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The Forgotten National Priority -New Zealand's Food Security:

When people talk about national security, the conversation tends to focus on military strength, economic resilience, and manufacturing independence. But what about food security? In a world facing climate instability, supply chain disruptions, and geopolitical tension, New Zealand's ability to feed itself should be a national priority. Instead, we are becoming increasingly reliant on food imports, putting our country's well-being at risk.

A Nation That Imports Its Food?

New Zealand is known globally for its agriculture, yet we import a surprising amount of our food. Supermarket shelves are stocked with foreign-grown produce, while domestic vegetable growers face bureaucratic hurdles that threaten their survival. The horticulture sector, which supplies 80% of our vegetables to the domestic market, is struggling under restrictive freshwater regulations and an uncertain policy environment. Without intervention, more growers will exit the sector, leaving New Zealanders at the mercy of volatile international markets.

Japan's recent rice crisis is a cautionary tale. Once self-sufficient in rice production, government policies reduced domestic farming in favour of market control. When climate shocks and speculation drove prices to record highs, the government was forced to release emergency stockpiles. New Zealand risks a similar crisis if we do not secure local food production. Unlike Japan, we have **no** food reserves to fall back on.

The National Security Argument for Food

Governments today are not investing heavily in defence and manufacturing to safeguard national interests. But food security is just as critical. Without a stable, affordable domestic food supply, economic and social stability will deteriorate. Rising food prices disproportionately harm low-income households, increase dependence on international supply chains, and expose us to geopolitical risks. If a major exporter like Australia restricted food exports due to drought or crisis, what would New Zealanders eat?

The Policy Problem: Making It Harder to Grow Food

Horticulture New Zealand (HortNZ) has raised urgent concerns over the regulatory environment for commercial vegetable production. Currently, many growers struggle to obtain local government consents, limiting expansion and even forcing some out of business. Despite promises to make commercial vegetable production a permitted activity, bureaucratic resistance is delaying meaningful change. This lack of national direction threatens not only growers' livelihoods but also food security for every New Zealander.

HortNZ has emphasised that vegetable production has a minimal impact on water quality compared to other land uses, yet growers face disproportionately strict regulations. If these barriers remain, we risk losing productive farmland to residential development, further shrinking our ability to grow food domestically.

A Call for Action

New Zealand must act now to protect its food security. This requires:

1. **Policy Reform:** Implementing national environmental standards that enable vegetable production as a permitted activity, ensuring growers have the confidence to invest in their future.

2. **Infrastructure Support:** Investing in agricultural innovation and ensuring water and land use policies support, rather than hinder, food production.
3. **Access to Skilled and Ethical Labour:** Ensuring a skilled workforce through training programs and targeted immigration that meets ethical labour standards.
4. **Public Awareness:** New Zealanders must recognise that food security is not guaranteed. Supporting local growers and advocating for policy changes will help secure a stable food supply and stable affordable prices.

New Zealand prides itself on being clean, green, and self-reliant. But without decisive action, we risk becoming a nation that cannot feed itself. In an unstable world, food security is national security—and it's time we started treating it that way.