

The neoliberalizing environmentalities of alternative agri-food networks in Australia: A critical examination of challenges and possibilities

Peter Andrée
Department of Political Science
Carleton University

Draft – May 18, 2009

Drawing on Polanyi, Foucault, and their interlocutors, this paper examines the productive effects of alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs) as efforts to counter the environmental degradation caused by conventional agriculture and food supply chains. Australia provides a useful case study for this workshop because its agricultural sector is one of the most liberalized in the world. This paper examines the challenges and possibilities of a range of emerging market-driven agri-environmental governance mechanisms, including organic farming, permaculture, and forms of localized marketing such as farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture. Theoretically, this paper argues that AAFNs are best understood as both a reaction to, and a manifestation of, neoliberalization in Australia, and that to understand the full implications of these voluntary initiatives – including what Guthman (2008a p.1181) calls the “politics of the possible [that] lies in the indeterminacy of neoliberalism” – attention needs to be paid to the governmentalities of food network participants themselves. Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirty-five farmers, farm-partners, and farm-product vendors in the state of Victoria, this paper argues that these food networks present both possibilities and challenges for addressing the social-ecological problems associated with agriculture and food distribution. Challenges include an over-reliance on individual entrepreneurialism, the assumption that these new markets will always favour the more “environmentally-friendly” practices, the fact that some AAFNs are easily co-opted into Australia’s state-supported agricultural export model (with varied ecological implications), as well as a lack of attention by participants to challenging deeper structural issues such as intense corporate concentration in the supermarket sector. On the other hand, AAFNs also show signs of promise: They support the innovations of what I term Australia’s new “citizen-farmers”, and market-based initiatives are driving changes that spill over to other farms in the countryside. Furthermore, this research shows that the long-term success of AAFNs actually depends on collective action, action that already includes various levels of the state. This action is focused on developing cohesive voluntary initiatives at this stage, but such initiatives may be the first step towards regulatory mechanisms with a wider reach.

Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of alternative agri-food networks (AAFNS) as a form of voluntary agri-environmental governance in Australia, with a focus on the experiences of the farmers who participate in them. AAFNs – also termed alternative agrifood initiatives (Goodman 2003), short food supply chains (Renting et al. 2003), or alternative food supply chains (Ilbery and Maye 2005) – such as farmers’ markets and organic supply chains, are distinguished from conventional supply chains by

their turn away from standardised and industrial systems of food provisioning, in terms of farming practices, distribution, or both, towards a focus on notions of “quality”, “place” and “nature” (Goodman, 2003, 2004). In this paper the emphasis is on AAFNs that are seen (or intended) to provide “environmental” benefits, with this concept encapsulating a range of social-ecological practices. These perceived environmental benefits are either associated with how products are produced (e.g. organic, biodynamic or permaculture production, the adoption of on-farm environmental management systems, free-range and grass-fed livestock production, wild-crafted “bush” foods), or they are associated with the smaller carbon footprint resultant from proximity between producer and consumer (e.g. the products are distributed through farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture schemes, and farm-shops). In many cases, the products sold through these particular AAFNs are deliberately marketed to consumers in ways that highlight their environmental virtues. Notably, while shopping “locally” or from farms that adopt specific ecological practices can be associated with a range of social, environmental, economic and cultural benefits, this is not *necessarily* the case (see Andrée 2006). There are also different effects from different kinds of AAFNs, both for the environment and for society more broadly (Guthman 2007 p.457). However, these issues lie beyond the scope of this paper.

AAFNs are a fairly recent phenomenon in Australia, but their number is growing (Andrée et al. forthcoming). Some farmers participate in AAFNs as a form of resistance to the dominant food system which they may see as not supporting their aims around ecological sustainability, allowing for the production of high quality food, or respecting animal welfare. Others participate in AAFNs simply because these networks present new economic opportunities at a time when they have been “squeezed out” of traditional commodity production through intense competition. Each of these reasons, including the search for greater economic autonomy, can be seen as a form of resistance to key elements of the conventional food system (ibid.; VanderPloeg 2007), and the AAFNs that these farmers turn towards thus can be understood as examples of voluntary, market-based, agri-environmental governance, even if the “environment” is not always at the fore-front of a farmer’s choice to embark in this direction. Entrepreneurialism, self-governance, market-based environmental outcomes, and value-added production: these concepts all figure centrally in the structure of AAFNs. Significantly, these concepts are also hallmarks of neoliberalization, which is the very process that drives the rest of Australia’s “competitive-productivist” food system centered on the mass production and export of bulk commodities produced as cheaply as possible (Dibden et al. 2005). (The term neoliberalization is favoured over neoliberalism here, because it better captures the dynamic and open-ended nature of this prevailing pattern of market-oriented regulatory restructuring (Guthman 2008a; Peck and Brenner 2009). AAFNs are thus both a reaction to the competition associated with the neoliberalization of Australia’s agri-food system in recent decades as well as a manifestation of “roll-out” neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002) intent on achieving positive environmental outcomes.

This analysis of AAFNs as a form of neoliberalism draws on Polanyi (2001 [1944]), Foucault (1991) as well as contemporary theorists of neoliberalization (e.g. McCarthy and Prudham; Guthman 2008a). Together, these theorists allow us to see neoliberalism as a social construct which, even as it continues to gain momentum globally, depends on significant state and ideological efforts to be maintained, is

continually resisted from a variety of quarters, and is ultimately never fully realized in practice. As a result, while there remains a general trend toward market-oriented policies and practices in the contemporary roll out, or re-regulation, phase of neoliberalism that AAFNs appear to be part of, this trend is fragmentary, and replete with contradictions. It is thus also a realm of possibility (Guthman 2008a); a starting point for potential “postneoliberal” futures (MacDonald et al. 2009). Foucault, in way that is commensurate with an underlying current in Polanyi’s thought, points us towards the subjective dimensions of state-market-society relations, and the role that individuals play in reproducing specific forms of neoliberal governance through what he terms “governmentality”. In this paper, particular attention is paid to the subjective experience of farmers – situated as they are amidst conflicting consumer demands, state inducements, and their own values and economic interests. It focuses on their environmental governmentalities, or what Luke terms “environmentalities” (Luke, 1999), since these play a critical role in how AAFNs will develop in Australia. This analysis is based on twenty-nine interviews with farmers or sets of farm-partners (mostly couples) and six interviews with farm-product producers or vendors (a free range livestock butcher, an organic food marketer, a farmhouse cheese maker, etc.) from the State of Victoria in the South-East of Australia. These interviews were undertaken between September and December of 2006.

Several political economists and geographers who study food systems have commented on the trend towards food localism and related, consumer-driven, initiatives “as embedded in and reinforcing of neoliberal forms of governance” (Blue, 2009). Rather than simply repeat this refrain, the objective here is to critically examine what this means in practice. As Guthman (2007; 473-474) asks, “given that neoliberalism makes neither its own ideology visible or its own transformations determinate, what does all of this suggest for the politics of the possible?” (see also Guthman 2008a). In relation to the immediate problem at hand, I ask: What are the challenges and the possibilities inherent in these neoliberalizing governance models for actually achieving positive, and widespread, agri-environmental outcomes?

This paper argues that the roll-out neoliberalization evident in Australian AAFNs does limit the extent to which these networks are capable of addressing the social-ecological problems associated with agriculture and food distribution. These limits include the reliance on individualism and solutions rooted in the market, as well as the fact that many AAFNs are easily tied into Australia’s agricultural export model that remains heavily supported by the state. These limits also include the lack of attention that AAFN participants and advocates give to structural issues such as competition for land and intense corporate concentration in Australia’s supermarket sector. On the other hand, AAFNs are actually leading to wider impacts: market-based initiatives are driving changes that spill out beyond the immediate participants in these relatively small networks. Furthermore, the evidence shows that this trend is not simply about the individualization of social problems. The long-term success of AAFNs actually depends on collective action, involving civil society, industry actors, and various levels of the state. This action may be focused on developing cohesive voluntary initiatives at this stage, but history shows that voluntary initiatives can eventually translate into higher regulatory standards. Despite their neoliberal character, then, AAFNs are not simply agricultural “alternatives” tinkering at the edges of the dominant food system, as Allen et

al. (2003) would characterize them; they have important “oppositional” characteristics that are beginning to change the norms and practices of the conventional food system as well.

