



Australian Beef
Sustainability
Framework

SUSTAINABILITY STEERING GROUP

2021 - 2024 Workplan



Transparency • Inclusivity • Credibility • Practicality • Relevance

AUSTRALIAN BEEF SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK

The Australian Beef Sustainability Framework (ABSF) defines sustainable beef production in the Australian context and tracks the industry's performance in addressing key priorities against a series of indicators annually.

The ABSF commits the Australian beef industry to a sustainably pathway of best practice and tracks performance through evidence against a series of critical indicators aligned to the four themes of Animal Welfare, Economic Resilience, Environmental Stewardship and People and the Community. Within those themes the Framework has identified 24 priorities and 49 indicators which track progress against recognised standards and metrics.

The ABSF is used to:

- Advise industry investment for continuous improvement in areas most important to our customers and stakeholders.
- Help protect and grow access to investment and finance by providing evidence of performance and continuous improvement.
- Foster constructive relationships with stakeholders to work collaboratively on continuous improvement.
- Promote industry transparency and progress to customers and the community.

The ABSF does not:

- Establish or endorse measure systems at an individual business level.
- Provide an accreditation or certification system.
- Endorse prescriptive management practise.
- Create additional paperwork for individual businesses.

The ABSF was launched in April 2017, its ongoing development is informed by globally accepted standards that require the application of principles including stakeholder inclusivity and responsiveness and materiality. The ABSF priorities and indicators will continue to be responsive and refined through materiality and stakeholder consultation. Since its launch considerable effort has been committed to improving the indicators and collecting evidence to substantiate industry's sustainability performance and progress.

SUSTAINABILITY STEERING GROUP

The ABSF is an initiative of the Red Meat Advisory Council (RMAC). RMAC appoints an independent, grassroots group, representative of the beef value chain, to progress the ABSF on behalf of industry. This is called the Sustainability Steering Group (SSG).

RMAC appointed the first SSG in 2016 to develop the ABSF. The second SSG continued consultation, the collection of data, refinement of indicators (including the establishment of the first Expert Working Group) and industry priorities, and publication of the first report.

The third and SSG was appointed in December 2018. Led by SSG Chair, Tess Herbert, the new SSG were responsible for progressing the ABSF, including addressing data gaps; refining some sustainability indicators; delivering the 2019, 2020, 2021 Annual Update; communications related to the ABSF and continuing to provide advice to RMAC on sustainability matters. In the past year, work has continued to refine indicators and gather data to improve how the ABSF reports on the sustainability of the Australian beef industry. The ABSF team has continued to widely consult industry and external stakeholders. The team has also worked to promote the Framework to industry, customers, investors, government and regulators, and other stakeholders.



*As project funder and manager, MLA will advise RMAC and SSG on the budget in place for the ABSF.

Figure 1: ABSF governance structure

2021-2024 ACTIVITIES

With the foundational framework, four annual updates now released, and the latest materiality assessment, the ABSF is well placed to assist the Australian beef industry reach the Red Meat 2030 goal of doubling the value of red meat sales as the trust source of high quality protein. This can be achieved by ensuring a thriving Australian beef industry that strives to continuously improve the wellbeing of people, animals, and the environment.

To continue progressing the ABSF and ensure continuous improvements towards a more sustainable industry, the SSG has developed the following workplan to be implemented from July 2021 to June 2024. The previous workplan is available in the Appendix.

OUTCOME 1: ABSF IS A DRIVING FORCE TO PRACTICE CHANGE

- Confidence in indicators, data, and trends
- Goals for all priorities
- Alignment with international goals
- Deep dive into two areas
- Data is proactively provided to RACs and RDCs

OUTCOME 2: OUR CUSTOMERS ARE CHAMPIONING OUR PRODUCT

- Biannual consultative committees
- Raise the profile of the ABSF beyond rural media
- Stocktake of which stakeholders use the ABSF

