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# Whither the city's fringe vege farms in the big dry?

By **JASON DOWLING**  
 CITY EDITOR

PAT Senserrick's family has farmed vegetables on its 10-hectare Keilor property since 1926 — growing artichokes, cauliflowers and lettuces.

But lately, this vegetable-growing business, 16 kilometres from the city, has not been so good as water has become scarce and more expensive. Indeed, the Senserricks did not plant a crop this year — the first time in more than 80 years of vegetable growing.

And while Melbourne debated this week the State Government's proposal to expand the city's urban growth boundary by 41,000 hectares — gobbling up thousands of hectares of green wedge land — Mr Senserrick said other uses for Melbourne's vegetable-growing land should be considered.

Mr Senserrick, who bought the local fruit shop five years ago as an alternate income source, said vegetable growing was no longer viable in the area for many farmers, particularly small growers.

"These growers are hemorrhaging down here; people are

suffering financially and they can't keep going," he said.

He said there were many empty paddocks that were once filled with crops.

Mr Senserrick predicts vegetable growing in the area could end within a decade as the water dries up.

"The Maribyrnong River has always been the main water source. Previously, if the river flow slowed down, they would cease us pumping from the Maribyrnong around Decem-

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**PAT SENSERRICK, vegetable farmer**

ber, and maybe in March you would get use again. This year, I think it stopped in October and it has only just started to flow again."

He said two- to four-hectare lifestyle lots or sporting grounds could replace vegetable growing on land no longer viable for farming. "We are not trying to be greedy, but we think lifestyle lots are very realistic and if that can't happen, we would even put to the council about sport-

ing grounds for schools." Zoned "rural conservation", the Senserricks' land is covered by strict planning controls.

However, not everyone supports a transition from vegetable farmland to other purposes.

State Government MP Don Nardella is a member of a parliamentary committee examining farming in outer-suburban Melbourne.

"Unless we actually protect irrigation or farming areas, then they go," he said. "We're actually going to find that getting ready access to food is going to become very problematic to urbanised cities, especially Melbourne."

He said farmers needed certainty in terms of land use as urban growth crept closer.

"Unless we give certainty to those farmers, they will just want subdivision."

Mr Nardella said growing vegetables on Melbourne's fringes was still viable. "It is viable, but it needs to have the protection of long-term certainty."

But that's not the case, says Mr Senserrick. "They keep trying to tell us that it's viable, but we're the ones paying the bills."



Pat Senserrick and his sister Carmen on their family's 10-hectare vegetable farm at Keilor. PICTURE: JASON SOUTH