Theoretical Framework

Recent academic interest in alternative agri-food networks has been accompanied by reinvigorated interest in the works of Karl Polanyi, and especially Polanyi’s notion of “embeddedness” (e.g. Sonino and Marsden 2006; Guthman 2007; Gutham 2008b). Polanyi is seen as helpful in understanding AAFNs because these initiatives appear to represent a societal reaction in response to the negative environmental and social effects of the productivist model of agriculture. In Polanyian terms, AAFNs are thus often framed as attempts to “re-embed” the market relationships around food provisioning in social values such as environmental sustainability, fair-trade, etc. (e.g. Raymonds 2000; Murdoch et al. 2000).

Unfortunately, his renewed notoriety also means that Polanyi’s ideas have been somewhat oversimplified in the AAFN literature. This section begins with a general overview of Polanyi’s central argument on the relationship between market and societies, followed by a brief critique of some of the ways that the concept of “embeddedness” has been simplified in some of the AAFN literature. This is followed by an elaboration of how Polanyi’s ideas, combined with those of Foucault and contemporary analysts of neoliberalism, set the stage for an examination of the neoliberal governmentalities of AAFNs.

Polanyi’s contributions to the study of AAFNs are centered in his overall analysis of the relationship between states, markets and societies. He argues that the liberal economists’ emphasis on market “self-regulation” is ultimately misguided: a utopian fantasy. For most of human history markets have been “embedded” in a wider context of forms of redistribution determined by kinship, religious or political relations (1968). As a result, state efforts to “disembed” markets from these social and ecological relations (in order to harness the efficiencies generated when supply and demand dictate prices) are likely to lead to social and ecological destruction, to dangerous political-economic stalemates as new costs are imposed on specific groups in society, and/or to societal responses designed to prevent that destruction through efforts to recreate a more embedded economy (Polanyi 2001[1944]). A central problem with the liberal outlook, for Polanyi, is that land and labour cannot simply be treated as commodities. He sees this as both a moral issue and an ontological fallacy (Block 2001). These two factors of production ultimately refer to nature and people, and neither is created by and for markets. Treating them as commodities ignores the fact that there are a variety of costs associated with the use of land and labour, from what we now call negative environmental ‘externalities’ to the costs associated with social reproduction. These costs are rarely fully paid for by the market. Rather than leading to a reduced role for the state, attempts to dis-embed markets from society are thus likely to entail “greater state efforts to assure that... groups [disadvantaged by increased reliance on market self-regulation] will bear these increased costs without engaging in disruptive political action” (Block 1944 xxv). Alternately, these groups are likely to respond through spontaneous counter-movements intended to build protective structures to re-embed markets, whether in the

form of new environmental regulations or the provision of social services such as health care and unemployment insurance. Polanyi generally saw these counter-movements as rooted in democratic values, and resulting in new regulatory measures at the level of the state or at the international level.

Before proceeding further with a discussion of Polanyi's specific contributions to the study of AAFNs, it is important to address two issues raised by some recent invocations of "embeddedness" in relation to AAFNs. First, Polanyi's concept of embeddedness is often simplified to refer only to the social relations of trust and reciprocity that underpin economic activity. This has led to claims that farmers markets, for example, which clearly rely on relations of trust and regard between consumers and producers (Kirwan, 2004; Sage, 2003), are embedded while other, more anonymous, supply chains are not. This reading of Polanyi can be traced back to the Granovetter (1985) paper that reintroduced this concept to economic sociology. Notably, however, Granovetter was fully aware that he was only looking at one aspect of embedded markets. He decided to focus primarily on the personal relations (or the "proximate" level of causal analysis) within which market relations are embedded because he felt that structural sociologists of a more substantivist bent had paid insufficient attention to this level (Granovetter 1985 p.506). In other words, his focus on trust and reciprocity should not detract from an analysis of broader structural factors, such as government policy and supply chain dynamics, within which food networks are also embedded. Furthermore, Granovetter tried to demonstrate the role of concrete personal relations and networks in generating trust and discouraging malfeasance in all kinds of economic transactions, not just some of them. Granovetter showed that "the anonymous markets of neoclassical models is virtually nonexistent in economic life and that transactions of all kinds are rife with social connections" (p. 495).

This point relates to a second issue raised by some recent invocations of embeddedness, namely that it is "embeddedness" which distinguishes AAFNs from conventional commodity chains (e.g. Raymonds 2000; Murdoch et al. 2000). Both Winter (2003) and Sonino (2006) have present detailed arguments for why this reading of Polanyi is over-simplified and ultimately untenable. As Winter notes, "in truth, all market relations are socially embedded, and in a range of contrasting ways.... We cannot equate "alternativeness" with embeddedness in a deterministic manner" (2003 p.25). For example, local organic supply chains may be embedded in particular places, values and institutions, but supermarket supply chains are also embedded in (very different) conventions of product quality. Sonino concurs: "In reality, recent literature shows that embeddedness is not an inherent and fixed characteristic of some (i.e. local) food systems (2006 p.64)." For Sonino and Marsden, food network analysts' attention should focus on *how* supply chains of all types are embedded in terms of specific social and ecological norms, practices, and relationships, and what the implications of those dynamics are (2006). These authors then differentiate between the horizontal dimensions of embeddedness – the immediate conditions and strategies which enable the development of food networks – and the vertical dimensions – the multi-level governance system in which supply chains are linked to the broader society, economy and polity. Leaving over-simplified readings of embeddedness aside, then, how should Polanyi's insights of the relations between markets and societies inform the study of AAFNs? I

would suggest that we build on the following three points in any Polanyian analysis of AAFNs:

First, markets are inevitably constructed and enabled by both the state and ideology. In Polanyi's language, they are "opened ... by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organized and controlled interventionism" (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]: 140-141). This was true in Polanyi's analysis of late nineteenth century liberalism, and it remains true for post-1970s neoliberalism. As a result, even an analysis of "alternative" food networks – networks that appear to have developed with little active involvement from the state – needs to consider how these networks emerge in relation to wider political-economic trends promoted by the state and dominant ideologies. Second, the liberal "free-market" project will never be fully realized because this path inevitably leads to social and ecological problems, problems which will elicit a response; social forces will emerge, in one form or another, to protect land and labour. Once again, this dynamic is as true of neoliberalism as it was of liberalism (McCarthy and Prudham 2004). In AAFNs we see evidence of one form of this resistance to the environmental problems of the food system through efforts to establish autonomy from dominant trends (van der Ploeg 2007). Third, Polanyi highlighted the importance of the subjective experience of market/society relations. This was revealed through his work on pre-capitalist social relations, though it is equally relevant (as Granovetter 1985 shows) to all economic transactions.

To these three observations we need to add some points about the peculiarities of re-embedding efforts in the post-1970s neoliberal era.¹ In the realm of environmental policy, the process of neoliberalization is often summed up by concepts such as de-regulation, commodification, privatization, devolution and self-regulation (McCarthy and Purdham 2004; Guthman 2008b). As Polanyi would expect, deregulation and privatization has led to contradictions and crises, and required re-regulation of some sort or another. Neoliberalized re-regulation (in what was termed by Peck and Tickell (2002) as the "roll out" phase of neoliberalization) often involves a shifted out of government to industry (or individual) self-regulation, or to voluntary organizations, citizen coalitions and public-private partnerships, etc (Guthman 2008b). Along these lines, in the context of agri-environmental governance the Polanyian counter-movements that have arisen, particularly in the industrialized north, to deal with the environmental and social problems of the agri-food system are increasingly associated with voluntary, extra-state, regulatory measures. These tend to take one of two forms. The first are top-down, multinational-corporation driven environmental governance systems such as the Eurepgap standards imposed by European supermarket chains on their supply chains around the world (ref). The second form is better characterized as "bottom-up", NGO and producer-driven AAFNs such as organic farming regulations and fair trade networks

¹ Neoliberalization in the realm of agriculture has been a highly uneven process. Many industrialized countries continue to maintain high levels of production subsidies (e.g. Japan, the EU and the USA), while others maintain high tariff barriers to protect certain groups of domestic producers (e.g. Canada). Australia and New Zealand are actually the only two industrialized countries to (fairly) consistently pursue the neoliberal agenda of de-regulation, tariff barrier reduction, subsidy reduction (or elimination) coupled with an export orientation intended to build on their comparative advantages.

