

Executive Summary

Overview

The Regenerative Food & Farming Alliance (RFFA) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to inform the development of the 2026–27 Federal Budget.

RFFA is a national alliance of farmers and organisations working across Australia’s food and farming landscape. The Alliance advocates for stronger recognition of regenerative agriculture and for investment in the education, infrastructure and policy settings required to accelerate its adoption. Our unifying objective is to empower farmers to regenerate Australia’s landscapes and food systems through long-term, holistic and outcome-based national policy.

This submission outlines five priority investment areas that respond directly to escalating pressures on Australia’s food system, climate resilience, biodiversity, water resources and regional communities. Together, these priorities deliver measurable economic, ecological and social returns, while addressing growing risks to national food security and regional prosperity.

Australia’s food and farming systems are increasingly exposed to climate volatility, ecosystem decline and supply chain disruption. The hidden costs of the agrifood system are estimated at up to \$274 billion, reflecting environmental degradation, health impacts and economic inefficiencies. If left unaddressed, these costs will continue to compound, undermining future productivity and public finances.

RFFA’s priorities reframe landscape regeneration not as an expense, but as a strategic asset investment. Well-functioning soils, water systems and ecosystems reduce volatility, protect land assets value, strengthen supply chains and unlock new revenue opportunities. Farmers are central to delivering these outcomes, but require policy settings that recognise their role as stewards of national natural capital.

Key Recommendations Summary

- Recommendation 1: Establish a multi-phased Enhancing Local Food Security Fund to invest in regional food system infrastructure in increasingly vulnerable national supply chains
- Recommendation 2: Invest in a ‘National Applied Research Program: Risk Reduction practices for Drought, Flood and Fire’
- Recommendation 3: Create a special envoy representing the interests of food and farming systems to the recently formed National Food Council
- Recommendation 4: Fund a National Regenerative Transition Program to empower farmers as key agents of change and provide long-term financial incentives for transitioning producers

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- Recommendation 5: Develop an Ecological and Natural Capital Fund for Farmers to provide financial assistance in implementing Ecological Monitoring and Natural Capital Accounting

About RFFA

The Regenerative Food & Farming Alliance (RFFA) is a national alliance of 5 founding organisations advancing farmers’ interests, with the support of an additional 13 organisations working across Australia’s food and farming landscape. The Alliance advocates for greater recognition of regenerative agriculture and for stronger, targeted investment in the education, tools and outcomes required to accelerate regenerative practices and secure a more resilient farming future for Australia.

RFFA’s focus is on advancing policy and legislative settings that increase regenerative land management and support farming systems that deliver three core outcomes:

1. Profitable, resilient family farm businesses
2. High-integrity food production
3. Landscapes regenerating within their ecological context

RFFA is founded on the principle that Australia’s food system challenges cannot be solved in isolation. Progress lies at the intersection of collaboration between agriculture, environment, trade and human health. When policy is shaped by and designed with farmers’ needs and perspectives in mind, Australia can collectively address the root causes of climate risk, ecological decline and food system vulnerability, rather than managing their symptoms.

Strategic Context and Vision

Across the Australian agricultural sector, the consequences of ecosystem decline is becoming increasingly visible. Supply chain vulnerability, national food security and declining asset value due to increasing climate risk are no longer abstract concerns; they are material economic realities with direct fiscal implications.

Investing in the regeneration of Australian landscapes reframes landscape repair not as a cost, but as a strategic asset investment. Healthy soils, functioning water cycles and resilient ecosystems enhance climate resilience, reduce ecological and economic volatility, and unlock new and diversified revenue streams across the agricultural economy.

Rising climate volatility, declining soil condition, water scarcity and evolving regulatory frameworks have shifted natural capital from a peripheral ESG consideration to a central investment risk. As Australia’s climate mitigation and

adaptation measurements improve, ecological risk has become more visible, more measurable and more financially material. Global investment trends increasingly reflect this reality, with the United States recently federally investing \$700M, supported by McDonald's US\$200M and New Zealand's \$50M in regenerative agriculture research in 2022.

