



Fear in the fields as urban sprawl looms

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CHOYSUM and Chinese broccoli that are delicately sliced from their roots at Y.T. Choy's farm at Kemps Creek on Friday afternoon sit on a shelf at Harris Farm Markets in Ultimo just 15 hours later.

It is a short 50-kilometre journey from field to shopping basket, made possible by the food bowl that lies in Sydney's western suburbs.

But concerns about the future of Sydney's farms were raised last week by comments from Opposition Leader Barry O'Farrell that he would shift more new housing to the urban fringe if elected in March.

A Coalition government, he said, would not continue to place 70 per cent of homes in established urban areas. "It will be closer to 50 [per cent] than 70... because that's the way I balance things," he said.

Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC) president Alison McLaren urged Mr O'Farrell to say where new developments would take place. "We would like to see the maps," she said.

A recent survey found there are 1052 farms in Sydney, mostly in the Liverpool, Penrith and the Hawkesbury areas. The further loss of farms in Sydney would increase the harmful environmental impact of transporting food long distances and could drive up the cost of fresh produce. Ms McLaren said.

"People in western Sydney are less likely to access fresh fruit and vegies if it becomes less affordable," she said. "The fattest region in Australia will get fatter."

While only 15 per cent of all vegetables consumed in Sydney are grown locally, that number goes up to almost 100 per cent of mushrooms and 85-95 per cent of cabbages, lettuces, Asian greens, cherry

tomatoes, silverbeet and fresh corn. The 25-hectare Kemps Creek farm *The Sun-Herald* visited on Friday grows a range of Asian greens and herbs. Mr Choy's family, who rent the land, have farmed in different parts of Sydney for three generations. "For the landlord, they might be happy about it because they might get to subdivide or sell to a developer," Mr Choy said about encroaching development. His produce is picked every afternoon, trucked to Flemington Market overnight and stocked in stores the next morning.

Tristan Harris, director of buying and marketing at Harris Farm Markets, said the proximity of these farms to shops provided advantages in terms of freshness and cheapness. "If they take that away from us and make us deal with the same big broadacre farms as the supermarkets, it would probably be a bit harder," he said.

North Sydney couple Jamie and Bernard Lai shop at Harris Farm Markets every fortnight to stock up on specialty Asian groceries. They are worried that if local farms disappear, so will their access to fresh, cheap produce.

"The food here is fresher and lasts longer in the fridge - it's better than Woolworths," Ms Lai said. "If farms go further away, food will get more expensive."

Ms McLaren said whoever took government in March needed to commit to rezoning swathes of land for agricultural purposes only.

Opposition planning spokesman Brad Hazzard said a statewide strategic plan would form a major part of their overhaul of the state's planning laws, which would be determined after consultation.

Mr Hazzard said they wanted a "better balance between shoe-horning people in existing suburbs without providing infrastructure... and new infrastructure and green-field development".

The Keneally government's Metropolitan Plan for Sydney 2036 states 30 per cent of Sydney's new homes will be on greenfield sites, mostly in the south-west and north-west growth areas. It is developing an agriculture policy.

A parliamentary briefing by researcher John Wilkinsin released on Friday stated even under the present strategy, new housing developments would result in the excision of around 6800 hectares of previously agricultural land.

Phillip O'Neil, from the Urban Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, said the long-term effects of depleting Sydney's farms were worrying.

"We have to start recognising that as energy shortages occur and climate change happens, we have to shorten supply chains in all sectors," he said.

His colleague Dr Sarah James said the importance of growing food locally was brought home to her recently when she went to buy silverbeet from her supermarket.

"It was \$5, and it was \$5 at the fruit shop next door, where they had a little sign saying 'increase in price due to the Queensland floods'.

"When I went out to Richmond... where they sell directly off the farm, they were selling silverbeet there for \$1.50. If you get food closer to where people are eating it, it can mitigate those rises in cost."



Farm fresh ... (far left) workers pick Chinese broccoli at Y.T. Choy's Kemps Creek farm on Friday; (left) hours later it is unloaded at Flemington Markets and (above) on the shelf at Harris Farm Markets' Ultimo store. Photos: Jacky Ghossein