(Raymonds 2000; Guthman 2007).² The state's role in either context is often as a facilitator of "best practices," and as a purveyor of seed funding to support such "market-based initiatives" designed to solve some of the problems caused by the conventional agricultural model. Foucault's ideas become particularly important to the study of neoliberalization because of this broader trend from government to governance, which refers in general terms to the structures and processes that enable decision making outside of traditionally appointed institutions and social agents (Blue 2009 p.3). Foucault examines this trend towards governance through his concept of governmentality.

Governmentality refers to the particular historical configuration of modern government which first evolved in the eighteenth century (Foucault 1991). It was the product of two often-conflicting tendencies. These were, on the one hand, a growing emphasis on the role of the state in governing human social life rather than simply governing territory (Rutherford 1999 p.48). This *raison d'état* assumed that the state should develop a total knowledge of its resources and populations in order to maximize their productivity, thus bringing prosperity to the nation as a whole. On the other hand, liberalism was emerging during this period as a critique of state reason. Liberalism is typically understood as stressing the limits of governmental rationality and the rights of the individual to freedom from state control (ibid. p.49). While the *ideology* of liberalism does promote these values, Foucault argues that the *discourses* of liberalism did not actually undermine state reason. Rather, liberalism shifted its goals, centres of authority, and modes of application in a process that Foucault refers to as the "governmentalization of the state" (Foucault 1991).

Governmentality can be seen as intent on directing human conduct towards maximizing the public good. Because of this seemingly "objective" goal – framed as an object of truth that begs expert analysis and advice – governmentality involves a particular relationship between knowledge and government. Academics and expert bodies that are actively engaged in the study of society, political economy, public health and ecology among others, whether inside or outside of the formal state apparatus, have taken on an important role in shaping the discourses of public life and population management within governmentality. Foucault saw that resultant modes of administration are also diffuse and multi-layered. While the state maintains an active role, regulation is no longer its exclusive domain. In particular, there is a critical role for what Rose and Miller describe as "government at a distance": the apparatuses, procedures and tactics of government that are carried out by institutions that are formally at arms length from the state, as well as the internalization of governmental norms by individuals in their daily activities (Rose and Miller 1992). It is this aspect of governmentality that we see realized in the AAFNs being discussed here. In fact, in AAFNs we see exactly how far this governmentality has taken us, in that these particular modes of environmentality (Luke 1999) are hardly encouraged by the state at all, but are instead forms of private governance that are developing around a variety of new knowledges and values about the "environmental" way to produce and/or distribute food.

Guthman (2008b 1243) sums up the argument for why it is important to understand these governmentalities in relation to neoliberalization trends:

² In the case of these latter forms, AAFNs involve the commodification of certain production practices (Guthman 2007; Fridell 2007). In other words, the re-embedding of these supply chains in social values and structures also involves another "dis-embedding" moment.

Material neoliberalizations are inextricably bound with the production of neoliberal mentalities of rule – specifically attempts to enforce market logics, to create conditions in which competition can flourish, to shift caring responsibilities from the public sphere (welfare) to personal spaces (self-help) and to depoliticize (or render futile) various social struggles over resources and rights.

This theoretical discussion leaves us with two questions: 1) What does the “neoliberalized” character of AAFNs actually mean for the way that governance takes place “on the ground”, so to speak?; and 2) what are the possibilities and limitations of these (neoliberal) approaches to governance? To begin addressing these questions, I look at one particular site of governance: the farmer. How do these actors understand what they are doing? And what does this mean for the possibilities and limitations of the type of neoliberal agri-environmental governance that AAFNs exemplify? Before beginning to answer these questions based on empirical research in Australia, this paper first presents a brief overview of the Australian agri-food system in order to contextualize the emergence of AAFNs.

Australia’s agri-food landscape:

The primary focus of Australian agriculture is on the supply of bulk commodities to export markets. This is a context where productivism has taken one of its starkest neoliberal forms among industrialised countries. Since the 1970s, and with greater enthusiasm since the mid-1990s, Australian governments have pursued a commitment to free trade and open competition on the world market, expressed through the elimination of tariffs, import restrictions and production subsidies. As a result, OECD statistics from 2005 show that, on average, only 5% of the income received by Australian farmers is in the form of government support, compared with 32% in the European Union and 16% in the United States (OECD 2006). The limited support for farmers in Australia largely takes the form of short-term adjustment assistance, drought relief, and agri-environmental payments. Whereas the European literature tends to equate productivism with state-supported (and often heavily subsidised) production (see e.g. Lowe et al. 1993) – even in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) which have espoused neoliberal modes of governance – the outcome of the liberalisation of Australian agriculture has been a form of hyper-productivism or “competitive productivism” (Dibden and Cocklin 2005). This competitive productivist orientation has placed enormous pressures on farmers to increase efficiencies in order to survive in a global market distorted by subsidies and tariff barriers, and characterised by unstable and generally low commodity prices.

For those farmers who market their product domestically, farmers face additional pressures due to limited tariff protection and progressively more concentrated domestic food processing, distribution and retail sectors – concentration which has been encouraged by the competitive productivist environment. In particular, the largest two supermarket chains (Coles and Woolworths) account for between 51 and 76% of total retail food sales (Delforce et al. 2005). This is one of the most highly concentrated food systems in the world. Among other OECD countries, similar market share (50-70%) is

usually only reached when the sales of the five largest firms are aggregated. The five largest retailers in France, for example, account for 80% of sales, while in the UK they account for 64% of sales and in the United States only 32% (Soler 2005). For farmers who wish to sell into the domestic retail market in Australia – a market that still accounts for over two-third of all sales for vegetables, fruit, poultry, eggs, pig meat and rice despite Australia's strong export orientation – the two major supermarket chains represent the locus of power in the supply chain (based on figures from DAFF 2005a and DAFF 2005b). In recent years these chains have been using their power to vertically integrate supply chains through exclusive supply arrangements with some farmers and processors. They have also followed the trend seen elsewhere in the world in the establishment of “private labels” owned by, or produced for, the retailer. These products are designed to offer consumers a quality alternative to proprietary branded foods while providing the retailer with increased margins (Delforce et al. 2005).

What does all of this mean for farmers and the environment in Australia? Economically, the majority of Australian farmers remain caught in the cost-price squeeze, as costs for inputs and farm machinery rise while the price producers are paid by a progressively more concentrated food processing, distribution and retail sector decreases. In Australia (in 2003), for example, pea producers received only 12% of the price paid for frozen peas in grocery stores, and this was down from 16% ten years earlier. In dairy, price declines have even more dramatic due to industry deregulation: From 1997 to 2003 the percentage of retail price received by farmers dropped from 40% to 25% (DAFF 2005). On average, farm share of the retail price of food has dropped from about 30% in the 1980s to 15-20% in 2003 (George et al. 2005). These economic realities have contributed further to the long-time trend in declining farm numbers in Australia, a trend that has had devastating impacts on the viability of rural communities. For example, the number of potato farmers in the Fassifern Valley of Queensland fell from about 480 to 50 between 1999 and 2004, though total production remained the same (George et al. 2005).

In terms of environmental sustainability, productivist agricultural practices in Australia, as in Europe and North America, tend to be intensive, input-dependent, often mono-cultural, aimed at maximising production and gaining economies of scale through farm consolidation – i.e. involve a range of practices widely recognized as environmentally damaging and probably unsustainable in the long term (Clark and Lowe 1992; Potter 1998). Together, agriculture and the transportation of food account for 10-20% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Unfortunately, Australian farmers are also facing the brunt of climate change caused by GHG emissions as witnessed in the serious droughts that have affected the country for over ten years now.

