

# Food security assured as never a better time to be a farmer

## Agriculture

Brad Thompson

Farmers will thrive through the coronavirus crisis and consumers should stop worrying about food security, says agribusiness leader Mark Allison.

The Elders managing director said it was a fantastic time to be a farmer, with no social distancing issues, high demand for rural commodities, drought-breaking rain and the low Australian dollar.

One area of concern is labour supply in horticulture, but the Morrison government is understood to be just days away from extending backpacker and seasonal worker visas to ensure fruit and vegetables are picked on time.

Mr Allison said Australians needed to know there was no need for panic buying of food.

"The simple fact is we have incredibly robust farming systems and some of the world's most resilient farmers, who are perfectly positioned to continue our food supply to supermarkets and stores across the nation," he said.

"Far from being adversely affected by this global pandemic, Australian agriculture can actually be a source of stability and calm for all Australians during these tumultuous times."

Mr Allison said agriculture and associated logistics were essential industries and would not be affected by state or federal movement crackdowns.

It is estimated Australia produces enough food each year to feed 75 mil-



No threat to fresh food supply: Elders managing director Mark Allison.

lion people, three times the nation's population, including 9 billion litres of milk, 2.5 million tonnes of beef and 22 million tonnes of wheat in recent times.

Mr Allison, the president of Agribusiness Australia, said food pro-

cessors had introduced split shifts to minimise the risk of workplace disruption and already had extremely high hygiene standards.

"As an industry we have already noticed significant business demand changes from coronavirus," he said.

"Bulk buying across Australian supermarkets has dramatically driven demand, with shelves stripped of meat, fresh produce and non-perishable foods such as flour, cereals, bread and pasta."

Mr Allison said the panic buying had put short-term pressure on domestic suppliers, describing beef mince as the "new toilet paper".

"Demand is high, farmer confidence is high and we have had significant rain," he said. "Our world-class, rigor-

ous systems will ensure we can adapt and increase supply."

He admitted labour supply in horticulture was a major problem that needed attention in the wake of international travel and movement restrictions.

Peak lobby group AUSVEG said it was by far the biggest concern facing fruit and vegetable growers.

"That is why we have been working with government on visa extensions and also working with government around options to get a local workforce from those people with relevant skills into horticulture," an AUSVEG spokesman said.

There are about 140,000 backpacker and 7000 seasonal worker visa holders in Australia, providing the labour backbone of the horticulture industry.