

6 July 2018

Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

RE: Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Obesity Epidemic in Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to submit some general comments for consideration by the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the obesity epidemic in Australia.

ASA was formed in 2007 to bring together supply chain participants on whole of industry matters. Founding members CANEGROWERS, representing some 80 per cent of the 4,000 Australian sugarcane farmers, and Australian Sugar Milling Council (ASMC), representing 95 per cent of raw sugar production, recognised the need for collaborative efforts in areas including research, trade liberalisation, and community engagement. Sugarcane production and processing is the lifeblood of many regional towns and communities along the east coast of Australia from Grafton in northern New South Wales to Mossman in Far North Queensland.

Key Points

- Obesity is a serious issue in Australia and as waistlines continue to expand ([AIHW 2018¹](#)), preventive programs need to be a high priority.
- While we recognise we have an interest in discouraging a singular focus on sugar, we also genuinely believe the recent efforts to demonise one ingredient in the diet is flawed. We believe a whole of diet approach, with particular emphasis on replacing discretionary treats with core foods, would be more constructive.
- It is a concern for those in the community who feel they are unable to make informed food choices and for those who do not understand the risks of overconsumption.
- More targeted information and support programs are needed to heighten awareness of the risks involved in eating a poor diet, including too much sugar. Many people are able to make well-considered lifestyle choices, but behaviour change is difficult and many in the population are struggling.
- As a sector, our industry adds almost \$2 billion to the economy per year and sugarcane growers and millers make a significant economic and social contribution to rural and regional Australia.
- Our people want to feel proud of the sugar industry and its products, both in terms of sugar's contribution to the economy and the role responsible consumption of sugar can play in a balanced lifestyle.

Overview

Obesity is clearly a problem in Australia and as sugar growers and producers, we are concerned about overconsumption of sugar by some in the community. We believe sugar can play a role in a balanced diet, and we certainly do not want our products to result in harm.

Over 80% of Australian sugar is exported and brings in up to \$2 billion per annum in export earnings. In addition to 4,000 sugarcane growing families, the industry employs over 16,000 skilled, regional workers. Our sugar mills also cogenerate electricity using cane waste products to power milling operations and also to export up to 500GWh of renewable energy to the national grid.

We have a long history along the northern NSW and Queensland coast and our growers, mill staff and allied workers play a pivotal role in the fabric of many local communities.

We support the Australian dietary guidelines², which recommend limiting intakes of discretionary foods containing saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol. Easily understood information programs that raise awareness and help people to track their consumption are starting to make a difference e.g. the Health Star Rating Scheme.

We recognise that more needs to be done to address the problem for those at risk, and for some people this makes a blunt instrument such as a sugar tax very appealing. We believe it would be more effective to use a targeted approach to help improve the diets of those struggling to eat well.

Many campaigns have tried to raise awareness³ that overconsumption of treats containing sugar, fat and/or salt are contributors to obesity and weight-related health issues. We believe a more comprehensive approach is required to tackle the problem.

As noted in the Australian Institute of Health (Australia's health 2018⁴, 20 June 2018):

“when it comes to obesity, it is not just a case of poor diet or exercise habits. Rather, a range of factors—biological, behavioural, social and environmental—contribute to our likelihood of becoming obese, including the walkability of our cities, rising work hours and increasingly sedentary jobs, larger portion sizes and food advertising.”

Rather than singling out sugar as the major ‘cause’ of the problem, we believe the focus needs to be on measures that change behaviour, particularly for people who are already overweight or suffering from a lifestyle/non-communicable disease.

As an industry, we want to work with government and stakeholders to find the most effective solutions, especially for these at-risk groups.

The challenge is to find solutions that change people's eating habits. In our view, behaviour changes are only addressed when people are motivated and open to making informed decisions about what they eat.

Yours sincerely



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Joint Secretary
ASA



Dan Galligan
Joint Secretary
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References

1. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/overweight-obesity/interactive-insight-into-overweight-and-obesity/contents/how-many-people-are-overweight-or-obese>
2. <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines-publications/n55>
3. <https://theconversation.com/how-anti-obesity-campaigns-reinforce-stigma-8427>
4. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/australias-health-2018/contents/table-of-contents>