



Agribusiness Agenda 2026

From status quo to status change

Resilience comes from intentional actions

The question posed to industry leaders at this year's KPMG Agribusiness Agenda (Agenda) roundtables was, on the face of it, a very simple question, given global food systems will change more in the next 25 years than they have in the 13,000-year history of cultivated agriculture, **are you status quo or status change?** The framing used to introduce this question is set out in the State of the Nation section.

After six roundtable conversations and more than 22,000 words of notes - recorded the old-fashioned way with pen and paper - I asked Copilot to assess the tenor of contributors' comments to understand where leaders sat on the spectrum between status change and status quo.

Status quo or status change

While Copilot produced a numerical split (for the record, approximately 75% of contributors being status change) it was quick to challenge the simplicity of that result. It highlighted that for many contributors, the answer was not one or the other, but a blend driven by their world view, their connection to markets, and the way they act in their businesses and organisations on a day-to-day basis.

When we framed status quo, we were clear that it still involved change. In fact, we suggested it was a continuation of today's reality; continuous change to adopt technology as it emerges and to create market opportunities, predominantly in existing sectors, just at an ever-faster pace. Status change, by contrast, placed greater focus on not just innovating in the sectors that have grown into successful global businesses over the years, but also in experimenting and developing new sectors and businesses, aligned and adjacent to what we do today.

One contributor answered the question directly, noting that the future they see for the sector is their own version of status quo, one that has always been grounded in making decisions and implementing change based on meeting the needs of customer led value chains. They noted that, to them, status quo means continuous step change in the areas of business they operate in. Many contributors, however, would have assessed themselves to be status change with this type of mindset towards the future.

Another contributor suggested that the sector's future needs to be status evolution. Given the scale of digital change ahead and the need to evolve farming systems to become more climate resilient, a status evolution future was described as one where organisations build on their strengths by doubling down on areas where New Zealand is already world-class. The contributor suggested that a vision for the future based on nothing but continuous change is likely to meet resistance from some farmers and growers. Whereas a future based on what we are already good at will take away the fear of change and help bridge the gap between the leading operators and the rest of the industry.

A further perspective extended the framing to status transformation, focussing more on changing the mindset across the industry as the pathway to adopting change. Noting that we have reached a point where change is now the norm across value chains, the key constraint the sector is facing is a mindset that assumes producing more is the solution to most challenges. Rather than focusing on our own challenges, it was suggested that the sector should continuously focus on the problems our customers (or potential customers) face globally and ask how we can evolve our systems and processes to solve these problems - an approach likely to drive very different outcomes than a singular focus on increasing output.



Different pathways to a common objective - resilience

These three contributions highlight the diverse perspectives leaders shared on how they would like to see the sector's future evolve. While very different, they share a collective understanding that continual change sits at the centre of the industry's future. The recognition that change is not just necessary, but inevitable, underpinned every roundtable contribution, with leaders identifying many reasons why the change must happen. We have collated 24 factors that are shaping global futures, our 'Global Future Shapers' which are summarised after this editorial. At the core of each reason for change sits the need for resilience: resilience to climate shocks, biosecurity incursions, geopolitical disruption, supply chain fragility, labour availability, energy and water insecurity, commodity price movements, and myriad other factors.

Given the challenges of the last five years, leaders repeatedly emphasised the need to move beyond reactive crisis response. Instead, contributors highlighted the need to invest time and effort in implementing strategic change that embeds resilience into value chains - from before the farm gate right through to how consumers ultimately use New Zealand food and fibre products.

What might the food system look like in 2050?

What was clear from the roundtable conversations is that resilience has become a strategic imperative for the sector, driven largely by uncertainty about what the sector may look like in the future.

Having framed the conversations around what the food system might look like in 2050, roundtable discussions touched on some of the changes that sector leaders believe we may experience. As one contributor noted, if you think back 25 years and consider how much our diets have evolved over that period in respect of the cuisines, textures and tastes that we eat today, this provides some framing of the level of change we could experience, however we should not expect change to be linear. Future diets will be shaped by demographics (by 2050 the global population aged over 65 is projected to double), climate change (and a growing need to make production systems more resilient to climatic events) and trends in health management and care (including but not limited to GLP-1s, which are discussed later in the Agenda).

The attributes demanded in our food are likely to change, with potential for greater demand for protein rich, nutrient accessible foods, high collagen foods, and foods containing specific functional ingredients targeted towards specific health issues. Environmental and ethical expectations will continue to evolve, which could see significant changes in how we use agricultural chemicals and manage animals within food value chains. As lifestyles evolve, there is the potential that the traditional eating patterns of three meals a day change to better fit with the way communities live in 2050, driving increased demand for advanced snack solutions and nutrient shots. There is also the question about what influence wearable devices and other digital trackers will have on diets by 2050 - there is the possibility that compliance with dietary advice provided by devices may become a requirement for insurance cover.

The only thing we can be certain about is that the future food system will be different to our reality today. We can also be certain that as the system evolves, it will present opportunities to organisations that are alert to change and have the ability to respond.

A notable feature of the roundtable conversations was the optimism expressed about the future for New Zealand's food and fibre sector. One commentator did express surprise at the level of positivity given several of the conversations took place against the background of the Iran conflict impacting global energy markets. The optimism was

realistic; it recognised that change is never easy and constant change can drive fatigue and burnout. However, it also recognised that now is the time to lean into change. As one contributor noted, the strong financial performance of many parts of the industry in recent seasons means that farmers and growers, and their supply chain partners, have some financial capacity to think differently about the opportunities in front of them and can start to make changes.

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Leaning into a future of change at pace

While day-to-day operational optimisation remains important, there was consensus amongst leaders who incremental change alone will not be sufficient to create an aspirational future for the food and fibre sector. Intentional, non-linear change is necessary, particularly in response to shifts

in global market demand, technology, climate and geopolitics.

As one contributor noted, the pace of change in international markets is high and it is expected to remain so. This is particularly evident as our key customers, the consumer-packaged goods (CPG) companies, expand their use of AI to model consumer behaviour and shape their product offerings. The rate of change within the New Zealand sector needs to be sufficiently rapid, to ensure the solutions we bring to market remain relevant to the CPG companies and the international markets they serve.

Leaders also reflected on the perceived level of inertia in New Zealand, driven by factors like regulatory overreach and insufficient funding. It is not a specific food and fibre sector issue; however it impedes the ability of many organisations to move at pace. The government has a role to play in speeding processes up, however as a contributor noted, large organisations also have a role to play as internal systems and processes can mean that they are slow to initiate, and even slower to implement, substantive change. Just as importantly, change is not about simply telling stakeholders, the community and markets that you are going to act. It is about doing the, often hard, work to make a substantive change to adapt to the future. The sector needs leaders who are ready and willing to do the work rather than make the noise.

Owning and delivering effective change

Several commentators noted that it is the organisations across the industry that must ultimately drive change, not government. During one roundtable, a leader noted that governments cannot solve the practical challenges business faces daily. Their role, instead, is to ensure that the regulatory settings are as relevant to the real world as possible, empowering businesses to find their own solutions. Flexibility within boundaries protects the community and the environment, while ensuring organisations can address problems and respond to opportunities in a manner which makes commercial sense to their circumstances. There has never been a time when change is happening so quickly, and while this is creating challenges to management teams and boards, however, if we are to thrive into the future, being good at change is non-negotiable.

On a similar theme, another contributor stressed that the sector cannot sit back and let change happen to their organisation. Organisations need to ensure change is intentional and aligned to the vision they hold for their future. They suggested that while each organisation will have a view of its direction of travel, industry leaders must collectively have some clarity on what the future looks like for the New Zealand food and fibre sector. They suggested that New Zealand has a little bit of everything but not necessarily a lot of anything, with

wide climatic and landscape variations. Our inherent diverse completeness should enable us to be a proving ground for what is most relevant and important globally, however we are not able to consistently achieve this currently. As we lean into change, we must consider how we utilise our unique diversity to partner with the organisations around the world, creating the future food system which could both accelerate change within our food and fibre sectors and create solutions we can deliver to the world.

Another contributor suggested that we also need to lift our capability in respect of systems thinking. It is much easier to get buy-in for change if it is clear how the change fits within an existing system rather than implementing a disconnected point solution, regardless of how good it is. Taking a systems approach also provides the benefit of enabling innovation to be optimised to work with the other tools within a system, offering the potential to release greater benefits faster. The suggestion was made that to go forward, we may first need to take a step back to reconnect and fully understand the status of our existing systems. This will then provide the framing to inform decisions on future changes.

The constraints to change

Contributors were clear that the food and fibre sector does not need change for change's sake. It was also clear that leaders have an expectation that change must drive better economic outcomes, through reducing cost, minimising risk, improving resilience or increasing revenue. Change must make organisations more effective, more financially resilient, and ultimately improve the outcomes for the food and fibre sector, the environment, and the New Zealand economy.

There was also a perspective that, too often, an innovative idea has emerged and effort has been made to roll it out across the whole sector with limited regard to whether it is the right solution in all contexts. As a contributor noted, it is key to recognise, when implementing change, that the geographical diversity of New Zealand means our agricultural systems are also regionally diverse both in the nature of the systems they use and the returns they generate. Different solutions will be needed in Canterbury to those that will work on the East Coast. As the industry pursues change it is important that we are alert to the reality that no one solution will fit every problem.