Increasing recognition of the environmental consequences of Western-style agriculture for Australia's fragile environment (Cocklin 2005) has resulted in two major trends. On the one hand, the state is increasingly recognizing these problems and trying to respond with environmental management strategies designed to minimally affect the competitiveness and productivity of agriculture. This has resulted in a set of policy objectives emphasizing environmental protection and remediation and imposing additional pressures on farmers (Dibden and Cocklin 2005, 2009) although with minimal new economic supports to respond to those pressures. A second set of responses, though less common, is summed up by the phrase “alternative agri-food networks.”

AAFNs are typically defined in opposition to the conventional supply chains using terms such as “traditional” vs. “rationalised,” “quality” vs. “quantity,” “extensive” vs. “intensive,” “biodiversity” vs. “monoculture”, etc. (Ilbery and Maye 2005 p.824). Most attention in the AAFN literature is focused on the “re-localisation” of food, exploring the political and social relations that serve to re-embed market relationships through community supported agriculture (CSA), farm shops, farmers’ markets, and other forms of face-to-face or spatially proximate sales (e. g., DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2000; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Kirwan, 2004, 2006; Marsden and Sonnino 2005; Sage, 2003). AAFNs are not necessarily defined as locally oriented, however. Spatially “extended” alternative food supply chains, such as global networks for fair trade or regional specialty products are also designed to provide consumers with value-laden information aimed at re-socialising and re-spatialising market relations (Renting et al. 2003). Whether face-to-face, proximate or spatially extended, AAFNs are thought to ‘short-circuit’ conventional supply chains by literally shortening producer-consumer relations, and by decreasing the cognitive distance from land to mouth (Kneen 1989), through clear signals to consumers on the origins and quality attributes of food. (These dynamics lead Renting et al. (2003) to prefer the term “short” to “alternative” as a descriptor for these networks.) From the point of view of consumption, the main factors driving AAFNs appear to be growing demand for diversity and distinctiveness in food, increased public concern over issues such as health, ecology and animal welfare, and a series of food scares which have undermined public confidence in conventional production (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Murdoch and Miele, 1999; Renting et al., 2003). For farmers, under continuous pressure to raise incomes by reducing costs, identifying new revenue streams, or capturing added value, AAFNs represent an important alternative route towards continued viability.

In recent years, a variety of agrifood networks that could be characterized as AAFNs have emerged in the Australian agricultural landscape, including farmers’ markets, regional brands, and a certified organic sector. These AAFNs do not appear to be as developed as in those parts of Europe and North America where scholarship has concentrated to date. Only recently has some academic attention been paid to the emerging AAFNs (Lockie 2005; Higgins et al. 2006; Knowd 2006).

In their work on short food supply chains in Europe, Renting et al. (2003) note that these can be differentiated along two interrelated dimensions, according to organisational structures (face-to-face, proximate or extended) or in terms of the types of quality attributes through which they differentiate themselves from conventional commodities (regional or artisanal vs. ecological or natural characteristics). There is insufficient space in this paper to discuss in detail the full range of potential AAFNs identified in Victoria. Rather, this paper draws from interviews with producers participating in a variety of AAFNs. The focus here is on AAFNs built around products perceived (or intended) to have environmental benefits, or on those AAFNs that are intended to reduce the “food miles” between producer and consumer.

Unfortunately, there is little quantitative data collected that is relevant to AAFNs in Australia. The main exceptions are for organic production and farmers markets. Some data on these two sectors is reviewed here to give readers a sense of the relatively small scale of AAFN activity to date.

The first Australian farms were certified as organic in the mid-1980s, and a national organic and biodynamic standards was first developed in 1992. By the 2000-01 season, the farm gate value of certified organic produce was estimated to be AUD\$89 Million, or 0.3% of the total farm gate value for all food and fisheries production (although 4% of horticulture) (ABARE 2003). Three years later, estimates put the total value of the organic industry at AUS\$140.7 Million (DAFF 2004b). In 2003, there were 1700 certified organic farmers in Australia, along with 300 organic processors or distributors (ABARE 2003). Australia actually has the largest amount of certified organic land of any country in the world, at ten million hectares, though much of this is grazing land in the outback and not very productive.

The first farmers' market in Australia (in recent memory) began in 1999 in Koonwarra, Victoria (PA26-m).³ This and a host of subsequent markets Australia were inspired by Jane Adams, an activist who secured an international fellowship to study the US farmer's market movement in the late 1990s (Erlich et al. 2005). By late 2006 there were 40 markets established throughout Victoria, most of them operating on a monthly basis and run by the vendors themselves. The markets provide a variety of new opportunities to farmers and micro-food processors to sell raw or value-added products. In 2004, it was estimated that 70 farmers' markets across Australia generated AUS\$40 million directly for vendors (Coster and Kennon 2005).

The challenges and possibilities of AAFNs as agri-enviro governance

The remainder of this paper is based on the empirical research with farmers in Victoria. It examines three broad themes relevant to a discussion of the challenges and possibilities of AAFN as forms of neoliberal agri-environmental governance, quoting individual farmers in order to reveal the way that these individuals understand their own practices. These three themes are: 1) the role of markets in agri-environmental governance; 2) the role of individual vs. collective action; and 3) the role of the state.

Market-driven agri-environmental governance

The first theme to arise from interviews relevant to a discussion of AAFNs as a form of agri-environmental governance concerns the possibilities and limitations of market-driven environmental protection. On the one hand, these mechanisms allow those farmers with particularly strong ecological and social values to practice the type of farming that is important to them as an expression of their politics, and often to get paid a premium for doing so by similarly-committed consumers. I term this group the "citizen farmers" and they are discussed here first. Then there is the fact that these markets bring in farmers who, for other reasons, are attracted to AAFNs. Market dynamics also lead this second group of farmers to adopt more environmentally friendly production and food distribution practices simply because this is what their consumers are asking for. I then discuss the way that market-driven environmental governance in the form of AAFNs do have their spin-offs (as Adam Smith might anticipate!), both in terms of inducing the spread of environmentally-friendly technologies and reducing the costs of these products.

³ Interviews are denoted by a number.

Some of the farmers interviewed can be understood as “citizen-farmers”, actively choosing to enact their politics through alternative farming choices. These farmers are actively supported by a small percentage of consumers (who expect them to adopt certain practices to meet public goods through their buying practices). Some are also weakly supported by the state (through the encouragement of Environmental Management Systems and Landcare). Their efforts also fit comfortably within neoliberal ideology, which emphasizes the role of individual choice and responsibility.

The term citizen-farmer is not a new one, though it is given a new definition here. Thomas Jefferson saw the citizen-farmer as the foundation of true democracy in the United States. He believed that effective democracy demands connection to a particular place (Curtis 2002).⁴ In Jefferson’s republican vision, the land-owning farmer was thus the ideal citizen. In contemporary agri-environmental politics, the concept of “citizen-farmer” is better understood in relation to theorizations of the citizen-consumer, defined as the political economic actor who identifies not with consumerism but political change, and who uses his or her own consumer behaviour to promote change (Slocum 2004). In a study highlighting the underlying contradictions of this hybrid, Johnston notes that the citizen-consumer acts by “voting with their dollar” to satisfy both the ideologies of consumerism (an idea rooted in individual self-interest) and citizenship (an ideal rooted in collective responsibility to a social and ecological commons).⁵ In the case of agriculture, citizen-farmers also make economic choices around how to organize their farms in relation to their own social perceptions of what “good” or “responsible” agriculture entails. In the case of AAFNs, this citizenship results in the development of farm operations that attempt to satisfy a range of public goods beyond immediate profitability, often including worker and animal welfare, environmental sustainability, community development, the preservation of traditional skills, etc. This conception of the citizen-farmer is closely allied with the notion of civic agriculture, defined by Lyson as the trend towards locally-oriented agriculture and food systems intended to rebuild communities in the face of the social and environmental destruction wrought by industrialized agricultural systems (Lyson 2004).

