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Kiwis and Robots Back to Work

At last, some good news. After a couple very tough financial years, two recent news stories really stood out. More than 80,000 Kiwis over the last year have come off benefits and into jobs. And New Zealand's been rated as well placed to ride the wave of AI. That's not just headline stuff – it's real cause for optimism in our primary industries.

On the ground, you'll have noticed it too. More locals showing up, motivated and ready to work. That's an opportunity we can't afford to let slip. Give people the right training and support now, and we'll grow a workforce that sticks around. Seasonals will always be part of the picture – we need them – but having more Kiwis stepping up gives us a healthier balance than we've had in years.

Of course, low unemployment brings its own pressure. Harvest peaks don't wait for anyone. That's where tech comes in.

Packhouses Racing Ahead

If you've been through a packhouse lately, you'll know the change is massive. Robots don't call in sick and they don't need night shifts off. Optical graders, robotic packers, palletisers – they're doing the heavy lifting now. What once needed hundreds of seasonal workers is being done by smaller crews of skilled operators. It's fast, it's efficient, and it's only going to grow.

Orchards and Vineyards – Always a Human Job

Step out in the orchard or vineyard though, and it's a different story. Pruning, thinning, canopy work, selective picking – still all people power. Sure, we've got machines spraying and mowing, and plenty of vineyards run harvesters and machine pruning, but the detailed stuff still relies on skilled hands. That's not going to change overnight.

What's Coming Down the Track

The innovators aren't sitting still:

- In the US, robotic apple pickers are already rolling down rows, plucking fruit with suction arms and AI eyes.
- Here in NZ, Plant & Food's been trialling "2D orchards" – flat tree walls that boost yields and make life easier for future robots.
- At Waikato Uni, engineers are building soft robot hands for kiwifruit, plus "e-Bins" that take the strain off human pickers.
- And asparagus? Overseas, they've got harvest robots already clocking 16-hour days. Kiwi teams are testing their own versions too.

It's exciting stuff. We're not there yet – but we're heading that way.

People Still Matter Most

Here's the thing: tech doesn't replace people, it changes the game. In the packhouse, workers move from box lifters to machine operators. Out in the field, people still do the tough calls robots can't. Automation takes away the grunt work and opens the door to better jobs, more skills, and more opportunities for locals.

With Kiwis coming back into the workforce, seasonals still in the mix, and smarter tech filling the gaps, we've got the chance to build something stronger than before.

The Big Picture

This isn't just about efficiency. It's about pride. About showing that New Zealand's primary industries can adapt, innovate, and lead. Robots in the packhouse, Kiwis back in work, prototypes in the orchard – that's progress you can see with your own eyes.

The future doesn't have to be something that just happens to us. We can shape it. We can make sure it works for growers, for workers, and for communities.

Kiwis and robots, side by side – building a smarter, fairer, and more resilient future.