress towards sustainability goals, targets.
- Dairy sustainability covers the environment, livelihoods, animals, consumers.

“In Australia, the focus on our national packaging targets (by 2025) and the upscaling of collection schemes to recycle more packaging is accelerating action to reduce waste packaging in the dairy sector.”

- Emily Best, Sustainability Manager, Brownes Dairy – dairy manufacturer



Brownes:

- Integrates ESG into their corporate strategy.
- Pays farmers a milk premium to undertake on-farm carbon audits.
- Won a global packaging award for a renewable, unbleached milk carton.

“In our business we try to use everything (e.g., water, effluent, feed bedding) we can and recycle it in ways that benefit other systems on the farm. This means we’re bringing in less inputs and using what we’ve got to do the best job we can. This is how we’re reducing our impact on the environment.”

- Trish Hammond, Director, MPH Farming - dairy farmer

MPH Farming:

- Uses water in three ways – cleaning, for effluent ponds which assist with fertiliser application, and irrigation.
- Does soil testing to optimise fertiliser and effluent use.
- Owns 2,000 livestock, manages 18 workers.

How do we get the balance right for a sustainable diet?

- Create a vibrant industry that rewards dairy workers and their families, communities.
- Provide nutritious, safe, quality dairy food for consumers.
- Strive to provide best care for all animals throughout their lives.
- Meet the challenges of climate change and providing good stewardship of our natural resources.

Did you know? 93% of waste from dairy manufacturers is diverted from landfill.