The following two quotes are representative of the citizen farmers I interviewed. The first is from a farmer who practices permaculture (which includes year round cover crops and many permanent plantations of tree species such as strawberry eucalyptus):

I think that the structure, the industrial linkage between land use and food consumption, is skewing land use so dramatically that it must change if we’ve got to get carbon back into balance... We are looking for a serious revolution in the way that we furrow our land and turn it over. I can’t help that think in the big picture, and in the long history of the next thirty or forty years, this [carbon sequestration] is the most important thing that we can do. We are sequestering carbon like crazy, our soils are so stable now,

⁴ Jefferson rejected the possibility that Native Americans who continued to live traditional lifestyles had a connection to place because of their nomadic tendencies, so his view of citizenship must be seen as closely connected with a colonizing understanding of “civilization” (Jefferson (1782) in Curtis (2002)).

⁵ This is only one of two readings of the citizen-consumer in the neoliberal era. Other authors frame the citizen consumer in terms of what is seen as another core shift within neoliberalism: the reinvention of citizens as consumers (Clarke 2007).

where the carbon buildup has been fantastic, where next door [a conventional farm] I reckon there must be so much carbon loss, which has its own environmental problems, where you can only feel that we have got this equation right. I just can't help but be consumed with the issues of carbon, as a problem that everyone has to thoughtfully take into account, and I wish that all farmers would take on year-long-green farming as a model (interview #26).

This second statement was made by an organic vegetable producer. She and her husband farm 50 hectares of land and employ 12 people directly. She went on trip to US and Europe and came back with a new vision of how she wants to do business, shifting her farms marketing orientation from international markets to local markets:

So we started off exporting. We then substituted the export market with an Australian national market, and then next stepping stone for us is to see the market place grow to a point where we can supply the vast majority of our produce just locally. That's what we want to do... We're envisaging the sustainable growth because it has sound environmental and ecological basis behind not shipping the food further... [In the USA] I saw all these CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] examples which were so much more aligned with the philosophy and yet still provided great financial rewards for people so I was fascinated by those examples... I came home and I said well, I believe that farmers' markets and local food will be a big growth area in the future and I want to be part of that. It's not where the market's at today, but if I want my market – if I want my business to have 50 per cent local sales in five years' time – then I have to start doing something today to move towards that... So I came back with a very clear strategy that I no longer wanted to have 50 per cent of my income reliant on supermarkets, because I felt that was too big a percentage and it was putting at risk too much of our income, so I wanted to spread those market segments and I wanted to have local food as a much stronger part of that. So I thought, well, okay, to do that we need to build our brand (Interview #14).

In 2004, this particular farm had no local sales, with all of their production going to export markets in Japan. By 2006 twenty percent of their sales were through farmers' markets, direct sales to local restaurants, farm-gate sales and a twenty-subscription CSA. For the 2006-2007 season they were selling one hundred subscriptions for thirty weeks of produce baskets, based on models from Oregon and Denmark. From this latter example it is also immediately evident how the citizen-farmer's environmental values are closely conjoined with entrepreneurial subjectivity – the branding of the farm's product for local markets, in this case. The entrepreneurialism associated with AAFNs is a recurrent theme in these interviews. These farmers are trying to create markets for more environmentally friendly production and distribution practices where none have existed before, and this takes long hours and hard work.

Advocates of a shift to carbon sequestration and local markets are actually a minority even among producers who participate in AAFNs. In fact, this was only the third of the three common reasons for choosing to participate in AAFNs garnered from the producers interviewed. More important were the search for economic viability and control over production in the face of increasingly demanding, and lower paying, markets. The first of these reasons was clearly described by a farmer who ran an orchard on the outskirts of Melbourne, selling into the wholesale markets until the late 1980s. She noted that in the late 1980s Footscary, the fruit market in Melbourne,

...was set up as a grower's market and all the growers used to go in with their trucks and people used to come round and...buy off the backs of trucks, but with these big supermarkets, they've got rid of that. It's all agents, very few growers left going in and it's really sad actually. It's like a whole change in - now, they're going to move the market too. But the market has nearly died and a lot of the agents buy direct from farms anyway, like Safeway [one of the two major supermarket chains], so it's all - that made us really look at where we were going because there was such a changing. (interview #1)

This couple chose to move to a farm far away from the city, in a tourism region, where they can sell fruit directly to the public from their orchards. This story is representative of the story of many interviewees, for whom participation in an AAFN was forced to a large extent by other options being foreclosed through the growth of supermarket power in the supply chain. The other political-economic dynamics that has really foreclosed options for farmers, thereby pushing many into these “alternative” directions, is the issue of land prices. This is particularly an issue in those parts of rural Victoria that are seeing migration from urban centres by early retirees and others seeking a new life in the country. This migration has raised prices for land well above their value for agricultural purposes in half the state (Barr 2005). Under these circumstances, an increasing number of mid-sized farmers are turning to AAFNs, wholly or in part, as a way to increase profits on the same land base.

The second main goal for farmer participation in AAFNs is to be able to make decisions that they would like to make around the quality of food they produce. And once again, the political-economic context matters, since these producers are choosing to pursue what they deem to be quality, rather than the dictates of higher links in the chain such as the supermarkets.

Notably, however, even though not all are “citizen farmers,” by participating in AAFNs many of these other producers are also adopting practices and distribution methods that have a lower environmental impact. Some of these producers don't even completely agree with the agendas that drive citizen-consumers to purchase their product. This was revealed most clearly by a poster that one potato producer has at his stand. This poster reads:

In the interests of offering you the best potatoes [we] utilise equal opportunity stock selection, trauma free memory recall, non confrontational potato relations, culturally aware growth policies, group

therapy, socially non violent awareness raising and no electric prodders. You could almost say ...No potato is forced to get in the box. (interview 16)

One of the things that was striking about this poster is that, aside from this jab at consumers looking for the “happy” potato, the poster also has a by-line that advertises (quite seriously) “genetically unmodified stock, environmentally considered cultivation, hand picked quality.” (interview#16) When asked about this tagline, the producer admitted that while this statement was indeed true, whether such practices were any better or worse than conventional practices was all “rubbish” to him anyways. This example reveals just how much changing consumer perceptions and expectations around food are affecting the countryside and the choices made by some farmers who wish to cater to them. While the goal of this research was not to quantify the scale of these impacts, it is clear that these changing values are changing the countryside and what happens there.

One concern, however, has to do with the question of whether the palate can actually always solve environmental problems. By this I mean that many of these alternative farmers ultimately have to keep customers through the taste of their product. There may be other values associated with the production and distribution, but taste keeps the customers returning. For many producers, this is not a huge challenge, given the way that the conventional food system has selected for tasteless products that have a long shelf-life:

We've taken fruit to these farmers' markets, apricots are a classic example, with little spots all over them... and the customers look at them and they say to us, 'they look rough but they taste really good'. Nobody ever questions that. They'll buy them every single time because they taste good. That's what people want. And this business about the supermarkets saying they have to look really pretty and every one's got to look exactly the same... people don't care about that. What they want is something that actually tastes good. (interview #20)

A cheese-maker interviewed has the same experience at Farmer's Markets:

The main way we actually got a following for our cheese is by getting to the farmer's market and talking to people. We've got, you know, four or five cheeses for people to taste and to start with people were going “ew,” goat's cheese because back in the '70s and '80s or whatever in Australia goat's cheese was all the rage and it tasted really bad, because it was lacking in flavour and that. So people, you know - mine won't kill you, that sort of thing, and they'll try it and then they'll actually go to the retailers and each of those places we would have been at the farmer's market and, because we're only there once a month and if they want it between the markets, we tell them to go to the retailers and so they do. Yes. We've built up quite a loyal following in that way, yes. (interview #3)

And the farmers do have to keep catering to the palate to ensure they are successful with their operations. For example, in a conversation with a free-range, rare-breed, pork producer over why her customers buy from her, she noted: “The rare breed and the free range is the two points that are pushed” (interview #9). When asked which of those two are most appealing to consumers, this farmer stated:

Look, I'd say they probably run on par with each other because your rare breed gives you your basic genetic start and your free ranging then gives it that dimension of flavour, so by the time it gets on to their plate, it's the combination of those two, and I don't think you could say one's more than the other, yes” (interview #9).