In a connected point, it was highlighted that historically, organisations have often held off making change as they waited for the perfect solution. A leader noted that

in an industry that has capital constraints, the time and money is not available to find the perfect solution, meaning leaders must approach change with a mindset of achieving what is possible within current constraints. When the size of the potential prize is significant, there may be an opportunity to seek government co-investment to maximise benefit realisation as soon as possible.





Increasing the chances of successful change

With near-unanimous agreement that continuous change will be a significant part of the sector's future, it was highlighted that successful change in a world of constraint relies on a combination of skillset, mindset and organisational structure. Of these, mindset was seen as the most critical factor that will keep us relevant and competitive in global markets and ensure the long-term success of the sector. Contributors pointed to a series of mindset factors that will increase the chances of consistently delivering a change pipeline:

- **Adopting an experimental mindset:** Not every initiative will work, so approaching change with an experimental mindset is important so that failures are treated as learning experiences that drive long-term success.
- **Active governance leadership:** Governors have a critical role to play in ensuring that the organisation has clearly defined its aspirations, as well as supporting leadership to inspire employees, customers and supply chain partners towards that aspiration, amplifying the impact in the process.

- **Recognising and reinforcing success:** The sector can often give far too much bandwidth to critics and detractors. As one contributor noted, to drive the change needed it is important to recognise successes, such as our competitive advantage in converting sunshine into protein via pasture, so people across the value chain understand that the roles they play are important and valued.
- **Collaboration at scale:** Climate, geopolitical and other systemic risks are too significant for any organisation to address on their own. It's critical that organisations find practical ways to collaborate and join up their thinking to create long-term success. It was noted there is much the whole industry could learn from the kiwifruit sector in terms of taking a joined-up approach to create long-term success.
- **Setting durable ambitions:** It is important that leaders set ambitions that can survive commodity, economic and political cycles.

Regardless of whether leaders identified more strongly with status quo or status change the clear message from this year's Agenda is that the organisations across the sector - and the people that work with them - must prepare for more change than ever in the coming years. The platform is in place for navigating the next 25 years; a track record of successful change and innovation in the

food and fibre sector stretching back over a century, a global reputation as an ethical, independent, reliable trading partner, and products that customers around the world choose to purchase because of the way they are produced. While these factors are important, they alone are not sufficient to sustain long-term success, making further change critical to ensure the food and fibre system is resilient to economic, geopolitical, environmental and social shifts.

The future is packed with opportunity. The food and fibre sector's ability to realise the potential in front of it will be shaped by how leaders take their stakeholders with them and navigate the change ahead.



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Global future shapers

Reflecting on the roundtable discussions held to inform this year's Agenda, alongside insights our team has collected from the events we attend and discussions that we are part of around the world, we have identified a series of drivers and trends that are shaping the world we will live in 2050.



Economic

Volatile trade settings, rising energy costs, constrained insurance markets and escalating cyber risk are reshaping operating economics. The food and fibre sector will need to find ways to compete effectively in increasingly fragmented global markets.

- **Tokenised digital payments grow exponentially to underpin global trade**
Stablecoin mechanisms will replace historic multi bank payment chains with near instant, low cost, programmable cross border settlement, reducing friction and improving liquidity across trade flows.
- **Availability and affordability of insurance is challenged, risk management products evolve**
Risk management shifts towards proactive, data driven resilience, using parametric products, real time analytics and alternative capital to manage increasingly systemic, climate driven, interconnected risks.
- **Free trade is constrained by tariffs, discretionary barriers and transportation constraints**
Shift from globally optimised, cost efficient models to regional, resilient and flexible supply chains, managing higher costs and complexity while evolving sourcing, pricing and market strategies.

- **Energy demand remains insatiable, meeting it at an equitable cost is a growing challenge**
Energy demand and affordability constraints will require business to prioritise efficiency, secure supply, and develop flexible, low cost energy solutions to protect margins and competitiveness.
- **Cyber criminals maintain their advantage over law enforcement and technology sector**
Persistent breaches drive focus towards resilience, rapid recovery and trust protection. Escalating threats drive higher costs, operational disruption and board level accountability.
- **Elevated government debt levels and structural inflation become unsustainable for many economies**
Businesses will face tighter financial conditions, demand and policy volatility, placing focus on costs, capital discipline and pricing strategies to sustain a long-term growth pathway.

Geopolitics

The relative geopolitical stability of the 75-year period through to the start of the pandemic has ruptured, as governments increasingly prioritise national interest over global stability. Food systems are increasingly seen as integral to national security and strategic infrastructure.

- **Rupture in the rules-based order creates strategic risks to middle powers and small countries**
New non-tariff barriers emerge, requiring continuous supply chain optimisation, frequent geopolitical intelligence and agility to sustain market access and growth.
- **Hybrid war intensifies in digital, food, comms, energy sectors**
Heightened risk of disruption across critical inputs and infrastructure, requiring organisations to extend risk monitoring and security to maintain operations amid persistent, multi-domain threats.
- **Control of critical mineral supply chains becomes strategic imperative for governments**
Critical minerals underpin production of essential technologies and energy systems, making supply security and cost stability vital to maintaining competitiveness and operational continuity.
- **Competition to control emerging frontiers (the Arctic region and space) intensifies**
Countries securing control over emerging frontiers will shape access to resources, infrastructure, and regulation, influencing investment, market access, and competitive positioning.
- **Nuclear re-emerges as energy demand rises and weapons non-proliferation treaties expire**
Renewed energy investment reshapes energy costs, reliability and decarbonisation pathways. Rising weapons risk heightens geopolitical instability, volatility and exposure to severe disruption scenarios.
- **Big Tech innovation remains largely unconstrained by regulation – with good and bad outcomes**
Continuation of the status quo creates powerful platform dependencies, reshapes competition, unlocks innovation and efficiency, while concentrating data, pricing power and strategic risk in a few players.

Environment

The compounding impacts of our consumption-led lifestyle on the natural world will become increasingly apparent in day-to-day life. As a biologically based industry, the food and fibre sector will need to find ways to partner with nature, given its role in ensuring the sector's long-term resilience.

- **The effects of climate change increase in magnitude and frequency**
Increasingly frequent and severe climate events disrupt supply chains, damage assets, raise costs and heighten financial risks. Resilience and adaptation are central to long term business viability.
- **Water scarcity makes it the new oil (and something to fight for)**
Competition for water between countries and use cases could disrupt operations, increase costs, trigger regulation and, ultimately, result in conflict that impacts supply chains, profitability and market access.

- **The consequences of breaching planetary boundaries become increasingly apparent**
Breaching planetary boundaries destabilises the earth's natural systems, increasing economic, regulatory and supply chain risks for businesses, threatening long-term viability in nature dependent economies.
- **Activity increases to realise the potential inherent in the blue (ocean) economy**
Realising the blue economy's potential unlocks growth, driving innovation in energy, food, materials and decarbonisation. It aligns economic drivers to ocean sustainability and ecosystem health.
- **Integration of nature into business models becomes standard to support resilience and profitability**
The need for resilience leads organisations to adopt circular bioeconomy products and solutions, delivering quantifiable financial benefits while also creating environmental and social benefits.
- **Historic underinvestment in infrastructure impacts quality of life across society**
Inadequate infrastructure constrains productivity, increases costs, disrupts supply chains, erodes social cohesion and undermines wellbeing, ultimately weakening demand, competitiveness and economic growth.

Social

Demographic shifts, AI driven change and evolving consumer expectations transform the way society works. Food and fibre businesses will have to compete for talent, respond to health driven consumption trends and operate at the speed and transparency increasingly expected by society.

- **Demographic directions become increasingly diverse – ageing, declining, exploding youth**
Structural population changes reshape labour supply, skills availability and demand. Potential for mass migration increases, with business forced to adapt workforce strategies, rethink offerings and markets.
- **AI progressively reshapes the fundamentals of life and work**
An AI-first world reshapes life and work. Businesses redesign operating models, reskill workforces and respond to new risks, as the pace of innovation accelerates.
- **Societal polarisation creates tribes shaped by social media algorithms and shifting political dynamics**
Markets fragment into identity driven segments, amplifying reputational risks, brand activism and demand volatility. Businesses need to focus on trust, and customer alignment more carefully.

- **Life span extends while health span declines, creating a massive cost burden on society**
Extending life span without health span drives up cost of healthcare on society, impacts productivity and increases higher employer costs while creating demand for longevity focused products and services.
- **Food and pharma are increasingly integrated into mainstream diets**
The fusion of food and pharma (led by GLP-1s) creates new markets, drives innovation in preventive health, reshapes consumption behaviour and requires businesses to explore new partnerships.
- **An hour is too slow, as fast commerce evolves into instance commerce**
Instant commerce forces business into real time operations, higher logistics costs, hyperlocal supply chains and intense competition where speed, convenience and reliability become core differentiators.



Introducing the 2026 Agenda

Since 2020, each KPMG Agribusiness Agenda has reflected on a world that feels more complex than the previous year. As work began on this year's Agenda it felt like we had reached a point in time where this pattern may have taken a pause.

Then March 2026 happened; the conflict in the Gulf region compromised fuel supply chains causing an inflationary shock, global supply chains were once again disrupted and global growth expectations have been scaled back by most forecasters.