The implications extend well beyond agriculture. Sectors dependent on functioning ecosystems - including insurance, construction, energy and manufacturing - are already exposed to Australia's lack of climate and landscape assurance. As a result, Australia's ecosystem infrastructure is increasingly and rightly being framed as a national security imperative. Like any critical infrastructure, it requires upfront investment, long-term stewardship and coordinated management. Australian farmers sit at the gateway of this system and are central to its success.

If Australia does not urgently address the hidden costs embedded in the agrifood system, up to an estimated \$274 billion worth of environmental and health burdens will continue to accumulate, progressively undermining productivity, increasing public expenditure and weakening long-term economic resilience (CSIRO, 2025).

The priorities outlined in this submission reframe Australia's current trajectory of rising climate and health risk. They offer a pathway towards greater economic, ecological and social resilience by shifting policy settings from reactive expenditure to preventative, asset-based investment.

In doing so, these priorities enable:

- A clear and evidence-based understanding of the returns from accelerating regenerative agriculture, including combined productivity gains, risk mitigation and expanded agricultural and environmental market revenue that is layered and diversified
- Deployment of capital at the portfolio level, aligning ecological improvement with operational performance and resilience
- Co-financing and investment structures that support system-scale adaptation and transformation, rather than fragmented mitigation projects with limited long-term impact
- Recognition of nature and ecosystem function as assets to be invested in and protected, rather than externalities to be managed after degradation has occurred

Alignment with Government Priorities

This submission has been developed to support the Government’s objectives of:

- **Climate Resilience:** Empowering farmers to address biodiversity loss and climate impacts through landscape regeneration.
- **Regional Investment:** Keeping value in regional communities through food hubs, co-operatives, and processing infrastructure.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** Integrating agriculture policy with health outcomes to ensure food security and public safety.
- **Sovereign Food Production Capability:** Building robust and resilient farming systems to immunise Australia against supply chain vulnerability, climate volatility and food insecurity.
- **Economic Productivity:** Driving the adoption of regenerative practices nationwide to reduce economically volatile input dependency and vulnerability to climate impacts whilst optimising agricultural outputs.
- **Trade Diversification:** Supporting the production of high integrity food and value-added exports to expand global market access and protect economic competitiveness of Australian agriculture.

Detailed Priority Areas:

Priority Area 1: Establish a Multi-Phased Enhancing Local Food Security Fund to Invest in Regional Food System Infrastructure

The Issue

Australia’s food system is facing a polycrisis that threatens both economic stability and food security. Five of the seven breached planetary boundaries are directly linked to food systems. At the same time, Australians are experiencing rising food costs, increasing climate disruption and declining regional infrastructure.

A major weakness is the lack of “missing middle” infrastructure; processing, storage, aggregation and distribution capacity between farm and market. This gap is estimated to cost the economy \$20–30 billion annually through lost value-adding opportunities, inefficient supply chains and farm business failure.

Small-to-medium scale farmers, who underpin domestic food supply, are carrying disproportionate risk. They invest in landscape repair, manage climate volatility, absorb rising costs and face sustained price pressure, often without access to fair markets. Without adequate post-farmgate infrastructure, much of the \$1.2 billion invested annually in regenerative practice change cannot deliver its full economic return.

Without intervention, 30–40% of mid-scale regenerative farms are projected to exit production by 2028, increasing consolidation and weakening national food resilience.

The Solution

RFFA proposes the establishment of a multi-phased Enhancing Local Food Security Fund to support 50–100 regional food hubs nationwide.

Regional food hubs provide shared infrastructure that enable farmers to aggregate supply, add value, access markets and retain wealth in regional communities. International evidence, including the USDA’s \$420 million Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program, demonstrates that targeted investment in food hubs strengthens resilience and regional economic performance.

The Fund would support:

- **Physical infrastructure:** cold storage, packing, processing, kitchens and distribution
- **Connection infrastructure:** aggregation services, buyer alignment and knowledge exchange
- **Business ecosystem support:** technology integration, incubation and market development

The Benefit

Economically, it could generate \$7.5–15 billion in economic activity over 10 years, create 2,500–5,000 jobs, and deliver an SROI of 3.2:1 to 4.8:1. Socially, it improves food security, supports Indigenous food enterprises and revitalises regional towns. Regionally, it strengthens supply chains, builds community ownership and reduces dependence on vulnerable metropolitan distribution. And climatically, it enables regenerative production at scale, reduces food miles and supports national climate and biodiversity targets.

