

Australia to strengthen the Horticulture industry with policy reformation

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The Australian government has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the horticulture industry, announcing an independent review of the Horticulture Code of Conduct. Led by Mr Chris Leptos AO, the review aims to assess and enhance the Code to ensure it remains relevant and effective in today's rapidly evolving agricultural landscape.

Horticulture is Australia's third-largest agricultural industry, with production value forecast to reach a record \$18.9 billion this financial year. Exports are also on track to set a new benchmark at \$4.4 billion. These figures highlight the sector's critical role in the national economy and its contribution to supplying fresh produce both domestically and internationally.

The Horticulture Code of Conduct, introduced to regulate trade between growers and traders of wholesale unprocessed fruit, vegetables, nuts, and herbs, ensures transparency and clarity in transactions. However, the sector has undergone significant changes since the Code was last reviewed in 2015. This has prompted the government to question whether the Code is still fit for purpose in addressing modern challenges and opportunities within the industry.

Mr Leptos, whose extensive experience spans corporate and government sectors, will lead the review over the coming months. He will engage with stakeholders across the horticulture supply chain, including growers, traders, industry bodies, and government agencies. A consultation paper will be made available to encourage input from those directly involved in the industry, providing them with an opportunity to suggest improvements to the Code and its operation.

Central wholesale markets play a pivotal role in the horticulture trade. Supplied by approximately 10,000 growers and serviced by over 400 fruit and vegetable wholesalers, these markets process around 13 million sales transactions annually. This

equates to 4 million tonnes of horticultural produce worth more than \$8 billion passing through the system each year. Such figures underscore the importance of robust and up-to-date regulatory frameworks to support this significant economic activity.

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry, Julie Collins MP, emphasized the importance of the review. "The Horticulture Code of Conduct was designed to protect our growers and traders who are responsible for so much of Australia's incredible fresh food," she said. "The horticulture sector has changed since the Code was last reviewed in 2015, and we want to understand if the Code is still fit-for-purpose. This is an important opportunity for growers, traders, and stakeholders from across the horticulture supply chain to have their say and to ensure we continue to improve transparency and accountability."

Assistant Minister for Productivity, Competition, Charities, and Treasury, Andrew Leigh MP, also stressed the role of fair competition in driving the sector forward. "Fair competition is the foundation of a strong horticulture sector," he said. "The Horticulture Code exists to stop unfair dealing and keep the playing field level. From the first handshake to the final invoice, we expect growers and traders to deal in good faith. Strong competition isn't just good economics—it drives innovation, efficiency, and better outcomes for growers and consumers."

The review is expected to address potential improvements to the Code while considering competition issues that may be impacting the sector. A final report will be provided to the government by the end of April, offering recommendations to strengthen the regulatory environment.

This initiative reflects the government's broader focus on ensuring Australia's agricultural industries are supported by policies that foster growth, innovation, and fairness. With horticulture contributing significantly to both the economy and food security, the review is seen as a timely opportunity to reinforce the sector's foundations.

Stakeholders are encouraged to actively participate in the consultation process, as their insights will be crucial in shaping the future of the Horticulture Code. By addressing potential gaps and ensuring the Code aligns with current industry dynamics, the review aims to uphold the integrity of trade practices while supporting the long-term sustainability of the horticulture industry.

The announcement has been welcomed by industry representatives, who view it as a chance to address emerging challenges such as market competition, supply chain efficiency, and the need for greater accountability. With the horticulture sector poised for continued growth, the outcomes of this review could have far-reaching implications for how trade is conducted and regulated in the years to come.