So, once again, we start this year's Agenda reflecting on a world that is increasingly complex. For the food and fibre sector, these disruptions extend well beyond fuel costs. They influence production inputs, global food supply and pricing dynamics.

While public attention has largely focused on the energy system and the immediate impacts on fuel costs to consumers, the impacts on global food systems are equally significant and likely to be long lasting. The world is facing a dual energy and food crisis, each with unique, but connected, economic, social and environmental consequences.

These dynamics formed the background to four of our six industry leaders' roundtables which were held during the first half of March (with the other two held in mid-February). The timing and context have undoubtedly influenced both the commentary industry leaders have provided and the scores that have been given to priorities in the leaders' survey.

A theme from last year's Agenda that resonated with readers was the importance of putting resilience, both economic and environmental, front and centre in decision making. This was seen as critical to enable the sector to prosper today, and to set up for future success. Building on this, we have shaped the 17th KPMG Agribusiness Agenda around resilience, and the change leaders consider necessary to create resilient organisations in a dynamic environment. The framing for the roundtable conversations is provided on the following page.

With this context, this year's Agenda is framed around a central statement: Status quo or status change, intended to prompt reflection on whether existing settings remain fit for purpose, or whether more fundamental shifts are required to secure long term success.

Framing for the 2026 leaders' roundtable discussions

Towards the end of 2025 I had the opportunity to attend the launch of the EAT Lancet Planetary Health Diet 2.0 at the Stockholm Food Forum, and join KPMG's global delegation to COP30 in Belem, Brazil to participate in food system discussions. These events, and others, have demonstrated the extent of the opportunity available across global food systems to drive better outcomes for farmers and growers, for the communities that they feed and for the environment.

One comment in particular resonated. Jack Bobo, Executive Director of the UCLA Rothman Family Institute for Food Studies, noted that the next 25 years are the most critical in the 13,000 year history of cultivated agriculture. He reached this conclusion, as the challenges facing global systems largely continue to move in the wrong direction; carbon emissions will continue to increase, the global population will continue to grow,

consumer demands will continue to evolve, while multi-national geopolitical collaboration is likely to continue to decline. He highlighted how change gives rise to risk and, importantly but often overlooked, opportunity.

The events also provided insights into the latest planetary boundaries research by the Stockholm Resilience Centre. The latest report shows the world has breached seven of the nine boundaries, with agriculture and food systems being the largest contributor to five breaches. However, there was hope in the two boundaries not breached (relating to ozone depletion and aerosol loading). These are the two areas where business and society united and collaborated to respond to issues identified decades ago.

Discussions highlighted a roadmap towards more resilient global food systems, centred on diet, innovation and waste. Dietary change will be slow as it is inherently cultural. Innovation adoption is about mindset and capability. Waste minimisation is about supply chain design and new economic models.

Other discussions included the availability of climate finance to support more resilient

production systems (food systems account for around 30% of global emissions but have received less than 5% of climate finance), access to risk management tools, the opportunities in the bioeconomy and circularity, and the use cases for AI (which is no longer seen a competitive advantage, and more a ticket to play).

Everything I heard, unsurprisingly, got me thinking about what Aotearoa New Zealand will look like in 2050? What will our food system look like?

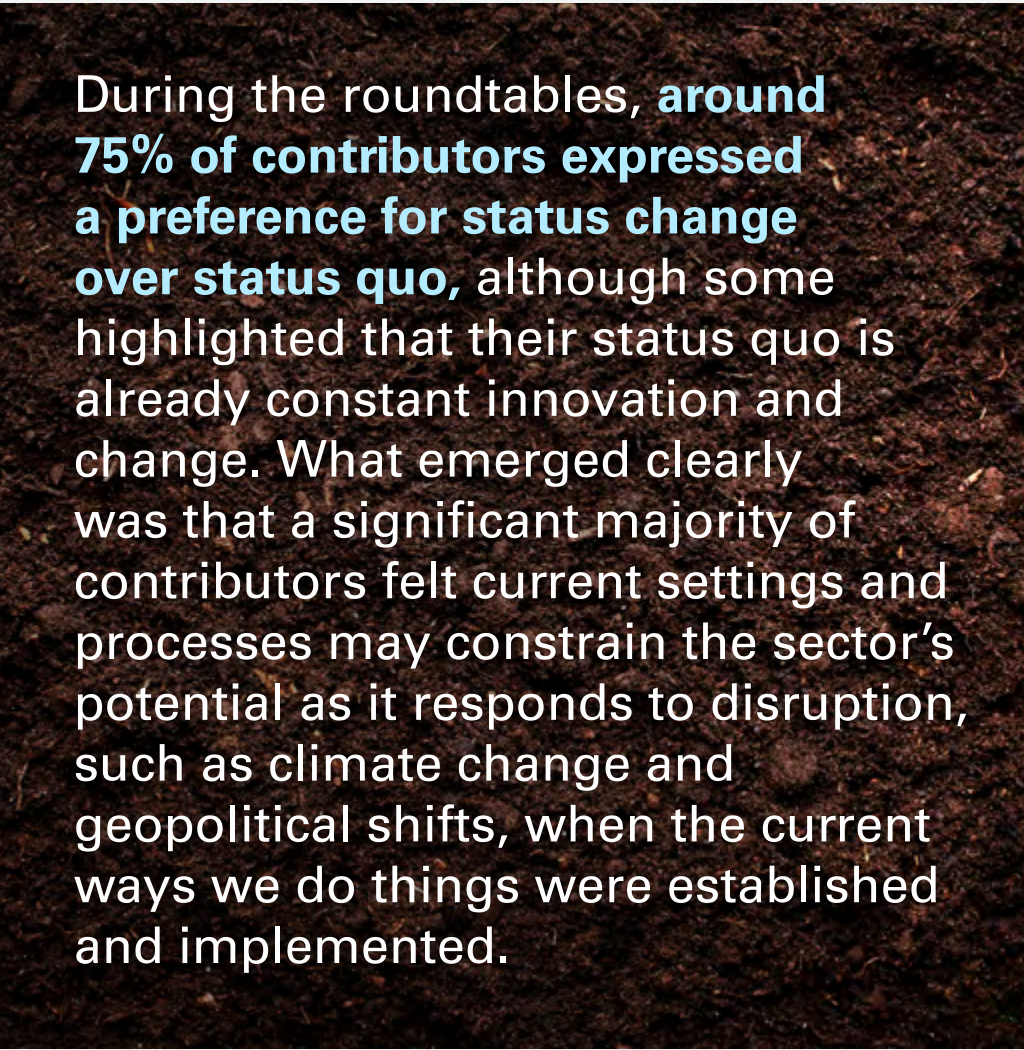
Does our small global footprint and geographical remoteness mean we can broadly stick with the status quo? Keep doing what we are doing; adopting innovation to drive productivity and meet consumer needs and walking the line between geopolitical ruptures to find high value customers for the high quality, high production value food and fibre products that we produce.

Or should we fear being sidelined due to being a small cog in a complex global system, and take the opportunity to step into status change? Evolve the products we grow, how we grow them, and the organisations that we collaborate with, to reinvent business models and remain relevant to key customers in high value markets.

Considering the options of status quo or status change, at this year's roundtables I asked leaders from across the food and fibre sector to share their perspectives on what

New Zealand should be doing strategically to set ourselves up to optimise success in the medium to long term. What would we like our agri-food sector to look like in 2050? What do we need to start doing to bring that vision to life, what should we stop doing now (or in the next few years), and what do we need to do more of?

With so many variables that need to be balanced – economic outcomes, the health and wellness of people and the environment, our communities, cultural considerations – there is no one right answer. The question is should we stay status quo, or shift to status change? What are the key actions we need to take to set us up for the next 25 years, this critical period in the history of global food systems.



During the roundtables, around 75% of contributors expressed a preference for status change over status quo, although some highlighted that their status quo is already constant innovation and change. What emerged clearly was that a significant majority of contributors felt current settings and processes may constrain the sector's potential as it responds to disruption, such as climate change and geopolitical shifts, when the current ways we do things were established and implemented.

About the leaders' priority survey

Interestingly, the results from the leaders' priority survey aligned more clearly with the prevailing themes from the roundtable discussions than they have in recent years, suggesting a consistency of views across the sector.

We again surveyed industry leaders to understand their assessment of priorities for the organisations they represent in the food and fibre sector. This year, contributors were asked to score 39 priority statements on a scale of 1-10, with 10 indicating that the issue is considered a critical priority.

Two new priority statements were introduced this year. No statements were removed although the wording of seven existing priority statements were edited to ensure that they remain relevant to current industry developments.

New priority statements

- Launch innovative risk management products
- Rethink product offering in light of GLP-1 use

Edited priority statements

- Develop resilient supply chains
- Maintain immigration settings
- Position as a global leader in circular bioproducts
- Act on the results of gene editing discussions
- Track global developments in food technology
- Quickly work to reduce food insecurity in New Zealand
- Improve water quality to swimmable

In line with previous years, contributors provided demographic information to assist us in analysing the results of the survey. This included their gender, generational cohort, and whether they predominantly hold an executive position or governance role.