Investment Required

- Year 1: \$15M (scoping, readiness grants, seed capital)
- Year 2: \$25M (capital co-investment grants, capacity building)
- Year 3: \$30M (capital co-investment grants, loan guarantees)
- Year 4: \$30M (final capital co-investment, guarantee facilities)

Leveraged Investment: Each Federal dollar is designed to catalyse 4:1 to 6:1 in additional capital through blended finance, creating:

- \$150-200 million in state/territory government co-investment
- \$100-150 million in impact investment and commercial debt
- \$50-75 million in philanthropic capital

- \$50-100 million in community equity and local investment

Total Program Value: \$450-625 million infrastructure investment (Federal \$100M + leveraged \$350-525M)

Offsets/Savings: This measure is expected to generate:

- \$150-200 million in increased tax revenue through expanded regional economic activity and farm business viability
- \$100-150 million in reduced welfare costs by maintaining farm businesses and creating regional employment
- \$50-75 million in reduced emergency food relief and food security interventions

Total Federal Government Cost: \$100 million over four years

Leveraged Investment: 4–6:1

Total Program Value: \$450–625 million

Offsets/Savings: Increased tax revenue, reduced welfare and lower emergency food relief costs

Priority Area 2: Invest in a ‘National Applied Research Program: Risk Reduction practices for Drought, Flood and Fire’

The Issue

Australia’s climate risks are increasing in frequency and severity. Natural disasters currently cost the economy \$38 billion per year, with agriculture among the most exposed sectors. Farmers report that regenerative practices reduce drought, fire and flood impacts, but Australia lacks a nationally consistent evidence base to measure and validate these outcomes across regions. This evidence gap limits adoption, weakens policy targeting and constrains insurance and finance settings.

The Solution

We know from existing research completed by Farming For The Future, that there is a statistically significant connection between improved ecology and a better bottom line - a bottom line that encompasses both economic and ecological resilience.

We believe acceleration of adoption can be achieved by enhancing this research capability that would provide context-specific, on the ground practice change based, scientifically robust methods to continually reveal the economic effect of investments in land management practices that fall under regenerative agriculture and result in greater drought, flood and fire resilience. To quantify the financial value of drought resilience and the time to realise returns on investment, further support for this

research is required. In funding this research, we can reveal the most powerful drivers of resilience in a local context.

The program would coordinate applied, on-farm research, establish consistent metrics, synthesise national insights and translate findings into decision-grade guidance for government, insurers, lenders and farmers.

The Benefit

Economically, it would reduce disaster recovery costs and improve targeting of resilience investment. Socially, it would ensure greater farm stability, reduced stress and faster recovery for communities. Regionally it could stabilise and support supply chains and employment all whilst accelerating the adoption of practices that restore soils, water cycles and biodiversity.

Investment Required

Total Federal Government Cost: \$50 million over four years

Leveraged Investment: Philanthropic co-investment identified, Research partners identified

Total Program Value: To be determined

Offsets/Savings: Reduced national disaster response, recovery expenditure and short term drought resilience funding

Priority Area 3: Create a Special Envoy Representing Food and Farming Systems to the National Food Council

The Issue

National food policy intersects agriculture, health, climate, trade and regional development, yet the current governance structure does not adequately reflect this complexity. Key perspectives, including regenerative agriculture, public health, climate risk and First Nations food systems, are underrepresented.

The Solution

Appoint a Special Envoy for Food and Farming Systems to complement the National Food Council by providing independent, systems-based advice and cross-portfolio integration.

The Benefit

In providing this support and resource to the National Food Council, it would lower long-term costs in health, disaster recovery and ecosystem repair. Socially it would ensure the improvement of food security strategy and public health outcomes. For our

regional communities it supports diversified, labour-intensive regional economies that we are at risk of losing. All the while positioning our national food policy to align national with climate and biodiversity objectives and commitments.

