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Enhancing Domestic Food Security

The idea of New Zealand running out of food would seem to be highly unlikely, considering the country feeds over 40 million people. However, it is important to note that we import one-third of the food we consume. The issue at hand is not about running out of food entirely, but rather running out of the varieties of food we need, particularly healthy foods such as vegetables and some fruits.

Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 restrictions, there were constraints on healthy food availability. For instance, during the first lockdown, McDonald's in Auckland ran out of lettuce. This situation can be seen as a trial run for potential future scenarios where increasing global population, demand for food lead coupled with the impact of adverse events leads to more restricted and expensive food supplies. Government decrees could also limit food exports, keeping more produce within domestic markets and not being shipped to New Zealand. And at what cost. When vegetables grown in New Zealand are in short supply, prices increase.

Agricultural Challenges and Solutions

Lettuce, for example, takes around 90 days in summer and about 150 days in winter (due to colder temperatures) to grow from seed and be delivered to retailers like McDonald's. Planning for climatic events is crucial, as droughts, floods, and extreme weather are becoming more common, severely impacting farming and growing conditions. Fortunately, unaffected regions in New Zealand have been able to supply fresh produce during such events, but this has been due to good fortune rather than strategic planning.

Infrastructure and Regional Growing Areas

We rely on regions not affected by adverse weather to provide fresh food, but we must also consider the resilience of our infrastructure. Damaged roads and railways can prevent fresh produce from reaching those who need it. Therefore, we should diversify our growing areas across the country and ensure that fresh, healthy food is produced close to major population centres.

Urban Development and Land Use

Converting productive land into housing and lifestyle blocks adjacent to cities reduces the available land for food production and limits our ability to distribute growing areas around the country to mitigate climatic and other events. It is also not carbon efficient.

Importing Food: A Limited Solution

Relying on imports presupposes that other countries will export to New Zealand, adhere to high food safety standards, and have the necessary logistics to deliver the food. However, this is not always guaranteed.

Workers

There is also the need to consider in an adverse event where workers are going to be housed and how they might get to work to provide food and repair infrastructure damage. This is more than providing emergency accommodation.

The Need for a Strategic Food Security Plan

The incident of McDonald's running out of lettuce should serve as a warning. Without serious efforts to ensure an adequate supply of healthy, fresh food, vegetable shortages will become more frequent. Now is the time to develop and implement a comprehensive food security plan. This plan should identify growing areas close to cities, with sufficient distribution to ensure that during adverse weather, there are still regions producing healthy food that can be delivered to those in need linked to the workers needed to make this all happen.