136
industry leaders
contributed to the 2016
KPMG Agribusiness Agenda



105
responses to the
leaders' priority survey



42%
of respondents to the
survey were female













65%
of respondents to the
survey identify as primarily
having an executive role

Top 10 results

For the 16th consecutive year, 'world-class biosecurity' is the top priority for industry leaders. While its position as the top priority is no surprise, what is surprising is that the average priority score of 9.40 is the highest score reported for any priority since 2018. Contributors recognised that the range of potential incursion threats we face is increasing, as global connectivity grows and the climate changes. As a result, focus is on ensuring threat identification and management mechanisms are aligned with the risks faced today rather than the issues we have encountered in the past.

For the 16th consecutive year, 'world-class biosecurity' is the top priority for industry leaders.

Top 10 priorities for 2026		Rank		Priority score	
		2026	2025	2026	2025
	World-class biosecurity	1	1	9.40	9.03
	Sign high quality trade agreements	2	2	8.82	8.29
	Build water storage to manage resources	3	5	8.39	7.75
	Invest in resilient rural infrastructure	4	=12	8.20	7.41
	Broadband equality for all	5	=10	8.04	7.45
	Transition to climate resilient systems	6	18	8.01	7.24
	Public/Private mission science partnerships	7	6	7.92	7.74
	Telling engaging provenance stories	8	8	7.88	7.59
	Develop resilient supply chains	9	3	7.87	8.06
	Build platform for local sustainable energy	10	=12	7.81	7.45

The second-ranked priority was again 'sign high quality trade agreements' which retained its place in the top three priorities for the eighth consecutive year. In a volatile global environment, it is no surprise that industry leaders continue to seek maximum market access, enabling them to pivot when the unexpected happens. Contributors acknowledged the progress that the Government has made on this front over the past year, with the Comprehensive Economic Partnership with UAE coming into effect and the progress made towards an FTA with India (which was signed subsequent to the roundtables in April 2026).

While progress on new agreements was seen as critical, the ask of the Government was more nuanced this year. While new agreements remain important, leaders emphasised the need to actively manage and evolve existing agreements so that they remain fit for purpose. The point was also made that investment is required in regulatory systems and infrastructure to ensure organisations can take advantage of the market access arrangements that exist. Free Trade Agreements remain necessary, but they are no longer sufficient on their own.

Leaders' place greater priority on the sector's infrastructure needs

The infrastructure needs of the sector featured strongly in leaders' top 10 priorities and in the roundtable conversations. Three new priorities entered the top 10 this year, all directly linked to the sector's infrastructure needs. The highest new entry was 'invest in resilient rural infrastructure' which was ranked fourth (having been ranked 12th equal last year), highlighting its importance in operational efficiency and the ability to attract the best talent into sector.

Two other priorities also make their Top 10 debut in 2026. 'Transition to climate resilient systems' (which relates to the adaption of farming systems in regions vulnerable to extreme climate events) ranked 6th overall, rising from 18th in 2025 and the lowest-ranked priority in 2024. The first four months of 2026 saw a run of extreme climate events impacting most parts of the country, shaping the context in which leaders completed the survey. The priority ranking reflects contributors' views that adaptation to extreme climate events is unavoidable. Leaders highlighted the need to evolve farm system design for long term resilience, rather than continuing to rely on reactive recovery following individual events.

The other new entrant to the Top 10 is 'build platforms for local sustainable energy schemes' which ranked 10th, compared to 12th equal in 2025 and 27th in 2024 (its first year on the survey). Most leaders completed the survey against the background of conflict in Iran, so it is not surprising that energy resilience has seen its rank increase, with many focused on the cost impacts on their own organisation. Notably, fewer roundtable contributors talked about the strategic opportunities that exist for the sector in energy, particularly inside the farmgate, which had been a common theme of discussion in the last two years.

Other Top 10 priorities also point to the importance placed on the need for resilient infrastructure. Like energy, water was not



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discussed at length during the roundtables, however leaders have ranked 'build water storage to manage resources' 3rd (up from 5th last year). Contributors recognised that water security is a critical constraint on the sector's future resilience. Several highlighted that the current political environment may present a rare opportunity to progress water storage schemes.

'Broadband equality for all' ranked 5th overall, which was unexpected given last year's view that the issue had largely been solved with the roll out of solutions like Starlink.

This year, contributors highlighted the breadth of digital opportunities and choices available across the sector, suggesting that the equality question has shifted towards the cost, rather than availability, of connectivity.

While 'develop resilient supply chains' held its place in the Top 10, it was one of the few priorities that saw its priority score fall (down 2.3% to 7.87), despite numerous leaders commenting on the risks the sector faces over long-term access to reliable and affordable transportation options to ports and into export markets.

The Top 10 was rounded out by 'public/private mission science partnerships' and 'telling engaging provenance stories' both priorities which have regularly featured in the Top 10. Last year, there was much focus on the publicly funded science system with the impending merger of the four primary sector focused Crown Research Institutes (AgResearch, Plant and Food Research, Scion and Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research) in a new Public Research Organisation, now known as the Bioeconomy Science Institute (BSI). This year, BSI did not feature extensively in the conversations; however, contributors highlighted the key role the entity could play in the sector's future, particularly if it is able to enhance connectivity with industry and secure funding to maintain key capabilities.





People priorities on the outer in 2026

A notable shift from last year's results was the absence of people related priorities in the overall Top 10. In 2025, people issues attracted the highest average priority score and featured three times in the Top 10, reflecting increased focus following the post pandemic period.

In 2026, four priorities fell out of the Top 10, three of which related to people related topics; 'maintain immigration settings', 'co-ordinated promotion of sector careers' and 'ensure comprehensive protection of migrant workers'. This has resulted in no people-related priority statements being placed in the Top 10 by the leaders involved in this year's survey.

It is not that leaders have deprioritised any of these statements (they have all recorded higher scores in 2026 than they did in 2025). Rather, priorities relating to infrastructure resilience have seen much greater increases in their average scores, pushing people-related topics to just outside of the Top 10 (immigration settings is 11th equal, promotion of sector

careers 13th equal and migrant worker protections ranked 15th). Therefore, it doesn't feel correct to say people issues have fallen off the leaders' agenda, instead they are just one of many topics requiring their attention. This was reinforced in roundtable discussions where leaders consistently noted the real risk that a lack of capable people could constrain the industry's ability to grow.

The fourth priority to fall out of the Top 10 was 'maximise sustainable use of oceans' which dropped from 9th place in 2025 to 19th in 2026, its lowest ever ranking. Despite recording a 10-place fall, the priority's score increased marginally (from 7.51 to 7.54) again highlighting the higher overall scores which leaders have attached to priorities this year. In the past the opportunity to explore and create a scaled blue economy utilising New Zealand's exclusive ocean economic zone has featured in roundtable conversations. This year, despite the focus on what the sector may look like in 2050, oceans hardly featured in discussions. While sustainable ocean management was acknowledged as important for delivering long-term environmental outcomes, there was limited discussion about how this may support economic growth and improved social outcomes.



Biosecurity: A foundational pillar of sector resilience

Since responding to the long-awaited arrival of high pathogen avian influenza in December 2024, industry and government have continued to actively and collaboratively respond to a range of incursions over the last year. The highest profile of these has been the Yellow Legged Hornet, first detected in Auckland in October 2025.

The successful eradication of the H7N6 strain of avian influenza, alongside confirmation in December that the sector has completed two calving seasons without the detection of *Mycoplasma bovis*, highlights the success that collaborative response

can have when incursions occur. As one contributor noted, alignment across the industry and government is critical when managing existential risks like biosecurity.

At the same time, contributors expressed concern against over confidence in our ability to respond to whatever comes next. It was highlighted that many of our most important export sectors are built on monocultures, making biosecurity a more significant risk to economic resilience than is often acknowledged. Leaders noted that threat profiles are evolving, partly due to climate change, yet our approach to identification and response remains largely based on historic successes. Contributors stressed the need to ensure that we are actively preparing for the next threat, rather than continuing to defend against past incursions.

A specific example raised was concern over whether resources are being appropriately targeted towards the highest-risk border entry points.

It was noted that traditional efforts have been uniform across most border crossing points, on the assumption that the risk of incursion is largely homogeneous. However, the use of data and analytics tools has enabled better assessment of the true risk at each entry point and the ability to direct resources, new technology and intensive surveillance as appropriate. This requires a mindset shift from a one size fits all style approach, towards a system informed by real time data which evolves based on current and future risks.

Contributors also highlighted the sector's biosecurity incursion crisis response capabilities as a (thankfully) underutilised resource. With the increasing incidence of extreme weather events requiring emergency response, recognising and resourcing this capability could support faster and more targeted delivery of critical support into regional communities during future disruptions.