Importantly, this conversation has quickly turned from the moral or environmental values of the production practices to the issue of flavour. A similar conversation took place with a farmer who sells free-range eggs. This producer noted that the customers first come because of animal welfare concerns and they want free range. They also like to know where their food comes from, buying directly from the producer. But then... “our customers just say they're so - I couldn't really say they're - they just say they're so fresh and I guess that relates to the taste, yes. They just come back for them.” (interview #12)

All of this begs the question: what happens if and when the more socially and ecologically-preferable option is not the one that tastes better? Alternately, what if the more environmentally-destructive food option is actually the one that tastes better? In recent years there has been a trend towards corn-fed feedlot beef in Australia, which is promoted as the better tasting beef (because it has more marbling) but it is ultimately much more environmentally-destructive than the grass-fed alternative (ref). Then there is the question of what happens when you can't “sell” your ecological advantage. One group of Victorian producers interviewed by Dibden et al. (2008) faced exactly this situation. With the encouragement and some financial support from the Federal government, this group of farmers adopted Environmental Management Systems (EMS) on their farms. They then branded their product as “enviro-meat” to sell through local butchers' shops. Unfortunately, they had difficulty commanding a premium for this product because it was not actually labeled “organic”, which many health-conscious consumers were willing to pay more for.

Another concern with market-driven environmental “solutions” of the type represented by AAFNs is that these networks may never produce a product accessible to all. Some claim that AAFNs are all about pricey niche products that allow well-off consumers to feel good about themselves and only some farmers to reap the benefits. There is some truth to this analysis, based on the interviews conducted for this research. Some of these high-priced products are so expensive because of the high capital costs related to setting up a farmhouse cheese operation that yields relatively little product (interview #3), the high costs of delivery associated with a small quantity of goods (interviews # 6 and #16) or the high costs of agricultural land near urban areas. As an example of this latter, one farmhouse cheese producer noted: “In another area, land might be \$4000 or \$5000 an acre, or thereabouts and we've got \$20,000 an acre, so you've got that money sunk in and you need to get a return on it” (interview #15).” These factors

lead to high-priced products. These facts mean that some AAFNs will, by definition, always remain exclusive and this represents a limit to their potential expansion.

On the other hand, the market is also doing what it does best – competition is reducing prices and making these products more widely available. Many of the farmers interviewed for this research are the innovators. These are the producers those who are willing to lead us all down a new path, as far as farm production and distribution is concerned, and thus the first generation of their products are often more expensive. Later, however, other producers pick up on the trends these innovators create, and find less expensive ways to achieve the same ends, and then the innovators move on to yet another set of new products. This dynamic was revealed in the case of a couple of specialty potato growers who have together increased the diversity of potatoes grown in Australia many times over. They note that they had to start selling into the “better off areas” 15 years ago to make the operation viable: “We thought we had to pick fairly well off areas because we're charging a lot for them.” They tend to market to fruiterers who sell to “people that will buy things where price doesn't come into a decision... People want quality and if you can provide quality you can charge for it.” They were the first ones in this business, and had a lot of support from food writers to get the word out. However, over time, as other producers adopted the new varieties as well, they became more widely available and prices have come down: “if you go to the wholesale market you probably see a few of the varieties we do... They're commonly available” (interview #16). In response, these innovators have simply moved on to new varieties, and can maintain their high prices: “every year we've discussed putting prices up and invariably when we do, we seem to be busier.” This example appears to demonstrate the spin-off effects of innovation – which also happens to be increasing the biodiversity of food producing crops in Australia.

Then there are the unexpected spinoffs of the adoption of new farming practices. One couple interviewed exemplify the type of organic farmers that sells into conventional supply chains both domestically and internationally. By Australian standards, they own a mid-sized farm. It is seventy hectares in size, and employs from ten to thirty labourers, depending on the time of year. Sixty percent of the farm's crop is asparagus and onions, with other vegetables representing the remaining forty percent. After over twenty years running a conventional farm with his father, they switched to organic production when they took over the helms of the operation nine years ago. This was an act of resistance against productivist norms, which include the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. He sums up their reasons succinctly: “I just wanted to try something more natural” (PA33-m). This couple's decision to grow organically and market into organic channels had also had positive ecological impacts. The most obvious is a reduction in chemical use, which has benefits for farm workers, the environment, and potentially also for the health of customers. A second implication is for the health of the soil on the farm, which receives considerably more organic material in the form of composted manure, and is thus more resistant to drought and produces healthier plants than would an operation reliant on chemical fertilizers. A third, perhaps less obvious, implication is in terms of increased on-farm biodiversity. At one time this farm was solely focussed on asparagus production, as many of its neighbours still are. The decision to produce organically led to a wider mix of crops for two reasons: 1) organic farming depends on crop rotations to reduce weed and insect pressures; and 2) the domestic market for organic asparagus was

simply not large enough at the time of conversion, so they decided to diversify their product line (PA 33-m).

What is most interesting about this story are the synergies that exist between the farm's practices and the increasing ecological sustainability of the conventional practices of neighbouring farms. Across developed countries, vegetable producers have significantly reduced their use of pesticides in recent decades. This has been possible, in part, through the adoption of integrated pest management (IPM) practices. In IPM, entomologists are contracted to visit farms, track pest problems, and recommend a variety of mechanical, biological, and chemical solutions. For conventional vegetable operations in Australia, IPM is expected to allow for a twenty percent reduction in chemical use, and a fifty-percent reduction in offsite impacts (DEWR 2001). With the growth of IPM across the horticultural sector, this organic farm now has access to local expertise on biological insect control that did not exist before (PA33-m). Through their shared IPM technician, neighbours have also learned about what is possible using organic growing techniques, and at least two have recently decided to convert to organics (PA33-m). This example shows how the emergence of "alternative" food networks leads to wider changes. It also shows just how intertwined "conventional" and "alternative" agrifood networks are due to the fact that they are both embedded in evolving social norms, in this case regarding agri-chemical usage.

Individual versus collective action

A second key theme to arise from interviews relevant to this discussion is the role of individual versus collective action in attempts to deal with the environmental issues associated with agriculture and food distribution. Neoliberal solutions are often derided as inadequate for over-emphasizing individualized solutions to social problems. As the previous section shows, individual, entrepreneurial responses definitely play a significant role in the development of AAFNs. This can be problematic on a number of levels, starting with the fact that they are often facing challenges which are simply too large for individuals to take onto their own shoulders.

From the interviews, this misfit between challenges and responses was revealed most clearly by livestock producers who had decided to sell their own product directly to customers. The challenges these particular producers face were multiple, from finding ways to sell all the parts of a carcass rather than just consumers' favourite cuts, to developing the appropriate types of food networks (and access to infrastructure) in order to slaughter, cool, cut, package, and then distribute their animal's meat: "There's a huge infrastructure for selling meat at a farmer's market... so it's not something that the average person would even consider taking on..." (interview #9). Many of the farmers who have moved in this direction have been overwhelmed by the details (interview #16, #34, #19), and at least one eventually gave up on the endeavor despite strong customer support (interview #34). Because of the food safety laws in the State of Victoria, which require all fresh meat to be killed and butchered in accredited facilities, those who succeeded essentially had to buy their own abattoir (interview #21), set up their own butcher shop (interview #25), or develop a business-partnership with a butcher (interview #29 and #9). Each of these steps involves complicated contractual arrangements and the development of entirely different skill sets. These individuals also took on significant new financial

risks in order to make these business relationships possible. Is this the way forward for agriculture to start dealing with the environmental costs associated with the long-distance transport of food? If it is, there won't be many farmers who can make the transition.

Notably, the challenge is not just taking on marketing skills and setting up new businesses. Victorian food producers are facing these particular challenges because of the neoliberalized state of Victoria's food system, which assumes that all animals will be killed in large, centralized, facilities, and then moved through conventional channels to customers. These centralized facilities require fairly onerous regulatory standards to ensure the safety of the products, especially since a small mistake (e.g. an e-coli contamination event) can have widespread consequences. These standards may not be as suited to smaller, more localized, scales of production and distribution, but this is not considered in this realm. Farmers who don't want to work within the conventional distribution model still have to meet the same regulatory standards. A similar situation faces farmhouse-cheese producers.