OUTCOME 3: THE ENTIRE SUPPLY CHAIN KNOWS THE ABSF

- Annual industry forums
- Empower industry organisations

OUTCOME 4: ETHICAL INVESTMENT IN AUSTRALIAN BEEF

- Annual updates & launches
- Increased communications

OUTCOME 5: AUSTRALIA IS VERIFIED SUSTAINABILITY LEADERS

- Embrace our principles
- Undertake an external review of the ABSF
- Work with external verification programs

OUTCOME 1: ABSF IS A DRIVING FORCE TO PRACTICE CHANGE

Confidence in indicators, data, and trends

The beef industry is continuously evolving to adopting proactive, transparent, and co-ordinated approaches to meet customer and community expectations. As part of this process, the industry needs a clearer understanding of what data are currently available across the key areas of sustainability and to determine what indicators are most relevant. The SSG will review and refine the indicators and data available in the ABSF, relevant to the 24 priorities.

This activity will allow for an increase in confidence and trending of the data presented. In 2021, the SSG reported on 90% of the ABSF indicators, with the expectation all indicators will have data in 2024.

Goals for all priorities

The SSG sees setting targets as a natural progression, and the ABSF is in the position to support the process of target setting in order to take the ABSF from a report card to a stronger commitment to sustainable improvement.

The ABSF's mandate is to help guide industry action on sustainability. Targets will provide a tangible pathway for industry to meet consumer and community expectations. Progress against targets will provide proof of our continuous improvement to stakeholders, and how we can achieve and outperform global goals. The SSG will collaborate with industry to ensure industry sets the agenda and takes control of the process, and that targets are endorsed with an aligned plan to achieve them.

There is a risk that by not having a target, certain standards will be enforced on industry. It is important to show we are making progress, even if we fall short of the target. With increased confidence in data and trends, targets will be based on evidence, carefully considered, and be ambitious, aspirational, and achievable.

Alignment with international goals

By understanding how the ABSF aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Australian beef industry can show how it is contributing to sustainability in a global context. Community, investors, and other stakeholders increasingly want industries to report on sustainability. As a pressing global issue, sustainability is changing the regulatory and market access landscape. Aligning with the SDGs helps the industry meet these ever-shifting expectations.

There is a strong international commitment to the SDGs. They were adopted by 193 countries, including Australia and our major trading partners, and global businesses are following suit by supporting and in some cases aligning and reporting against the SDGs. They have become a shared language or shorthand by which people around the world can talk about sustainable development. The ABSF is represented as a National Roundtable in the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (GRSB), and where applicable, align activities to global efforts. Through its worldwide network of members, GRSB intends to power progress in sustainable beef by setting ambitious goals around reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving land use, and enhancing best practices in animal welfare.

Deep dive into two areas

Part of the ABSF's mandate is improving the credibility of its indicators and measures. While individual indicators and data sources will be improved through the *stocktake and investigation of sustainability data and metrics for the Australian cattle industry* project, there will still be areas of sustainability that require further insight. The SSG won't restrict the deep dives to priority areas, and will look beyond the ABSF to look into emerging topics and opportunities.

Data is proactively provided to RACs and RDCs

The ABSF works with multiple agricultural industries, across the value chain, to utilise the best available data to report on priorities which matter the most. This network of stakeholders and access to information is vital to the industry, and provides key insights. 'Decisions informed through data and insights' is a focus area for MLA, and the ABSF will assist MLA and other RDCs with data and insights to inform their research and adoption strategies. Engaging with RACs and providing key information will further advise on investment for continuous improvement in areas most important to our customers and stakeholders.

OUTCOME 2: OUR CUSTOMERS ARE CHAMPIONING OUR PRODUCT

Biannual consultative committees

The Consultative Committee serves as a reference group for the ABSF. Consulting with the group has provided valuable insight and perspective into the activities and expectations of our non-industry stakeholders. The SSG will continue holding Consultative Committees twice a year to share knowledge, seek collaborative opportunities, and learn from diverse perspectives. Engaging our customers directly will facilitate championing of Australian beef.

Raise the profile of the ABSF beyond rural media

Building industry, stakeholder, and community buy-in the ABSF is an important part of effecting industry-wide practice change and increasing trust. The ABSF released its annual update to a sold-out room at Beef Australia in 2021, and the need for representation at significant events and media is growing. The SSG will continue spreading the word to industry and external audiences to grow awareness of the ABSF and the efforts to create a more sustainable beef industry beyond rural media, with a view of the 2024 annual launch featured on commercial station evening news.