Investment Required

Total Federal Government Cost: \$1 million over four years

Leveraged Investment: N/A

Total Program Value: High policy leverage

Offsets/Savings: Avoided downstream public costs, Ensures a comprehensive scope is provided to the selected National Food Council

Priority Area 4: Fund a National Regenerative Transition Program

The Issue

Australia does not currently incentivise farmers to transition to regenerative practices at scale. The natural capital of our landscapes is degrading at a rate exceeding that of restoration and farmers lack financial safety nets to change systems without risking whole business viability.

At present, farmers lack the financial safety net required to change practices resulting in outcomes such as decreasing soil fertility rather than possible outcomes, such as increased soil fertility and the myriad of ecological and economic benefits that accompany regenerating landscapes, ie. increased carbon sequestration.

Soil degradation is just one example of the natural capital assets such as biodiversity, water cycles and pollinators that come at a risk of losing without landscape management practice intervention. Current soil loss across Australia exceeds 460 kg per hectare, per year, undermining productivity and water retention, despite soils delivering up to \$930 billion annually in ecosystem services. If we continue on the current trajectory, Australia risks further degradation of its natural capital and both short term and long term food security.

The Solution

Establish a National Regenerative Transition Program, modelled off the highly successful Australian FarmBis program - combining training, mentoring, tax incentives, structural adjustment support and farmer-led knowledge sharing.

The Benefit

Economically, it would reduce input dependency in the financially variable climate of inputs imported and improve economic productivity and resilience. Socially, the improved farmer wellbeing and decision-making confidence would impact statistics that we see such as Australian male farmers facing a suicide rate up to 94% higher

than the general population, with one dying by suicide roughly every 10 days. This crisis is driven by extreme environmental pressures (drought/fire), financial instability, geographic isolation, and a cultural stoicism that discourages seeking help. Providing programs of transition equals stronger, more resilient rural economies which we know directly translates to practices employed on ground that regenerate rather than degenerate landscapes; healthy soils, increased biodiversity and functioning water cycles.

The fund would be broken down into tiers of investment:

- Tier 1: (Foundational Tier): Awareness, Literacy and Decision Support: \$15M
- Tier 2: Transition Support & Practice Change: \$35M
- Tier 3: Outcomes, Monitoring & Market Access: \$20M
- Tier 4: Systems Learning, Policy Feedback & Scale: \$10M

Investment Required

Total Federal Government Cost: \$80 million over five years

Leveraged Investment: Private and state co-investment potential

Total Program Value: To be determined

Offsets/Savings: Reduced disaster losses and input volatility

Priority Area 5: Develop an Ecological and Natural Capital Fund for Farmers to provide financial assistance in implementing Ecological Monitoring and Natural Capital Accounting

The Issue

Climate impacts are rendering some regions increasingly marginal or unviable for agriculture in the future due to climate conditions and Australia's current funding focuses on post-disaster assistance rather than prevention, encouraging maladaptive outcomes.

At the same time, though awareness is increasing, farmers lack affordable access to tools to measure and manage natural capital.

The Solution

RFFA proposes the introduction of Government funded, remote sensed Natural Capital Reporting, aligned to the Australian and International Natural Capital Standards allowing farmers and land managers to baseline the state of their natural capital assets, followed by funding to improve environmental assets. Particularly funding made available for environmental assets that benefit the whole of society such as fencing off riparian areas, addressing erosion and topsoil runoff, enhancing water cycles and protecting natural habitat. This initiative would support the rollout and

access to natural capital accounting metrics and bio-region relevant benchmarking for farmers and land managers to improve the effectiveness and health of ecosystem processes, such as soil health, biodiversity and ecosystem function.

The Benefit

By providing funding for farmers and land managers to monitor and repair ecosystem function, soil health and consequently, their overall social well being, the Australian government encourages farmers to understand their natural capital value and in turn Australia’s ability to meet its global and national climate ambitions such as the Nature Repair Act. At present, this is a missed opportunity due to lack of uptake and accounting due to the financial cost of measurement

Economically, by investing \$500 million over the next 8 years, such funding would save the Budget approximately \$4 billion over 8 years, by reducing the effects of climate change on agricultural production and environmental integrity. Socially, investing now will provide farmers and land managers with options to improve their natural capital to mitigate the effects of climate change, making them feel less vulnerable and instead empowered to protect their economic and environmental sustainability into the future. This directly supports jobs in remote rural and regional areas across Australia and assists in keeping some rural and remote towns viable as we see their national decline.

