Slow Food in Australia

Promoting a better food system in which good, clean and fair food is readily available to everyone

Slow Food Australia – Hot Topics

Australian Consumer Law Review

s a s a i ar ng a review of a i e r f ti comprehensive framework under the Competition and Consumer Act 2010.

v e be c r d nte r r p 160 s i r w ents are now invited on the review.

a t e e of good food a t on e t re who work in d’ s h s oduce food for consumption – not ur l ean and fair food for all. Our mov m nt e s, fishers, academics and researchers, restaurateurs and small farmers.

Slow Food Australia notes that the L eview has d s o it has met its n ov um t and comments from consultees are largely favourable and those conclusions.

m t a i s t a e e umers when they purchase food . S c on Interim report e he t s f th n n a nsumer policy framework. Its objective is:

c w ons ment and protection, to fost r f i t a h onfident w and suppliers trade fairly.

e t t e v t entified six operational objectives:

- to ensure that consumers are sufficiently well informed to benefit from, and stimulate effective competition
- to ensure that goods and services are safe and fit for the purposes for which they were sold
- to prevent practices that are unfair
- to meet the needs of those consumers who are most vulnerable, or at greatest disadvantage
- to provide accessible and timely redress where consumer detriment has occurred
- to promote proportionate, risk-based enforcement."

Slow Food believe that there continues to be a serious failure in respect of the first operational objective when it comes to food.Consumers cannot stimulate effective competition because they have increasing difficulty in obtaining clear and accurate information about the nature, origins and processing of the food they buy. Slow Food maintains that, were such information freely available, there would be a more competitive market and better outcomes for consumers, for many small businesses in farming and food processing, and better employment opportunities in rural Australia.

Background

Most of our food is now produced by large farm businesses, processed by increasingly large food processors and the majority (more than 90%) is sold to consumers by four major retailers. The food chain has grown noticeably longer in the past 70 years. Less and less produce goes directly from producers to consumers through markets. A very small amount of food is still directly harvested from the wild and even in those sectors like fisheries where this happens, the switch from wild catch to farmed catch is accelerating.

As farmers have increased production the emphasis has been on the quantity of output and the reduction of unit costs. That in turn has seen an increase in the intensity of production, with units dealing with very large numbers of livestock or large areas devoted to a single crop: intensive poultry units, cattle feed lots, large scale pig units, hundreds of hectares planted to one variety of wheat, cotton, sorghum or banana; these are now common sights in rural Australia. Less and less people are directly employed in agriculture, 3.3% of the workforce in 2011.

Seventy years ago, many consumers had family links to the land, and knew a good deal about the food they bought, where it came from and how it was processed. Many grew at least some of their own food. They perhaps kept a pig, a house cow, chooks in the back yard and grew a few vegetables. Most of us are city dwellers now and such activities are difficult if not impossible.

These changes in the production and processing of food have been encouraged by successive Governments whose priorities have been cheap food and food security and to a lesser extent protecting the health of consumers faced with the increased risks associated with farm intensification. The quality, taste, distinctiveness and cultural significance of food have not featured in any Agriculture Policy statement in living memory.

The agricultural industry has opted for the path of homogenisation, standardisation and productivity gains which erode biodiversity, food culture, heritage and taste, and impose low prices as the main criteria for food choices.

Operation of the market

In a market based economy, such as we have in Australia, consumers are rumoured to be kings. Most politicians would argue that the market serves consumers.

But, we need to ask whether this is really the case in modern day Australia. Think about it, if you shop for food at Coles, Woolworths, Aldi or the IGA and you want to send a message to producers that you wish to buy some food that is not on their shelves, how would you do it? Try it with something simple like buying Kipfler potatoes that have not been irrigated or a locally grown variety of banana (i.e. not Cavendish) or something more complex like a rib roast of beef from a certified Murray Grey steer. There is no evidence to suggest that consumers can succeed in getting any such messages to major retailers, let alone to farmers.

As far as many farmers are concerned the consumer is a food processor or a major retailer that sets out what they want in considerable detail via a contract. As far as most consumers are concerned the producer is the major retailer and his or her choice is what is on the shelves.

This situation results in poorly or misinformed consumers and a lack of real competition on food quality.

Much of the argument about how this situation might be rectified (so that the wellbeing of consumers is improved) has centred on improved accuracy of product labelling and a clearer distinction between advertising and promotion on the one hand and factual information on the other. The arguments have been well rehearsed in recent inquiries into food labelling. Whilst Slow Food do not endorse or condone the outcomes of those enquiries, we do accept that in practical terms it has become almost impossible to describe the complex of relevant information on a product label. It is for this reason that Slow Food International have been arguing for the introduction of narrative labelling.

A practical way to improve consumer wellbeing and market competition

Slow Food believes that a practical way to improve the market for both consumers and primary producers would be to:

- give consumers a right to information about the origins, nature and processing of all food offered for sale in Australia.

All the information necessary to deliver such a right is already held by major retailers and the larger food and restaurant outlets. The issue is how to make it available.

As you remark in your report, the world of technology is changing rapidly. Retailers that sell food and drinks on line often make available at least some of this product information. We believe it would be relatively simple to make this information available to customers on screen at point of sale. If First Choice can do this for their wine customers and Local authorities can do if for their library readers we see no reason why major retailers should not be able to do so as well. A screen at the end of each aisle with a product passport would be one way. Bar coding might also be used to programmes that would download to mobile phones.

There will no doubt be resistance to telling consumers what pesticides have been used on vegetables, what antibiotics have been fed to livestock, what has been irradiated, stored for 12 months, or genetically modified.

We believe the consumer should have a right to know and that the market will begin to function to meet consumer preferences if this proposal is implemented.

We commend it to you.

Country of origin labelling

We note the recent introduction of new country of origin labelling regulations, but in the light of the two year transition period it is not possible to make a valid assessment of whether these new regulations will work.

Slow Food doubt whether the regulations are strong enough. They do not appear to encompass:

- the whole range of food, fresh foods such as fruit and fish
- food sold through the restaurant trade and other food outlets
- food sold over the internet

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