One of the outcomes of these challenges to livestock producers who wish to sell their product directly to the public is, in the majority of cases, the formation of co-operative relationships and new partnerships with other farmers to make this possible (interviews # 5, 9, 19, 25, 29). This emerging response is important, because it reveals how neoliberalization is *necessitating* collective responses and the formation of collective identities, despite its *emphasis* on the individual entrepreneur.

Notably, for some of the citizen-farmers interviewed, a collective identity comes quite naturally as a reaction against the norms of the system they are facing, and the fact that it appears to be built of such tight relationships between industry and government. This was clearly seen among some of the organic farmers interviewed, who work hard to support one another. As one informant stated,

I think because there's such lack of support from everywhere, especially government, that you've got to help each other out, you've got to share the knowledge to be able to just keep it going... Fight the good fight and all that sort of stuff, you know, against the big companies. Most of the cheese that's made in Victoria is National Foods which is a multi-national owned companies. They hate us small producers. We're sort of cutting away (interview #3).

Examples of the kind of collective action seen in Victoria: the establishment of new joint marketing initiatives (interview # 13 and 29), regional producer groups (interview #6), "local" labeling regimes (interview #26, #37), farmers' markets controlled by the farmers themselves (to keep out re-sellers) (interview #24), and "food and wine trails" (interview #1, 11, 17) among others. The following quote illustrates the way that farmers see these efforts:

Our aim on that [food and wine] trail is to support each other, but primarily for total excellence. Everyone on that trail is sincere about total excellence of product and experience... The integrity of that has flowed through to the dollar (interview #1)

What is notable about this statement is the emphasis on collective action, and how this is once again strongly connected to neoliberal norms of achieving financial success through excellence and exclusivity. At this point, it is important to consider Guthman's critiques of precisely this kind of collective action.

Guthman (2007) criticizes AAFNs defined by new labeling regimes for not actually challenging the structural problems of the neoliberal food system. Instead, while these networks purport to redistribute money to farmers to support more environmentally or socially-friendly production practices of one sort or another, they are ultimately analogs to the very things they are designed to resist: "property rights that allow these accredited commodities to be traded in global markets" (p.456). In order to ensure that higher levels of profit go to those on the inside, labels are designed to exclude. In their practices of exclusion, different AAFNs ultimately have different distributional effects, from the redistribution from consumers to producers characteristic of fair trade networks, to the more competitive dynamics that occur in the post-transition organic sector – dynamics which ultimately tend to push down prices.

So, while labels might be good for some (Polyannian?), they are hardly good for everybody (Polanyian). Furthermore, the degree to which that they produce competition and reproduce inequality – themselves benchmarks of neoliberalism – suggests a more fundamental imperative to examine these as a form of neoliberal governance (ibid. p.464)

Guthman argues that as they currently exist, the forms of collective action that rely on labeling and differentiating production or distribution practices from the norm are ultimately not capable of fully achieving the Polanyian counter-movement with which they are sometimes associated. This is a fair point. On the other hand, the collective identities emerging in these groups are not just focused on how they can promote themselves at the expense of competitors.

What is particularly apparent is how they are beginning to develop state or nation-wide standards. New associations are forming and national standards are being established for a range of initiatives: for organics, farmers markets, free-range egg production (interviews # 12 and #23), and bush foods (interview #19 and 26), among others. The kinds of issues these associations are dealing with are fairly minor at this stage. For example, the emerging Victorian farmers' market association will have to deal with the fact that under the Victoria Food Act currently farmers market vendors need to get a permit in each council where they do business, which could be quite a number for some of these producers. (interview #14). As another example, free-range egg producers are organizing among themselves to try to ensure that national standards do not allow for the de-beaking of "free-range" birds (interview #23), though this is not a unanimous sentiment in this group (interview #12). As a third example, there is interest in having more coordination of bush food capacity across the state:

There is a need for some sort of capacity to coordinate across the state, to actually develop, like we are doing in Prom country, but to do it state-wide, to pick up the little productive enterprises across the state and to give them some coherent merchandising, marketing support... A network

of known producers, funneling in information on what they can supply and when, they could work collectively... (interview #26)

Such initiatives, even if state or country-wide, are clearly not challenging the underlying structures of the food system. On the other hand, in the environmental sector it has long been recognized that the first step towards mandatory regulation is sound voluntary standards. When enough producers get on board, the push can then come to make the voluntary rules mandatory (Bernstein and Cashore 2000). As a result, I can only concur with Guthman, that “the best hope for these labels, then, is that they would produce more collectivist political subjects who in time would develop forms of governance more commensurate to the socialized problems before us” (Guthman 2007 474).

The role of the state

The final theme from interviews important to the discussion here concerns the role of the state. On the surface, many of these initiatives occur without much state involvement at all. The organics industry, for example, has emerged of its own accord. In fact, when the state is involved in any of these sectors, it often goes against that sector’s needs. The food safety laws associated with meat processing are a case in point. Another example from this research is the engagement of higher levels of governments with food trails. The State appears to be ambivalent to the economic and rural development potential of farm gate sales. This lack of interest was exemplified by State-government proposed farm zoning legislation, released in September 2006, which would allow farmers to sell fresh produce like strawberries from the farm gate, but not to sell product that was processed off-farm like strawberry jam, even if made with the farm’s own ingredients (Cooke, 2006). Notably, the government *was* cognizant of the concerns of smaller wineries, which it proposed to exempt them from the legislation. In another example that actually pits winery tourism against food tourism, the group of producers who have spent twenty years successfully establishing the “Milawa Gourmet Region,” named for the Central Victorian community that lies at its hub, are now seeing their efforts pushed to the sidelines by state government efforts to promote tourism in the “King Valley Wine Region” – a wider area that includes Milawa (interview #10). New government promotional materials highlight “local produce in the King Valley,” but the brand by which heart of the region has become known is completely absent (anonymous, 2007).

It is important to note, however, that not all levels, or arms, of the state are on the same page. These same regional food trails tend to get some support from local councils for training and business development, and even from the State government for road signage (interview #1). We also see vestiges of earlier (pre-neoliberal) governmental norms and practices affecting the AAFN terrain. The potato innovators discussed above have, until quite recently, been receiving active support from a governmental potato research station to introduce new tuber varieties in Victoria. Recent action from farmer groups of the type described above (interviews #14, 26 and 29) has also led the government of the State of Victoria to take a more active role in supporting regional farmers’ markets and a nascent farmers market association (Bracks et al., 2006, Allen 2008).

Part of the problem of the neoliberalization, however, is that it is so wide and all-encompassing. We really see this in the push to export. This was identified by Andree et al. (forthcoming) as a key characteristic of how the State and Federal governments in Australia interact with AAFNs, and it is particularly evident in the organic sector. In recent years, the government of the federation has undertaken at least two studies of the sector, mainly looking at export market growth and the potential of the domestic industry to meet that demand (DAFF 2004b; RIRDC 2006). More recently, the Victorian government (2007) in cooperation with the Australian Federation of Agriculture released its first directory of 350 certified organic producers, processors and distributors in the State. Designed to “give the sector a strong export promotion tool for use at overseas trade fairs and missions”, over one hundred of the businesses in the directory are tagged with the phrase “export ready” (p.1).

This brings us back to the issue of neoliberalizing governmentalities. This issue is brought to life through the case of a farmhouse cheese manufacturer who was offered support from the federal government for export. This particular cheese-maker had to go to France to buy a \$100,000 piece of equipment. He learned that the federal gov’t had travel grants to support that kind of initiative. In the end, his grant application was approved, but only after he had made the actual trip, and the letter stated that the funding could not be used for trips already taken. This left him very “bitter”:

In the end I just don't think governments really understand businesses. I don't think governments really should be in that, but I think if an investment is worth making, it's worth making, you know, and if an investment isn't worth making, what the hell is the government doing propping it up? I just don't - I can't get my head around the concept quite frankly... Obviously international trade, there are big issues in international trade and there's obviously a role for government there. The infrastructure is very important, you know, and - infrastructure, and just in terms of, I'd have to say, things like tax levelsbut tax makes a big difference when you're talking about what to invest in and what not to invest in and the amount of tax you have to pay makes a big difference to those investment decisions. So the best thing the government can do is reduce tax, actually. But - I can't believe I'm saying things, but anyway, that is true, that is true.” (interview #15).