Stocktake of which stakeholders use the ABSF

Major producer, processor, supermarkets, food service and value chain businesses and investment groups are utilising the ABSF and aligning their own sustainability processes to it, because it is specifically tailored to the beef industry and articulates what the supply chain wants. The SSG is aware of a number of organisations and stakeholders using the ABSF, but a wider understanding of how it is being used, by who, and why is needed in order to ensure it continues to meet our customers and stakeholders need.

OUTCOME 3: THE ENTIRE SUPPLY CHAIN KNOWS THE ABSF

Annual industry forums

In 2021, the SSG held the first industry forum to connect with the wider industry and better connect industry with what the priorities are from our end customers and those that influence them. This annual event will have a tailored agenda specific to internal industry stakeholders, with a focus on some more contentious matters where an internal industry view may be opposing to external. Some industry stakeholders appreciate the opportunity for honest discussion with other industry members, to ensure a complete representation of the industry is agreed on when presenting to external stakeholders.

Annual forums will further enable industry to promote the ABSF to every producer, processor, lot feeder, and exporter.

Empower industry organisations

Industry organisations can use the ABSF to inform their own sustainability activities, define specific areas of sustainability to them, setting targets, resourcing projects, and assist individual operations to develop their own sustainability frameworks and initiatives. By working with industry organisations closer, the SSG will ensure industry is equipped to promote the ABSF and the entire industry's sustainability efforts in an aligned and consistent manner. Focus will be on both how and why industry can and should use the ABSF.

OUTCOME 4: ETHICAL INVESTMENT IN AUSTRALIAN BEEF

Annual updates and launches

The consultative committee have unanimously voted on the importance of an annual update, and continued to see progress with each year. The first annual update was published in 2018, and four updates have been released so far. With the foundation of the ABSF now established, annual updates will play a pivotal role in showing trends over time (the industry's continuous improvement). With the addition of targets, the SSG expect these reports will become a powerful tool for the industry, enabling a strong narrative to be displayed to our external stakeholders.

With the 2021 being producer focused at Beef Australia, the SSG aims to reach other important stakeholder groups through their keystone annual launches. With a view to launching at Beef Australia in 2024, the SSG will focus launches in 2022 and 2023 to the finance, media, and retail sectors.

Increasing effective communications

Communicating the sustainability credentials of the Australian beef industry is a key deliverable of the ABSF. The SSG will continue to increase their communication and engagement with both internal and external stakeholders. This will include interacting with State Farming Organisations, Peak Industry Councils, industry representative bodies, customers, financial institutions, special interest groups, and government bodies.

More recently, the SSG has seen the finance sector take a stronger interest in how it interacts with agricultural industries. Finance and investment are integral to the viability of the Australian beef industry, so the SSG will reach out to the sector where possible to engage, and be involved in their initiatives.

Pivotal to this will be advocating for the industry and the ABSF in media and events, and use to assist red meat positioning in Australia and to our markets.

OUTCOME 5: AUSTRALIA IS VERIFIED SUSTAINABILITY LEADERS

Embrace our principles

The ABSF is underpinned by five guiding principles. These principles were developed with and accepted by industry, and sometimes have been overlooked in order to rectify difficult situations. This has often led to further compromising of the ABSF and the sustainability of the Australian beef industry. The SSG will reinstate referring to the five guiding principles before, during, and after the completion of activities to ensure Australia is well placed to make verified decisions.

- **Relevance** – The priority is important to our customers, the community, and the Australian beef industry and is within the industry’s scope of influence.
- **Inclusivity** – The constructive views of industry, customers, government, and community groups as to how industry can continuously improve performance will be valued and considered.
- **Credibility** – The decision (about a theme, priority area, indicator, KPI or recommendation) is grounded in evidence. It can or has the potential to be monitored and managed.
- **Practicality** – The indicator is realistic. The industry is able to make changes that represent value in the value chain through continuous improvement.
- **Transparency** – The industry can provide an open and honest picture of performance using the most appropriate data available.