Investment Required

Funding can be obtained from the existing Future Drought Fund (FDF) initiative and administered through various Regional Innovation Hubs, NRM networks such as Landcare, and Local Land Services (NSW), Landscape Boards (SA), CMA’s (VIC), etc which have direct access, established, existing relationships with farmers and land managers, in partnership with specialist organisations

Total Federal Government Cost: \$500 million over eight years (Future Drought Fund)

Leveraged Investment: Existing program delivery networks

Total Program Value: \$500 million

Offsets/Savings: \$4 billion in avoided economic losses

Summary of Financial Implications

The following table outlines the estimated investment required to implement these recommendations over the forward estimates (2026–27 to 2029–30).

<i>Recommendation</i>	2026-27 (\$m)	2027-28 (\$m)	2028-29 (\$m)	2029-30 (\$m)	Total (\$M)
<i>Recommendation 1:</i>	\$25M	\$25M	\$25M	\$25M	\$100.00

Recommendation 2:	\$12.5M	\$12.5M	\$12.5M	\$12.5M	\$50.00
Recommendation 3:	\$250K	\$250K	\$250K	\$250K	\$1M
Recommendation 4:	\$15M	\$35M	\$20M	\$10M	\$80M
Recommendation 5:	\$62.5M	\$62.5M	\$62.5M	\$62.5M	\$250M
TOTAL	\$115.25M	\$135.25M	\$120.25M	\$110.25M	

Conclusion

RFFA urges the Government to consider these measures as practical, high-value investments in Australia's future. By empowering farmers and regional communities, we can regenerate Australia's landscapes and food systems through long-term, integrated policy.

Further Reading

For further reading, please see our *Regenerating the Regions: How Food Hubs Can Build Resilience* report [here](#).

Appendix:

Health and Economic Burden of Australia’s Food System — Evidence Base and Modelling Framework

Purpose of this Appendix

This appendix summarises the current evidence linking Australia’s food and farming system to population health outcomes, and outlines a conservative, internationally aligned approach to estimating the associated health and economic burden. It is intended to inform fiscal and policy decision-making by situating regenerative food and farming within a health-economics and productivity framework relevant to Commonwealth budget considerations.

Food Systems as a Determinant of Population Health

A substantial body of international and Australian evidence identifies diet and food system characteristics as leading determinants of non-communicable disease (NCD)

burden, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, selected cancers, and neurological and inflammatory conditions.

The Global Burden of Disease (GBD) studies consistently rank **dietary risk factors** among the top contributors to disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) lost in high-income countries, including Australia. These risks include excess intake of ultra-processed foods, low intake of whole and nutrient-dense foods, and exposure to food-borne environmental contaminants.

Food systems influence health through multiple, interacting pathways, including:

- dietary composition and nutrient density;
- exposure to agricultural and food-contact chemicals;
- effects on gut microbiota, inflammation, and metabolic regulation; and
- broader environmental determinants such as soil quality and ecosystem degradation.

Ultra-Processed Foods and Chronic Disease Burden

Australia is among the highest consumers of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) globally. UPFs are characterised by high energy density, low fibre, low micronutrient content, and the presence of additives and industrial processing by-products.

Large systematic reviews and meta-analyses have demonstrated consistent associations between higher UPF consumption and increased risk of:

- obesity and metabolic syndrome;
- type 2 diabetes;
- cardiovascular disease;
- certain cancers; and
- all-cause mortality.

Dose–response relationships have been observed, with incremental increases in UPF consumption associated with proportional increases in disease risk. These associations persist after adjustment for total energy intake and socioeconomic factors, suggesting an independent contribution of UPFs to disease burden.

Australian health expenditure related to diet-related chronic disease is substantial. National analyses estimate that unhealthy diets and associated chronic conditions impose tens of billions of dollars annually in direct healthcare costs and indirect productivity losses.

