National Farmers Federation | Horticulture Council

Climate

Policy position statement

Position

The Council understands the challenge of feeding a growing world population within planetary limits will present significant opportunities for the Australian horticulture industry, which we must actively work to realise with aligned partners and stakeholders.

The Council supports increasing public and private investment to better position the national horticulture industry for adaption in response to the risks of a changing climate. The Council understands climate change is at least in part a product of human activity and supports government intervention to reduce emissions as a means of avoiding its worst impacts.

Overview

Horticulture stands out in agriculture for delivering high nutritional value foods with a comparatively low greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions profile, making it a compelling component of both sustainable food systems and climate-smart agriculture.

Plants and natural turf will have increasingly essential roles to play in ensuring our cities and suburbs remain liveable environments for humans and other species. The nursery industry will also be instrumental in supplying tree seedlings for projects that either seek to capture carbon or grow our sustainable sources of timber.

To the extent climate change is increasing the frequency and impact of natural disasters or extreme events, such as flooding, storms, cyclones, frost, heatwaves, and drought, the horticulture industry remains exposed to both primary impacts on farm but also secondary impacts along long supply chains connecting growers with the end consumer.

Some crops are typically grown in tightly managed production cycles, and are highly sensitive to changes in temperature, water availability, and extreme weather. Increasingly frequent and intense heatwaves can reduce yields, cause damage like sunburn or misshapen fruit, and disrupt flowering and fruit set. Shifting rainfall patterns and growing uncertainty over irrigation allocations exacerbate water stress, while sudden rainfall events or flooding can wash out young crops entirely. Compounding these challenges, climate change is expected to increase pest and disease pressures, as warmer temperatures and humidity create more favourable conditions for a wider range of pests and pathogens to survive and proliferate.

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Perennial tree crops face deeper structural risks that unfold over longer timeframes. These crops are long-lived, fixed assets that take years to reach full productivity, and are not easily relocated or replaced. As a result, they are far more vulnerable to long-term climatic shifts that may render a growing region unsuitable within the productive life of the orchard or vineyard. One of the most pressing risks is the reduction in winter chill hours, which are essential for the proper dormancy and fruiting of many temperate tree crops.

The fruit, vegetable and nut industries, given competitive pressures in domestic markets, are already highly efficient, and given the intensive nature of production and the advantages of being located close to markets, there is often limited scope for growers to offset their emissions on farm.

Fortunately, new technologies and improved production systems that will enable growers to better manage risks associated with climate change also promise increased efficiencies in terms of inputs, including labour, water, energy and chemicals.

Also, while existing production regions may become increasingly unviable for some crops or varieties as a result of a changing climate, they may be replaced with others, or else new regions could become increasingly viable for crops and varieties.

Policy principles

The Council recommends the following core policy principles are given consideration when developing responses to climate change for the national horticulture industry:

1. **Profitability:** In order to best adapt to both the risks and opportunities presented by a changing climate, horticultural businesses must first be profitable, with the capital available to make necessary investments.

2. **Recognition:** In the context of climate change and efforts to reduce emissions, sustainable horticulture industries must be acknowledged and recognised by all stakeholders as essential to long-term human and planetary health.

3. **Priority:** Total emissions from the national horticulture industry are small, even relative to the rest of agriculture, let alone in the context of the entire economy. Given the nature of production systems and supply chain, what emissions industry does have are very hard to reduce or avoid.

   The most efficient means of lowering the emissions profile of the horticulture industry will likely be making better use of produce that currently goes to waste, through value adding or changes to retail specifications.

4. **Responsibility:** The primary responsibility for on-farm decisions in response to climate risks and opportunities rests with horticultural businesses.

5. **Research:** Governments and research institutions should prioritize funding, conducting research that (a) contributes to our understanding of climate change and its impacts and (b) takes an enterprise-first approach that delivers new practical tools enabling horticultural businesses to adapt and remain profitable

6. **Extension:** Effective mechanisms should be continued and established to transfer knowledge from research institutions to businesses.

7. **Public investment:** Government investment in climate change should be strategically prioritized and constrained to maximize impact and ensure efficient use of resources. Programs should focus on providing incentives for businesses to adopt sustainable practices, rather than imposing restrictive mandates, and avoid distorting markets.

8. **Equity:** All responses to climate change must Be fit-for-purpose and designed to take account of the variety of needs, capacities and capabilities across horticultural businesses.

Priority initiatives to deliver on principles

The Council recommends the following policy and program initiatives to deliver on principles concerning responses to climate change for the national horticulture industry:

1. **Emissions target (principles 1 & 6):** There should be no mandated emissions target for the national horticulture industry, in recognition of its essential role in human and planetary health, and its existing efficiencies.

   The Council does however acknowledge an economy-wide aspiration of net zero emissions by 2050 and expects that horticulture will still play an important part in achieving this broader target.

2. **Opportunity assessment (principle 2):** Invest in research can identify the most efficient and profitable opportunities to lower the emissions profile of the national horticulture industry, both on-farm and along the supply chain.

3. **Grower toolbox (principles 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7):** Funds should be directed toward research and development that creates new and improved tools, designed for all growers, that enable industry to make short- and long-term strategic decisions concerning on-farm climate risks and opportunities.

4. **Capacity building (principles 5 & 6):** Stakeholders should prioritise training, education and capacity building to accelerate on-ground action to reduce agriculture and land emissions.

5. **Industry collaboration (principles 5, 6 & 7):** Hort Innovation to work collaboratively with industry peak bodies to (a) develop commodity specific tools and information, and (b) to apply best practice to extension for faster adoption.

Associated documents

At the time of approval, the Council has the below associated policy positions:

- Policy position statement on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures.

Date of approval

Version 1.0
Approved by the Council 8 August 2025