Almost unprecedented: Overall priority scores set numerous milestones

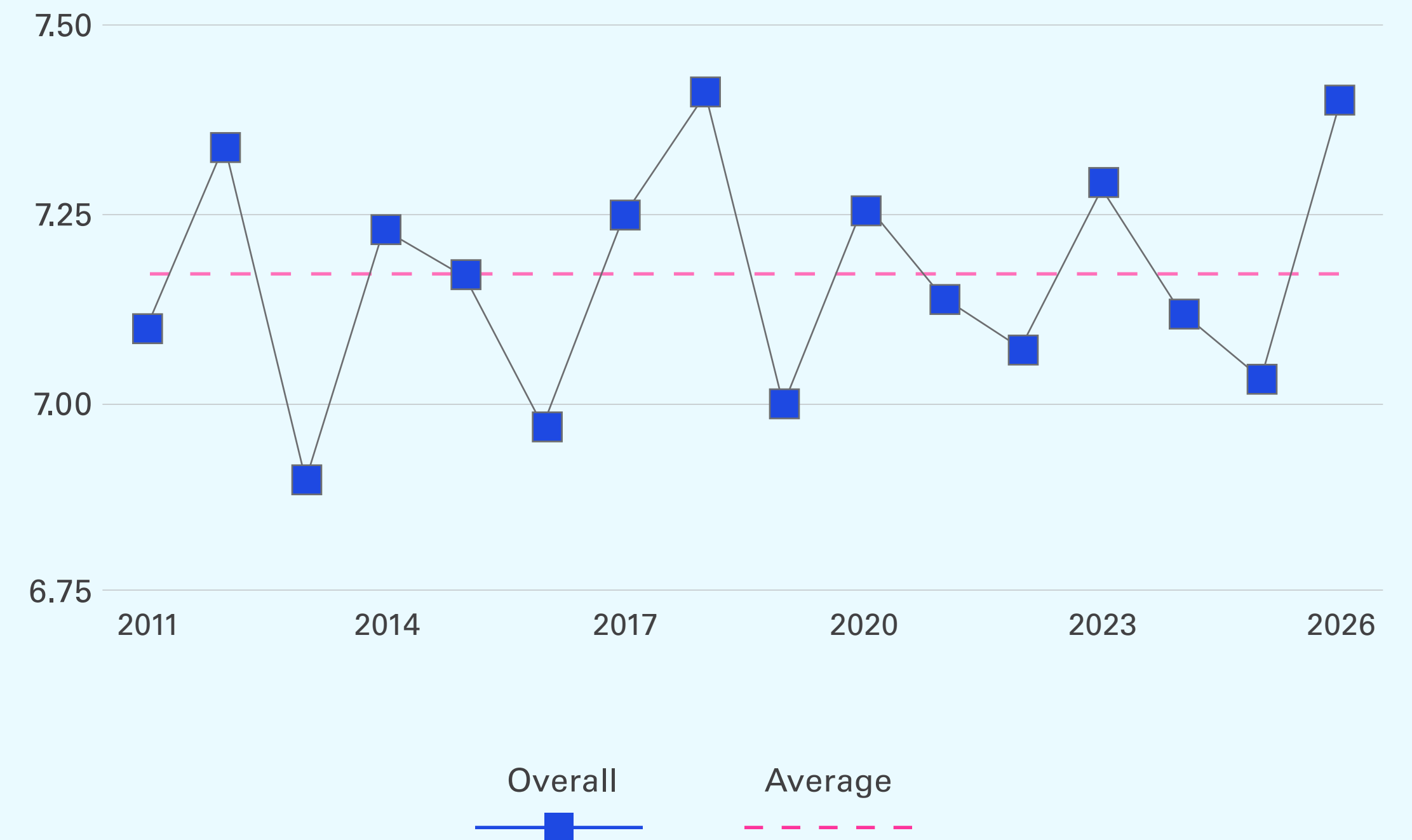
It is hard to interpret the overall priority scores in this year's survey as they have almost completely rewritten the record books. The overall average score has increased by 5.3%, the largest year-on-year increase in the last 17 years, to reach 7.40. This matches the highest overall score recorded in 2018, the year of Myrtle Rust and *Mycoplasma bovis*, which saw the record score recorded for biosecurity (9.62), and 15 other priorities in the survey also reported their highest scores.

The question this year's results leave us with is, what has changed in the last 12 months to see such a dramatic uptick in the priority scores recorded? The scale of the overall increase is unexpected (the next largest increase recorded is 4.8%, which was recorded between 2013 and 2014 - the year we first introduced a priority statement on the strategic importance of food safety following several product recalls).

Historically, years with dramatic shifts have been marked by dramatic events, influencing the priority statements in the survey and responses from industry leaders. As noted earlier, this year was more stable than many in recent years, until the conflict in Iran started to unfold during the survey period.

Overall, 11 priorities (excluding the two new statements) recorded their highest score in 2026, five of which were also present in the survey in 2018. The table below sets out these priorities. A common factor across them is that they are all inherently focused on building the foundations for the long-term success of the sector. Perhaps the combination of this year's forward looking focus to the roundtable conversations, combined with a more stable environment over the last 12 months, and even the recent energy shock, has given leaders more capacity to think about what needs to be done to ensure long-term success. The overall score suggests that the majority of the sector's leaders believe there is much to be done and the window for action is getting shorter as climate, technology, geopolitical, and consumer changes all start to evolve the world we trade with.

Leaders' priority survey - Average scores 2011 - 2026





Priorities recording their highest score in 2026	2026			Prior high score	
	Rank	Score	Years in survey	Year	Score
High quality trade agreements	2	8.82	16	2014	8.58
Invest in resilient rural infrastructure	4	8.20	12	2024	8.00
Transition to climate resilient systems	6	8.01	4	2023	7.61
Build platform for local sustainable energy schemes	10	7.81	3	2025	7.41
Deepen capabilities to maximise use of AI	=13	7.78	3	2025	7.30
Seek diversity of thought and knowledge	17	7.56	5	2022	7.49
Position as a global leader in circular bioproducts	18	7.55	5	2024	6.43
Manage exposure to clusters of export customers	20	7.45	5	2023	7.14
Direct levies towards intergenerational projects	=24	7.28	14	2025	6.66
Create single open access data platform	34	6.81	12	2023	6.71
Set FDI rule to enable sector to realise potential	35	6.72	16	2025	6.68

Having sought to interpret the overall priority score, the results of the demographic cohorts are even more unusual. The score for every demographic group has moved in the same direction (in this case, increased) for the first time since we started collecting demographic data in 2020.

Also, for the first time, the overall priority score for both our male and female cohorts was the same. Historically, the female

cohort have recorded a higher overall priority score than the male contributors (on average female scores have been 4.87% higher than male scores over the last six years), which has often come from females placing greater priority on the people and social priority statements.

The big movement in 2026 has come from the male cohort, which reported its highest ever priority score at 7.40

(a 7.6% increase on 2025). Eleven priorities recorded increases of more than 10% for the cohort (the largest being 'track global developments in food technology' at 32.8% increase and 'position as a global leader in circular bioproducts' which recorded a 30.9% increase) and only three priorities recorded a decreased score. By contrast, the female cohort's 7.40 was only 0.4% above the average cohort score for the last six years, featuring only five priorities

Average score given to a priority	Overall	Male	Female	Millennial	Gen-X	Boomer	Executive	Governor
Average priority score 2025	7.03	6.88	7.24	7.02	7.05	6.96	7.12	7.02
Average priority score 2026	7.40	7.40	7.40	7.61	7.35	7.42	7.37	7.47
Movement	0.37	0.52	0.16	0.59	0.30	0.46	0.25	0.45

that had increased by more than 10% (the largest again being 'track global developments in food technology' which recorded a 25.4% increase) while 14 priorities recorded decreases (the largest being 'act on the results of gene editing discussions with a 7.2% decrease).

Consistent with previous years, the smaller millennial cohort recorded the greatest year-on-year movement, although both the boomer and governor cohorts (which have quite a high degree of commonality in the members) also recorded large increases in the average priority scores. Unlike previous years where distinct differences between cohorts were identifiable, this year the data suggests the leaders of New Zealand's food and fibre sectors have a more consistent, unified perspective on the priorities facing the sector.

It is worth noting that in a rapidly changing world, there is clearly more recognition amongst leaders of the greater need for action and the range of priorities that need to be acted on. However, as a contributor cautioned, elevated priority scores should not be interpreted as an absence of action on the priority topics. Competitive pressures may mean that the activity is happening below the radar. As the contributor observed, if organisations had not already acted on some of these issues, the likelihood of them being around in 2050 would be remote at best.



The biggest movers point to a focus on a resilient future

It is not surprising that resilience features prominently among the priorities with the largest increase in score compared to last year. The increase in priority attached to both ‘invest in resilient rural infrastructure’ and ‘transition to climate resilient systems’ lifted them into the Top 10, highlighting a focus amongst contributors on ensuring the production environment remains fit for purpose into the future.

Other significant increases were recorded across priorities linked to provenance, food technology and the bioeconomy. These are areas where the industry has an opportunity to better understand the evolution of markets and find ways to participate to create and capture new value. The priority statement relating to an industry wide provenance scheme has been on the survey since 2014. This year it recorded its highest score since 2018. While little progress has

been made on the implementation of a public/private partnership in this area, the conversation continues to progress, particularly as trust and credibility become ever harder to earn and, consequently, increasingly valuable to consumers.

All contributors placed greater priority on the evolution of future food technologies, an area that has historically ranked lower. It is worth noting that the wording of this priority changed in 2026 from a specific statement on alternative proteins to a broader statement around the impacts that emerging food technologies are having on manufacturing and consumer behaviour. This suggests that while the threat from the most recent generation of alternative proteins was not seen by most industry leaders as a competitive risk, there is, however, recognition that with the pace at which food-tech innovation is evolving there can be no complacency about the opportunities and threats this presents to the sector into the future.

As noted previously, male contributors placed much greater priority this year on opportunities associated with the circular bioeconomy. This aligns with roundtable commentary around the importance being attached to the delivery of economically and environmentally sustainable new revenue opportunities for farmers and growers as a foundation for long-term financial resilience.