In addition, the SSG will operate with the understanding that perfection is not to prevent progress. Progress is better than perfection, as it shows the industry is moving forward and improving, rather than halting work to meet an often unattainable standard.

Undertake an external review of the ABSF

The SSG will seek an external evaluation of the ABSF, its progress, and challenges. The evaluation will inform future development and adaptation of the ABSF and associated efforts within the industry.

Specifically, the evaluation will:

- Identify the successes and challenges of the ABSF since its launch, and since the first review was completed in 2020.
- Identify ways to improve and develop the ABSF.
- Improve the effectiveness of the ABSF as a trust building mechanism.
- Understand how the ABSF leads to practice change.

Work with external verification programs

There are currently numerous verification programs in development to provide mechanisms for producers and supply chains to demonstrate their sustainability credentials. These are being led by industry bodies, non-government organisations, independent customers and supply chains, and collaborative partnerships. While not a function of the ABSF, the SSG will work with these external programs to ensure alignment and consistency where possible with the industry led ABSF.

Utilising the priorities within the ABSF derived from the materiality assessment, will assist the verification programs in working with industry to achieve agreed outcomes and benefits. It will also help ensure there are no competing priorities or actions between programs.

TIMELINE

ACTIVITY	Jul - Dec 2021	Jan - Jun 2022	Jul - Dec 2022	Jan - Jun 2023	Jul - Dec 2023	Jan - Jun 2024
Confidence in indicators, data, and trends						
Goals for all priorities						
Alignment with international Goals						
Deep dive into two areas						
Data is proactively fed to RACs and RDCs						
Biannual consultative committees						
Raise the profile of the ABSF beyond rural media						
Stocktake of which stakeholders use the ABSF						
Annual industry forums						
Empower industry organisations						
Annual updates and launches						
Increasing effective communications						
Embrace our principles						
Undertake an external review of the ABSF						
Work with external verification programs						

APPENDIX

10-Step SSG workplan for 2019-2021

10-STEP SSG WORKPLAN FOR 2019-21

STEP 1
Outputs from deep dives into two key priorities
Part of the Framework's mandate is improving the credibility of its indicators and measures. In 2018-19, the SSG oversaw a thorough examination, or deep dive, into the *balance of tree and grass cover* priority. The SSG identified that vegetation measures were a critical gap, so they established an expert panel to help develop evidence-based indicators.
To be a vehicle for continuous improvement, the Framework must also continue improving. It is not practical for the SSG to do a deep dive on all the priorities at once, its members will concentrate on two more key priorities in the next three years. They will identify gaps and take action to address them.

STEP 2
Data for more Framework indicators
The Framework is a constantly evolving tool. It must reflect improvements in the industry's ability to collect data and develop indicators.
The SSG will keep working to collect more data; increase the number of indicators against which it reports; and improve the integrity and credibility of data being used.

STEP 3
A review of key material risks
A materiality matrix was developed in 2016 following a review of material risks based on the GRI content principles and AA1000 AccountAbility Assurance Standard. This work informed the priorities in the Framework.
Since 2016, a lot has changed in the beef industry, and in the world. Reviewing the material sustainability risks is crucial to ensuring the Framework stays up-to-date and on the front foot. The SSG will oversee this body of work in 2020.

STEP 4
Targets for all Framework priorities
Since the Framework's launch in 2017, work has focused on consolidating its foundation. This work has included reporting more data: from presenting data for 50% of indicators in 2017 to 83% in this report. RMAC sees setting targets as a natural progression and has directed the SSG to lead the process of target setting in order to take the Framework from a scorecard to a stronger commitment to sustainable improvement.
The Framework's mandate is to help guide industry action on sustainability. Targets will provide a tangible pathway for industry to meet consumer and community expectations. Progress against targets will provide proof of our continuous improvement to stakeholders. The SSG will consult widely and collaborate to set targets. This activity will focus on the six key priorities first.