This statement brings to the fore the neoliberal perceptions of many of these farmers. This farmer is not challenging the logic of land markets that lead to all of the best land around Melbourne being valued for wineries (or urban development) rather than the kind of food production he is engaged in, nor does he challenge the way that two supermarkets are able to “eat him alive”, although this dynamic was mentioned earlier in the interview (interview #15). Instead, he wishes to see tax relief in order to have the capital to invest in his business. This echoes Guthman’s (2008) point about how neoliberal mentalities push aside social struggles over resources and rights: “the politics of the possible are not only narrowed by the political economy of neoliberalism, but by its governmentalities” (p.1251).

Conclusions

Even though AAFNs are market-driven, this does not necessarily mean public goods are not being realized in them. In fact, many of these AAFNs are realizing environmental benefits. While imbued with neoliberal norms, these activities are also building inroads, or colonizing, neoliberal space with some alternative values. However, it is worth asking whether this is the first step towards a post-neoliberal agriculture in Australia? I would suggest that these may represent a small first step down that road, but that the perspectives of these farmers shows just how big a challenge it will be to actually start challenging the larger structures.

Guthman (2007) notes the troubling rationalities that label-based AAFNs produce. We can make a similar list here. The most troubling aspects of the structures and governmentalities being produced here are the assumptions that the state has a limited role in solving the environmental issues associated with food systems; that individual initiative on the part of producers and consumers can solve these problems through the market; and that the environmental values implicit in AAFNs are commensurate with an export-oriented economy regardless of the specificities of the product in question.

Ultimately, this case study appears to fit in with the argument put forward by Peck and Brenner (2009) – drawing on Sader (2009):

The short- and medium-term prospects for such forms of alternative politics will surely be structured (and to some extent constrained) by the neoliberalized terrains on which they must be prosecuted. This is not simply a matter of contending with (residual) neoliberal power centers, in economics ministries, in international financial institutions, in think tanks, in the media, and in much of the corporate sector. Perhaps more intractably, it must also entail overcoming the profound reconstitution of cross-national, interlocal, and cross-scalar relations through various forms of market rule, which facilitate the reproduction of neoliberalized logics of action, institutional routines, and political projects. (p.)

References Cited:

Allen, P, M. FitzSimmons, M. Goodman and K. Warner. 2003. Shifting plates in the agrifood landscape: the tectonics of alterantive agrifood initiatives in California. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19:61-75

Andrée, P., J. Dibden, V. Higgins, and C. Cocklin. (forthcoming). *Contesting Productivism? Alternative agri-food networks in Australia*. *Journal of Agriculture, Food and Human Values*.

Barr, N. 2005. *Understanding Rural Victoria*. Department of Primary Industries. State of Victoria. April.

Bernstein and Cashore. 2000. *Global Business Regulation*.

Block, Fred. 2001. Introduction to *The Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi. Boston: Beacon Press.

Blue, Gwendolyn. 2009. On the politics and possibilities of locavores: situating food sovereignty in the turn from government to governance. *Politics and Culture*.

Clarke, John. 2007. Citizen-Consumers and Public Service Reform: at the limits of neoliberalism? *Policy Futures in Education* 5(2): 239-248.

Curtin, Deane. 2002. Ecological Citizenship. Handbook of Citizenship Studies. Engin F. and Bryan S. Turner (Eds). Sage

DAFF. 2005. Australian Agriculture and Food Sector Stocktake. Canberra.

Dibden, J. and C. Cocklin (2005). —Sustainability and agri-environmental governance. || In V. Higgins and G. Lawrence (eds.) *Agricultural Governance: Globalization and the New Politics of Regulation* (pp. 135-152). Abingdon: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel. 1991. “On Governmentality.” Burchell, Gordon and Miller: 87-104.

Fridell, G. 2007. Fair trade coffee and Commodity Fetishism: The limits of market-driven social justice. *Historical Materialism* 15: 79-104

Goodman, D., 2003. Editorial – the quality “turn” and alternative food practices: reflections and agenda. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, 1-7.

Goodman, D., 2004. Rural Europe redux: reflections on alternative agro-food networks and paradigm change. *Sociologia Ruralis* 44(1), 3-16.

Granovetter, Mark. 1985. Economic Action and Social Structures: The Problem of Embeddedness. *The American Journal of Sociology* 91(3):481-510

Guthman, Julie. 2008a. Neoliberalism and the making of food politics in California. *Geoforum* 39:1171-1183

Guthman, Julie. 2008b. Thinking inside the neoliberal box: The micro-politics of agro-food philanthropy. *Geoforum* 39: 1241-1253

Guthman, Julie. 2007. the Polanyian Way? Voluntary Food labels as neoliberal governance. *Antipode* 457-478

Ilbery, B and D. Maye. 2005. “Alternative (shorter) food supply chains and specialist livestock products in the Scottish-English borders.” *Environment and Planning A* 37: 823-844

Johnston, Josée. 2008. The citizen-consumer hybrid: ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market. *Theory and Society*. 37(3): 229-270

- Kirwan, J. 2004. 'Alternative strategies in the UK agro-food system: interrogating the alterity of farmers' markets' *Sociologia Ruralis*. 44(4): 395-415
- Lowe, P., J. Murdoch, T. Marsden, R. Munton and A. Flynn. (1993). "Regulating the new rural spaces: the uneven development of land." *Journal of Rural Studies* 9(3): 205-222.
- Luke, Timothy W. 1999. Environmentalism as Green Governmentality. In Darier, Eric (ed). *Discourses of the Environment*. Oxford: Blackwell. Pp.121-151
- Lyson, Thomas. 2004. *Civic Agriculture*.
- MacDonald, L. and A. Ruckert. 2009. Post-Neoliberalism in the Americas: An introduction. In L. MacDonald and A. Ruckert (eds). *Post-Neoliberalism in the Americas: Beyond the Washington Consensus*
- McCarthy, J. and S. Prudham. Neoliberal nature and the nature of neoliberalism. *Geoforum* 35: 275-283
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). 2006. *Agricultural Policies in OECD Countries: At a Glance – 2006 Edition*. SourceOECD Agriculture and Food. Brussels. July 31
- Peck J and Tickell A (2002) Neoliberalizing space. *Antipode* 34(3):380-404
- Peck, J., N. Theodore and N. Brenner (2009) Postneoliberalism and its malcontents. Paper presented at the Canadian Political Sciences Association meeting May 28, 2009. Ottawa, Canada.
- Polanyi, Karl. 2001. *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press [1944]
- Polanyi, K. 1968. *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Raymonds, Laura. 2000. Re-embedding global agriculture: the international organic and fair trade movements. *Agriculture and Human Values* 17:297-309
- Renting, H., T.K. Marsden and J. Banks. 2003. Understanding alternative food networks: exploring the role of short food supply chains in rural development. *Environment and Planning A*. 35: 393-411.
- Sage, C. 2003. Social embeddedness and relations of regard: alternative 'good food' networks in south-west Ireland. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, 47-60.
- Slocum Rachel, 2004, "Consumer citizens and the Cities for Climate Protection campaign" *Environment and Planning A* 36(5) 763 – 782

- Sonino, Roberta. 2006. Embeddedness in action: Saffron and the making of the local in southern Tuscany. *Agriculture and Human Values* 24:61-74
- Sonnino, R. and Marsden, T., 2006. Beyond the divide: rethinking relationships between alternative and conventional food networks in Europe. *Journal of Economic Geography* 6, 181-199.
- Vanclay, F and G. Lawrence. 1995. The Environmental Imperative: Eco-Social Concerns for Australian Agriculture
- van der Ploeg, J.D. (2007). Resistance of the third kind and the construction of sustainability: paper presented to the ESRS conference, Wageningen, 23 August 2007. Available on:
http://www.esrs2007.nl/dynamic/media/1/files/vanderPloegESRS_paper_07.pdf.
- Winter, M., 2003. Embeddedness, the new food economy and defensive localism. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, 23-32.