Largest changes in overall priority score	Priority score	Change on last year	2025 rank
Track global developments in food tech	7.19	30.7%	26 (+9)
Position as a global leader in circular bioproducts	7.55	26.9%	18 (+16)
Implement national provenance system	6.93	13.0%	32 (+1)
Invest in resilient rural infrastructure	8.20	10.7%	4 (+8)
Transition to climate resilient systems	8.01	10.7%	6 (+12)
Act on results of gene editing discussions	7.31	-1.2%	23 (-9)
Enable new entrants to NZ food retail sector	6.26	-1.3%	36 (-5)
Develop resilient supply chain	7.87	-2.3%	9 (-6)

The most notable decline was noted for ‘act on the results of gene editing discussions’. This priority was ranked second overall in 2024 with a score of 8.19, before falling to 7.40 in 2025 (ranking 14th). At that time, many contributors suggested they saw the issue as resolved, pending the Government passing the Gene Technology Bill to provide the industry with tools considered critical to the sector’s long-term competitiveness. Roll forward to 2026, with the legislation still not enacted the score fell again. Contributors expressed frustration about whether the window to change the legislation has been missed. The key concern is that the failure to modernise the biotechnology

legislation comes with a risk of locking New Zealand into a diminished competitive position, with farmers denied access to globally standard tools critical for resilience, productivity and long term viability.

Only five priority statements recorded a decrease in score in 2026, which is not surprising given the overall increase in the scores.

New priorities are not a focus for leaders in 2026

Two new priority statements were introduced in the leaders' survey in 2026, reflecting key industry conversations we have both observed and been part of internationally in the last year.

The first related to the launch of innovative, technology-based risk management and insurance products to support farmers and growers mitigate climate and other risks their businesses face daily. This scored 7.11 and was ranked 28th equal. The second related to the need to rethink product portfolios in response to the needs of growing use of GLP-1 pharmaceuticals, which ranked 37 with a score of 6.25.

The relatively low rankings for these topics were surprising. Given companies globally are evolving their product portfolios to respond to the opportunities these themes present, it was unexpected that neither topic is attracting much focus in New Zealand. Crop insurance, for instance, is currently not common in New Zealand and leaders may hold the perspective that this reflects limited demand for the product and there is not a market here to be served. As a provider of protein, there may be confidence that our product portfolios are well aligned to the needs of GLP-1 users meaning protein sectors are positioned to benefit from the demand changes that diet changes will initiate. As global trends develop, it will be interesting to see how the scores for these priorities evolve in future years.

Crop insurance, for instance, is currently not common in New Zealand and leaders may hold the perspective that this reflects limited demand for the product.



Commonality across the cohort Top 10s in 2026

This year the cohort Top 10s have more similarities than differences. The top two priorities are the same for every cohort ('world class biosecurity' and 'high quality trade agreements'). Only the baby boomer cohort diverged from the overall pattern by not ranking 'build water storage to manage water resources' as its third priority (instead scoring 'broadband equality for all' third). In addition, the top five priorities in the overall ranking appeared in the Top 10s of every cohort. This contrasts with 2025, when only two priorities were ranked in all cohort Top 10s. It is a notable, in a year when priority scores are higher, that we also have a greater commonality of focus than we have seen in previous years. The survey suggests that industry leaders are well positioned to move forward collaboratively on a range of priorities that will create a strong platform for the future of the sector.

This relative uniformity does not mean an absence of differences. No two cohort Top 10s are the same and they feature 12 additional priorities not present in the overall Top 10 (compared to eight additional priorities in 2025). Four priorities outside the overall Top 10 appear in three cohort Top 10s: 'deepen capabilities to maximise use of AI' (13th equal overall), 'clear market signals to all in the value chain' (11th equal overall), and two people related priorities, 'maintain immigration settings' (11th equal overall) and 'co-ordinated promotion of sector careers' (13th equal overall). Even the diversity between cohorts

highlights the consistency of views this year, as these four priorities sit immediately outside the Top 10 with overall scores of 7.80 (for 11th equal) and 7.78 (for 13th equal).

Both AI utilisation and market signals were regular points of discussion during the roundtable conversations. Over the last three years, AI has moved from being a nebulous concept leaders sought to understand, to an expectation that AI tools should be widely used, to concern that the industry may not be adopting AI quickly enough and costing us competitive

advantage. In 2026 the message is much simpler; AI tools are essential enablers of productivity, resilience and credibility. The challenge leaders pointed to was not a lack of tools, but a lack of skills and capability to deploy and optimise the right tools, a position that the male, generation X, and governor cohorts all ranked in their Top 10s.

The connection of farmers and growers to what is happening in the market was raised during the roundtable sessions. In the past, this has purely been connected to making the right production decisions to optimise returns. In this year's sessions, market signals were considered in a much wider context than purely economic information. It was suggested that signals also need to cover sustainability, regulation and risks, as farmers and growers increasingly use these insights to make long-term decisions on system changes, land use and infrastructure investment. The female, generation X and executive cohorts all ranked this priority in their Top 10s.

The two cohorts with the greatest variation from the overall Top 10 were millennials and baby boomers. In common with previous years, millennials placed a greater focus on people related issues. In common with 2025, they ranked 'quickly work to reduce food insecurity in New Zealand' in their Top 5. Food security issues featured less this year, with only a handful of roundtable contributors addressing the topic. Their comments pointed towards the social license

The survey suggests that industry leaders are well positioned to move forward collaboratively...

issues that food insecurity creates, with the recent Hunger Monitor report by the New Zealand Food Network showing 1 in 3 New Zealand households had experienced some form of food insecurity in the last 12 months. However, the overall ranking of the priority at 27 suggests the issue has fallen off the radar of many sector leaders.

Amongst the priorities in the baby boomer cohort's Top 10 (which included 13 priorities due to ties in 10th place) were a range of people related priorities. 'Positioning as a global leader in circular bioproducts' and 'maximise the sustainable use of the ocean' also featured, with baby boomers the only cohort to place these in their Top 10. The cohort ranked 'recognise the strategic importance of food safety' 5th, the highest this priority has been ranked by any cohort for many years. Contributors commenting on food safety generally viewed it as a non-negotiable hygiene factor, rather than a point of differentiation for the New Zealand industry. Comment was made that at times, regulatory settings can seem disproportionate to the risk and may constrain innovation in the sector, particularly for start-ups and artisan operators.

Top 10 priorities for cohort not in overall Top 10	Rank	Score	Overall Top 10 priorities not in cohort Top 10	Rank	Score
Male contributors					
Deepen capabilities to maximise use of AI	8	7.88	Develop resilient supply chains	=11	7.78
Maintain immigration settings	9	7.87	Transition to climate resilient systems	13	7.75
Co-ordinated promotion of sectors careers	10	7.85	Build platform for local energy schemes	18	7.55
Female contributors					
Clear market signals to all in the value chains	5	8.18	Telling engaging provenance stories	=13	7.71
Millennial / Centennial contributors					
Quickly work to reduce food insecurity in NZ	=5	8.43	Transition to climate resilient systems	11	8.14
Tougher penalties for animal welfare breaches	=7	8.36	Telling engaging provenance stories	15	7.93
Co-ordinated promotion of sector careers	=9	8.21	Public/Private mission science partnerships	=16	7.86
Industry wide leadership development scheme	=9	8.21	Build platform for local sustainable energy schemes	=27	7.43
Generation X contributors					
Clear market signals to all in the value chains	=8	7.89	Telling engaging provenance stories	11	7.78
Deepen capabilities to maximise use of AI	=8	7.89			
Baby Boomer contributors					
Recognise the strategic importance of food safety	5	8.09	Public/Private mission science partnerships	14	7.87
Ensure comprehensive protection of migrant workers	=6	8.04	Build platform for local sustainable energy schemes	16	7.78
Seek diversity of thought and knowledge	=6	8.04	Transition to climate resilient systems	=17	7.61
Maintain immigration settings	8	8.00	Develop resilient supply chains	=17	7.61
Co-ordinated promotion of sector careers	=10	7.91			
Position as a global leader in circular bioproducts	=10	7.91			
Maximise sustainable use of oceans	=10	7.91			
Executive contributors					
Clear market signals to all in the value chain	8	7.81	Build platform for local sustainable energy schemes	11	7.76
Governor contributors					
Maintain immigration settings	6	8.05	Build platform for local sustainable energy schemes	13	7.89
Deepen capabilities to maximise use of AI	7	8.03	Public/Private mission science partnerships	=15	7.76
Seek diversity of thought and knowledge	=8	8.00	Develop resilient supply chains	=15	7.76

Several priorities within overall Top 10 priorities did not feature consistently across cohort rankings. 'Build platform for local sustainable energy schemes' was excluded from the Top 10 of five cohorts, while 'telling engaging provenance stories', 'develop resilient supply chains', 'transition to climate resilient systems' and 'public/private mission-based science' were absent from three cohorts' Top 10s each.

It is unusual for a priority to feature in the overall Top 10 while appearing in so few cohort Top 10s, as was the case with sustainable energy. There is growing global understanding of the depth of the inherent connections between food and energy systems and the opportunities that exist for a significant part of the solution to energy shortages to lay within the farm gate. These solutions also have ability to support the economic resilience of farmers and growers. The survey suggests that most sector leaders are increasingly aware that opportunities exist in exploring the connections between food, fibre and energy. However, many are yet to be convinced of meaningful economic or environmental benefits to the sector to justify the time and cost in developing them.