Agricultural Chemicals and Food-Borne Toxic Exposures

Agricultural chemicals, including pesticides and related compounds, are routinely detected at low levels in food and in human biomonitoring studies. While individual exposures often fall below regulatory thresholds, there is growing evidence that **chronic, low-dose, multi-chemical exposure** may have population-level health impacts.

Emerging evidence links food-borne chemical exposure to:

- endocrine disruption;
- altered gut microbiota (dysbiosis);
- increased systemic inflammation;
- elevated risk of metabolic disease;
- neurodevelopmental effects; and
- selected cancers.

Recent global assessments of the health costs associated with synthetic chemicals in food systems estimate annual global health burdens in the order of **US\$1.4–2.2 trillion**, reflecting healthcare costs, productivity losses, and premature mortality. While these estimates are global and multi-chemical in scope, they provide a benchmark for national-level scaling using established health-economic methods.

Soil Health, Nutrient Density, and Upstream Health Risk

Soil degradation and declining soil organic matter have been linked to reduced micronutrient density in food crops and increased vulnerability of food systems to climatic and economic shocks. Although soil health impacts human health indirectly, it represents an **upstream structural determinant** of diet quality and long-term population resilience.

Nutrient dilution, combined with increased reliance on ultra-processed foods, may exacerbate micronutrient inadequacy even in high-income countries. This contributes to chronic disease risk by impairing metabolic regulation, immune function, and overall physiological resilience.

International assessments increasingly recognise soil health as part of the broader “true cost of food” framework, in which environmental degradation ultimately manifests as human health and economic costs.

Integrated Health Burden Modelling: Avoiding Double Counting

5.1 Rationale for an Integrated Approach

Ultra-processed foods, agricultural chemical exposures, and soil degradation are **not independent risk factors**. They act through overlapping biological pathways and converge on the same disease endpoints. As a result, summing cost estimates derived separately for each exposure would lead to double or triple counting.

To address this, international best practice (including GBD methodology) attributes disease burden at the level of health outcomes (e.g. cardiovascular disease, diabetes), and then estimates **overlapping attributable fractions** for different drivers.

5.2 Disease-Endpoint (DALY-Based) Framework

Under this approach:

1. Total food-system-attributable disease burden is estimated using DALYs.
2. DALYs are monetised using accepted Australian health-economic values.
3. Overlapping attributable fractions are applied to identify the relative contribution of different food system drivers.

This method is conservative, transparent, and aligned with Treasury and health-agency standards.

Indicative Health Burden Estimates for Australia

Using available Australian and international evidence:

- Dietary and food-system risks plausibly account for **approximately 8–12% of total DALYs** in Australia.
- This equates to roughly **400,000–700,000 DALYs per year**.
- Using a conservative valuation of **AUD 50,000–100,000 per DALY**, this implies an annual health burden in the range of **AUD 30–55 billion** attributable to the food system.

This range is consistent with:

- global “true cost of food” assessments scaled to Australia; and
- national estimates of diet-related healthcare and productivity losses.

Within this total (non-additive, overlapping):

- Ultra-processed foods likely account for the largest share (approximately 45–55%);
- Food-borne chemical exposures contribute an estimated 10–15%; and

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- Soil degradation and nutrient decline contribute an estimated 10–12% as upstream risk factors.
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7. Relevance to Fiscal Policy and Budget Decision-Making

From a Commonwealth budget perspective, food system-related health burdens:

- increase long-term healthcare expenditure;
- reduce labour productivity and workforce participation;
- exacerbate fiscal pressure from chronic disease management; and
- create intergenerational liabilities through preventable disease.

Investment in regenerative food and farming systems addresses these risks upstream by:

- improving diet quality and nutrient density;
- reducing reliance on harmful chemical inputs;
- enhancing ecosystem and soil resilience; and
- lowering long-term health system costs.

Such investments align with preventative health strategies and represent a fiscally prudent approach to managing future health and productivity liabilities.

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Concluding Note

The estimates presented in this appendix are intentionally conservative and consistent with established international health-economic methodologies. They demonstrate that Australia’s food system is a material driver of preventable health expenditure and

productivity loss, and that regenerative food and farming systems represent a credible upstream intervention with long-term fiscal benefits.