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Submission from Cultivating Community: Independent Inquiry into the EPA

Cultivating Community manage 21 public housing community gardens, 11 school food gardens, provide advice to community groups and local government on community gardens and other food growing projects. We recognised that with the rapid increase for growing food in urban¹ spaces there was a need to address the issue of potential soil contamination. Community groups wishing to grow food are generally not resourced to fund soil testing or in some cases are unaware of potential risks. Similarly home gardeners may not be aware of the potential risks from lead paint or other potential contamination sources from historical uses.

From our experience the general approaches are: complete ignorance of potential risks, awareness of the potential risks but growing food regardless without any testing or not growing food due to concerns (in spite of the fact there are a wide range of mitigation/preventative methods for growing food). None of these approaches are appropriate for public health, environmental sustainability or community development. With community groups not able to fund soil testing and local government not wanting to incur such costs either work is being undertaken regardless or the default position is to assume contamination and use measures such as raised beds/geofab/soil imported etc which are more expensive than in-ground growing making projects either unviable or spending funds which could be spent elsewhere (if the site is clean). In addition the lack of understanding by the community enables media reports relating to soil contamination to fuel concerns without providing a balanced and constructive viewpoint.

In July 2013, Cultivating Community met with staff from EPA's Community and Environmental Partners section to discuss the issue and the need for greater education and that there needed to be practical guidance for the community as to how to address the issue of potential soil contamination. A working group of not-for-profit organisations (including Cultivating Community) and local government and other representatives was formed which met several times to discuss the issue and potential ways forward. Although participants in the group were hoping to develop a mechanism where community groups could undertake testing, on advice from the regulatory part of the EPA it was determined that only environmental consultants could be used (generally cost prohibitive for most). Draft guidelines for Growing Food in Urban Soils were developed along with a draft educational brochure for backyard gardeners. Then the staff involved were moved to other projects, the process stalled and we have not heard any further updates. Therefore the issue of potential soil contamination and community/backyard food growing still exists and has not been addressed.

Issues relating to the current Inquiry:

1. The EPA is the appropriate organisation to address potential soil contamination for the community given its existing regulatory engagement in the issue however it needs to be resourced to properly inform/educate the community about the issue and also to provide a

¹ Noting that community gardens and other food growing in rural towns and areas, also need to assess potential soil contamination especially due to residual pesticides.



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practical framework with which people can operate. Greater education of the general public is also required regarding disposal of wastes in soil which can create a problem at a later date if such soil is used for food growing.

2. Currently this does not exist and there is a gap in protecting public health and being a barrier to safe food growing.
3. Brownfield sites have potential for being reactivated as viable areas for growing food (as occurs in North America in particular). Particularly in low socioeconomic areas/food deserts there is potential to achieve a range of government objectives through such work. However this requires expertise and support to ensure that local government and community engaged in such projects undertake it safely and appropriately for the site. Such support does not currently exist which is a missed opportunity for clean-up of contaminated sites for community benefit.

If you wish to discuss this issue any further please contact Sharelle Polack, Community Gardens Team Leader, [REDACTED] sharelle@cultivatingcommunity.org.au

Yours faithfully

[REDACTED]

Sharelle Polack
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Cultivating Community