Perspectives in the C-Suite compared to the Boardroom

This is the fourth year the survey has captured whether contributors predominantly hold a governance or executive role in the sector. Once again, around two-thirds of contributors held executive roles, one-third governance roles. In common with previous years there is greater focus from executives on the immediate operating priorities facing the businesses they are running, while governors tend to give higher rankings to longer-term more strategic priorities.

Higher priorities for Executives over Governors	Exec rank	Govern rank	Exec score	Govern score	Exec priority
Co-invest to support tech adoption	=13	36	7.68	6.54	17.34%
Act on results of gene editing discussions	=13	30	7.56	6.87	10.04%
Collaborate to accelerate net zero transition	29	=34	7.03	6.57	7.00%

Higher priorities for Governors over Executives	Exec rank	Govern rank	Exec score	Govern score	Govern priority
Rethink product offering in light of GLP-1 use	38	33	5.99	6.73	12.35%
Quickly work to reduce food insecurity in NZ	=31	=19	6.88	7.62	10.76%
Seek diversity of thought and knowledge	23	=8	7.32	8.00	9.29%

Executives have given notably higher scores to 'co-invest to support tech adoption' and 'act on the results of gene editing discussions'. Both priority statements relate to moving technologies beyond innovation and into day-to-day use on farms, in orchards and across the value chain. This aligns closely with roundtable conversations where there was a clear recognition that technology is most valuable when it can

be deployed at scale. The reality for the food and fibre sector globally is that there are so many good ideas that have shown promising results during pilot projects, that for a myriad reasons have not been taken to scale. For executives, the message this year - whether it is about automation, AI or biological technologies - is that we need to put more focus on ensuring that

technologies are not just launched but used to enable the change the sector needs. It was also interesting that 'collaborate to accelerate net zero transition' was again a priority that executives gave a notably higher score to than governors. Last year, we suggested that executives are potentially more connected to the returns that a net zero product may be able to generate in market.

This may still be the case. However, with the executive score declining 2.6% compared to last year while the governor score increased 2.2%, the gap in understanding is reducing against a background where ambitions to reduce emissions towards net zero appear to have been parked (the priority ranked 33rd overall this year, compared to peaking at 6th in 2021) and replaced with a focus on adapting systems to current and expected climate disruption.

By contrast, the priorities governors scored more highly than executives were more diverse. The priority with the largest difference is 'rethink product offering in light of GLP-1 use' which aligns with the perspective that governors are likely to focus on priorities with longer-term strategic implications. With forecasts suggesting at least 100 million GLP-1 users worldwide by 2030, with many in key export markets for New Zealand, it is not surprising that governors are focused on understanding the impacts these new technologies may have on the businesses they lead.

Governors also placed a notably higher score on 'quickly work to reduce food insecurity in New Zealand', a reversal from last year when executives ranked this issue more highly. Why it has swapped from a C-Suite to Boardroom issue is not immediately apparent, other than the connection to social license, referred to earlier, which may be increasing the governance focus. Interestingly, governors also included 'seek diversity of thought and knowledge' in their Top 10 priorities this year, potentially reflecting growing recognition amongst boards that diversity in experience better enables the board to collectively fulfil its obligations.



The priority with the largest difference is 'rethink product offering in light of GLP-1 use'...



Climate, nature and water

Recognising the environment's contribution to resilience

It is too early to announce a renaissance in the relationship between New Zealand's food and fibre sector and the natural environment. However, survey results and roundtable discussions indicate a clear shift over the past year, with climate, nature and water increasingly recognised as central to the sector's long-term resilience and success.

For some, this connection has never been out of focus. However, as we noted in last year's Agenda, the current global political environment led parts of the industry to believe there was scope to step back from climate and sustainability commitments. What emerged clearly from this year's discussions is a shared recognition that environmental action is not optional and, in a world where disruption is coming from multiple directions, environmental actions that lift organisational resilience are valuable and investable.

The language has evolved from sustainability to resilience, although the underlying solutions are largely the same. Contributors noted that resilience is expected by investors and more easily justified in capital allocation decisions, while sustainable actions are viewed by many as less tangible, and remain on the outer. Several contributors noted that environmental initiatives which are economically viable are far more likely to be adopted at scale, simply because it makes good business sense.

Contributors also highlighted that customers in premium markets expect products to demonstrate strong environmental credentials. These attributes are not the differentiators that drive a premium, but a licence to play in those markets. As one contributor noted, the industry depends on its customers and therefore has little choice but to respond to these expectations. They highlighted that over the last century the industry has capitalised the premium product prices we have secured in New Zealand into the value of land. As a result, acting on climate, biodiversity, water and other environmental themes is less about return on investment, and more about

maintaining the underlying viability of the asset. Failure to act risks future cashflows that a piece of land will generate becoming insufficient to sustain the investment.

The environmental basket – from lowest to highest priority in two years

In 2024, the basket of priority statements related to nature and environment had the lowest average score of all themes analysed. In 2026, the nature and environment theme has the highest average priority score, increasing 8.1% on last year, with all but one component statement reporting a higher score.

This was not expected at the outset of the Agenda process, nor was it strongly signalled during the roundtables. While climate and nature featured more prominently during the discussions, there was no suggestion that this theme would rank first in the survey. For context, last year climate was mentioned 20 times across 25,849 words of roundtable notes. This year, climate was referenced 50 times and nature 23 times across 22,084 words of notes – an increase on 2025 but

nothing compared to references for market (134) and people (100) in 2026.

The climate and nature themes go to the core of how the sector responds to the most significant shift facing the planet today, climate change. Two of the last three years rank as the first and second years warmest years on record, with 2026 starting on a similarly warm trajectory. New Zealand (at the time of writing) has experienced five periods of extreme weather this year, impacting much of the country and resulting in multiple states of emergency being declared, significant insurance claims and, tragically, loss of life.

The priority statements showing the greatest increases are largely focused on long-term responses to environmental risk, be that water storage, climate resilient infrastructure, climate adapted farming systems as well as securing nature-based revenue streams. With an El Niño system expected towards the end of year, bringing increased drought risk to parts of the country, the message from leaders is clear: we need to accelerate action as climate change is not tomorrow's problem - it is very much here and now.

Scores for nature/environment related priority statements				
	2026	2025	2024	2023
Build water storage to manage water resources	8.39	7.75	7.89	7.61
Transition to climate resilient systems	8.01	7.24	5.16	7.61
Build platform for local sustainable energy schemes	7.81	7.41	6.73	0.00
Position as a global leader in circular bioproducts	7.55	5.95	6.43	6.29
Maximise sustainable use of oceans	7.54	7.51	7.69	7.75
Fast track restoring native ecosystems	7.42	6.94	7.01	7.29
Improve water quality to swimmable	7.11	6.43	6.54	6.82
Collaborate to accelerate net zero transition	6.87	6.90	7.58	7.67
Average market related priority score	7.59	7.02	6.88	7.29

Notably, two environmental topics received limited attention in the roundtable conversations this year. As mentioned earlier, there was little discussion on the sustainable utilisation of our oceans and the blue economy. One contributor did highlight the impact of urban waste discharges into the ocean in Auckland and Wellington, noting that while these issues have nothing to do with the sector, they have the potential to undermine efforts to develop a world-class blue economy sector in New Zealand, something they suggested will have a material long-term impact on the nation's economy.

There was limited discussion on the conversion of pastoral farming land to forestry, a hot topic in recent years. This likely reflects legislative changes that have been made to repeal provisions in the Overseas Investment Act and change carbon entitlements under the Emissions Trading Scheme, which have made the conversion of prime agricultural land to forestry more challenging.

Initiating the transition to climate resilient systems

Roundtable contributors raised the need to evolve legacy farming models towards systems that provide greater resilience to climate volatility.

Contributors described situations where repeated climate events within a region had prompted boards to initiate detailed land use planning exercises to reassess the long term direction of their businesses.

These processes were described as both necessary and challenging; the detailed information required to make intergenerational decisions about land use is often unavailable. The guidance on how to move along an alternative pathway has not been developed to the extent needed to enable boards to make decisions of this scale with confidence.

Well-articulated land use propositions are critical for people to understand the issues they need to focus on and the options that are available. Without clear pathways for change organisations,

particularly those in climate exposed regions, risk continuing on a pathway that ultimately puts their future at risk.

It was also highlighted that climate change is not linear. Consequently, the impacts on farming systems under a 3°C increase in global temperatures cannot be extrapolated from what we are experiencing today at around a 1.5°C increase. It was cautioned that there is a risk of reaching a point when the consequences of temperature increases become more apparent, which is likely to result in dramatic and inequitable regulatory change that may or may not favour the industry.

There remains a window of opportunity for the industry to act. This includes addressing land uses, changes to farming systems, diversification opportunities, new incentive structures and other opportunities to improve farmer and industry resilience. The challenge is that change comes with a cost, reinforcing the importance of incentives that encourage change. As one contributor noted, no organisation can drive the level of uptake and change that will be required to make a farming system resilient on their own. Collaboration with innovators, capital providers, regulators, processors and customers will be key to get the right technology - not just introduced, but actively used - delivering improved productivity and profitability.