STEP 5
A map of how the SDGs align to Framework priorities
The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent the world's plan for action on sustainability. When the Framework was released, work was done to show which SDGs the Framework addressed.
The SSG seeks to take another step and show how the SDGs and their targets map across the Framework's 23 priorities. The aim is to translate the Framework to a common, global language understood by business leaders and governments to build trust and support collaboration.

STEP 6
Enhanced engagement with industry groups
In 2018, the Framework team engaged industry groups through presentations, briefings, reports and meetings. Industry ownership and support for the Framework is important to its progression.
The SSG will continue to closely engage these industry groups. Progressing the Framework priorities requires coordinated industry effort. Consistently involving industry stakeholders and expanding how we engage them will be key to the Framework's success.

STEP 7
Half-yearly Consultative Committee forums
The Consultative Committee serves as a reference group for the Framework. Consulting with the group has provided valuable insight and perspective into the activities and expectations of our non-industry stakeholders. Their input was used to help determine the six key priorities.
The SSG will continue holding Consultative Committee forums twice a year to share knowledge, seek collaborative opportunities and learn from diverse perspectives.

STEP 8
Engagements with key stakeholders
The SSG interacts with a variety of stakeholders such as government, corporates, grassroots producers, NGOs and financial institutions. In the past year, the SSG has unlocked opportunities by engaging these groups, using the Framework to guide sustainable practice.
The SSG will continue this active engagement with key stakeholders. Grassroots producers and financial institutions will be a focus.

STEP 9
Annual Sustainability Reports
The first Annual Update was published in 2018, reporting against the Framework's 23 priorities and filling data gaps.
Now that Framework's data foundation has been established, the SSG hopes to show trends over time. The SSG will keep reporting annual progress against the indicators. With the addition of targets, the SSG hopes these reports will become an even more powerful story of progress and commitment to continuous improvement.

STEP 10
Advocacy in media and at events
Building industry and key stakeholder awareness and buy-in to the Framework is an important part of effecting industry-wide change. In 2018, SSG members were advocates for the Framework in the media and at significant industry events like Beef Australia.
The SSG will continue spreading the word to industry and external audiences to grow awareness of the Framework and the efforts to create a more sustainable beef industry.

Items in the 2019-2021 workplan were delayed or unachievable due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Where relevant, these items have been carried over to the 2021-2024 workplan.

Outcomes of previous workplan

10-STEP SSG WORKPLAN FOR 2019-21		
Activity	Progress	Comment
Outputs from deep dives into two key priorities	PROGRESSED	The SSG completed a deep dive into animal husbandry techniques in 2021. Efforts to complete a second were delayed by COVID-19 restrictions
Data for more framework indicators	SIGNIFICANTLY PROGRESSED	The 2021 Annual Update reported against 90% of the 49 indicators, up from 58% in 2018
A review of key material risks	COMPLETED	This activity was completed in January 2021, and will inform the future direction of the ABSF
Targets for all framework priorities	PROGRESSED	The SSG determined a set of principles for targets and goal setting, and identified a number of pre-existing industry goals. Work will continue with industry to ensure alignment across the supply chain prior to implementation of these goals.
A map of how the SDGs align to framework priorities	NOT PROGRESSED	The SSG was prepared to undertake this task, however RMAC requested this activity be delayed
Enhanced engagement with industry groups	SIGNIFICANTLY PROGRESSED	In 2021 the SSG held the first industry forum. With individual webinars offered and hosted for all PICs and SFOs in 2020, the SSG is committed to continuing the proactive engagement
Half-yearly consultative committee forums	COMPLETED	Biannual consultative committees have been held in 2019, 2020, and 2021, usually in February and August. Some of the activities have been held virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions
Engagement with key stakeholders	SIGNIFICANTLY PROGRESSED	Made difficult with cancellation of many key events and travel restrictions, however contact has been maintained and is increasing again
Annual sustainability reports	COMPLETED	Annual updates have been delivered in 2019, 2020, and 2021
Advocacy in media and at events	SIGNIFICANTLY PROGRESSED	Made difficult with cancellation of many key events and travel restrictions, but used by industry bodies and Federal Ministers in response to damaging claims