We are flowing forward on water

Two years ago, nobody was talking about water. This year, it was noted that there are 16 water projects in various stages of development across the country, something that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Contributors emphasised that access to capital has not been the primary constraint on water infrastructure investment. Rather, progress has historically been slowed by lengthy, costly and uncertain regulatory processes that made it difficult to get an investment off the plans and into reality.

With legislative change making the consenting process more certain, intergenerational farmers are prepared to invest into assets such as water storage schemes, that deliver resilience to their businesses and also to the communities that they are part of. When it comes to water, one contributor suggested that it feels like the handbrake has come off, and the industry is finally able to pursue investments that deliver resilience and enhanced environmental outcomes.

Globally, water is becoming ever more valuable as the climate changes and more communities experience severe water stress. Historically, food production has had priority access to water, which has resulted in around 70% of available fresh water globally being used in agriculture. However, this protected position is becoming less assured as communities look for water for day-to-day survival, the water demand from data centres grows and more regions invest in desalination and other water capture technologies.

In the first Agribusiness Agenda, we described water as New Zealand's liquid gold. In a water-stressed world, where geopolitical analysts warn that water scarcity may heighten international tensions, New Zealand's water provides the industry with a significant competitive advantage. This reinforces the importance of not only managing water effectively, but using it responsibly.

Water storage achieved its equal-highest ranking in the leaders' survey this year, placing third for the first time since 2013. Roundtable contributors also highlighted the need to treat water infrastructure as a strategic capability underpinning productivity, social licence, and diversification.

It is important that the critical role water plays in the sector's social license is recognised and not overlooked in the rush to get development underway. While industry leaders gave 'improve water quality to swimmable' a higher score this year (up 10.6%), the priority was still only ranked equal 28th (up from 30th in 2025). Carefully considering the environmental impacts of and ensuring that communities share benefits from the investments being made is critical if the current momentum is to be sustained rather than being a short-lived surge we later reflect on with nostalgia.



In the first Agribusiness Agenda, we described water as New Zealand's liquid gold.



Establishing the frameworks to support nature and biodiversity

As a biologically-based industry, food and fibre growth depends on natural capital. Without the land, soil, climate, water, flora, fauna, and the other living things that silently and consistently service the sector, the ability to grow products, create wealth and support the economy would be impossible. Even the most innovative new production systems, be they controlled cropping or precision fermentation, still rely on biology and nature to work.

This dependence means the food system is an inherently extractive system, drawing on natural capital to create the food and fibre products we use in our day to day lives. Historically, this relationship has been largely one way. Globally, however, much greater focus is being placed on regenerative systems that look to balance extraction with a level of reinvestment into natural capital stocks.

Despite this global trend, regenerative practices featured only sparingly in this year's roundtable discussions – with notes recording only three uses of the word regenerative, two of which described it as unclear or not immediately practicable. This was despite numerous conversations which framed nature and biodiversity as core to resilience, market relevance and social licence. The discussion suggested that leaders are getting more comfortable acknowledging that their businesses are inherently nature-based business, however embracing a two-way relationship with nature remains challenging for some.

Contributors nonetheless suggested a range of opportunities for integrating natural capital into farming systems, with a particular focus on how actions can move beyond compliance and create value for farmers, growers and their supply chain partners. This included the establishment of biodiversity credit mechanisms that rewards farmers for managing nature, something that has been

largely delivered as a public good to date. Suggestions also included incentivising the use of wearables technology to drive productivity and optimise land use, or connecting key elements of our farming systems to attributes that are important to premium consumers, with measurement and assurance frameworks to underpin credibility.

The overall message from the roundtables was that the industry's long term competitiveness depends on protecting ecosystems while designing and implementing farming systems that reward the stewardship of nature and adaptation to climate disruption. As one contributor noted, recent reductions in environmental compliance requirements aimed at cost reduction may have slowed our rate of change in respect of nature to below what is required to remain relevant to our most valuable customers. In their view, the connection between environmental action and commercial return has been lost. They noted that there is an important role for advisers and supply chain partners in restoring this connection, ensuring farmers receive clear, credible advice on the financial returns that can result from enhancing the environmental performance of their farming system.

Are we missing the bioeconomy opportunity?

In previous editions of the Agenda, we have quoted contributors that have indicated that the bioeconomy opportunity for New Zealand could be worth tens of billions of dollars annually. This year, however, we didn't get an updated perspective, in fact we didn't hear much at all about realisation of the bioeconomy opportunities available to the sector, despite the priority 'position as a global leader in circular bioproducts' being a big mover up the survey rankings.

This does not imply inactivity. Contributors noted interesting initiatives are underway, including nutrient recycling within farming systems, collaborations across the food system to make harvesting surplus food to support nutritional security in vulnerable communities financially viable, and projects testing the integration of technology with natural assets to create biobased products,

to assess where and to what extent they create value. All contributors commenting on bioeconomy opportunities highlighted the role they can play in lifting economic and environmental resilience, productivity and social licence.

The activities we heard about offer exciting potential, however are unlikely to deliver a multi-billion-dollar uplift to the economy. Achieving that requires an overarching strategy, the emergence of a collaborative ecosystem and long-term investment. Based on this year's discussions, there is little evidence that these foundational elements are yet in place.

A contributor noted that the potential to grow a significant bioeconomy sector in New Zealand continues to exist, with exciting, world class companies already operating in the New Zealand market. This creates opportunities for partnerships that leverage existing technology. Several leaders suggested that growth in the bioeconomy will accelerate as understanding of the opportunity deepens. With this year's survey showing recognition that the opportunity exists, this may be an important step towards realising the transformational potential the bioeconomy offers New Zealand.



The activities we heard about offer exciting potential, however are unlikely to deliver a multi-billion-dollar uplift to the economy.



International markets

Operating and thriving in a fractured world

In a provocative opening statement, one contributor suggested that if the New Zealand food and fibre sector disappeared, it would not immediately impact global markets, given we are a relatively small cog in a very big system. However, they emphasised that while markets might adjust, New Zealand would be missed. Customers actively seek out New Zealand products for reasons that extend well beyond price, including our stability, our biosecurity status, our sustainable production systems, our adherence to the rules of international trade, our reputation as an ethical and transparent partner, our food safety standards, our value proposition. What was clear to many contributors during the roundtables is that New Zealand has a valued place in the global market, and to each customer we bring something they value which is why they choose to do business with our exporters.

The challenge for the New Zealand food and fibre sector is how we build on these strengths while continuously evolving to meet the changing needs of our customers. As one contributor noted, if we can embed continuous evolution into our DNA there is no reason to believe that the sector cannot continue supplying largely the same products for decades to come - while still generating strong value - provided those products and production systems continue to evolve in line

with market needs. Our markets are telling us that continuous change is critical whether we want to supply the same products or new products in the future.

The reality that many contributors pointed to is that our organisations will need to make this change against the backdrop of a very different world to the one we have operated in for the last 80 years. There was consensus amongst contributors that the peak of globalisation has passed, and we are now

operating in a conflict-prone environment, where governments, rather than markets, are setting the rules for global trade. For exporters, geopolitical shifts and shocks are now one of the most significant risks they face, and it is critical that they identify and understand these risks (and how they are changing) as they design and evolve their trade strategies. For New Zealand companies, one contributor suggested this means thinking about how we engage with markets that are increasingly set up to support national food resilience rather than seeking to be part of an optimised global food system.

Despite this uncertainty, the underlying tone of each roundtable was positive to strongly positive. One leader suggested that we are incredibly tough on ourselves, overlooking the world-class businesses we have built across all our primary export sectors. The suggestion was made that the whole sector might move forward faster if we eased up on the self-criticism and put the same amount of effort into working collaboratively to unlock more of the value available in global markets.





Scores for market related priority statements

	2026	2025	2024	2023
High quality trade agreements	8.82	8.29	8.14	8.42
Telling engaging provenance stories	7.88	7.59	7.58	7.74
Develop resilient supply chains	7.87	8.06	7.83	7.69
Clear market signals to all in the value chain	7.80	7.37	7.40	7.47
Manage export exposure to clusters in export markets	7.45	7.14	6.74	7.14
Track global developments in food tech	7.19	5.50	5.40	5.86
Implement national provenance systems	6.93	6.14	6.53	6.90
Rethink product offering in light of GLP-1 use	6.25	0.00	0.00	0.00
Average market related priority score	7.52	7.16	7.09	7.32

Recognition of the role of the customer is back at the heart of sector priorities

During the pandemic period, border closures and health protocols left sector leaders detached from markets and customers in a way that had been unimaginable for an export-orientated sector. Focus fell on resilient supply chains and the practicalities of getting product out of New Zealand and to the world, while customer engagement and market development were, of necessity, deprioritised.

Four years after the borders reopened, the priority score for the International Markets basket has increased to a post Covid high of 7.52 (up 5% on last year, broadly in line with the overall uplift in priority scores), clearly indicating that leaders have re established strong connections with their markets and are increasingly focused on growth rather than crisis management. Six priorities have increased, with 'develop resilient supply chains' reporting a marginally lower score (potentially indicating that handling

supply chain disruption has become a business-as-usual activity in the 2020s).

The significant increase in the priority related to global developments in food tech, explored in more detail in the innovation section, also reflects recognition amongst contributors that eating patterns are evolving and thus creating opportunities for New Zealand exporters who can clearly align their product attributes with the market need. That said, the score for the new priority relating to GLP-1s was much lower than expected, given its direct relevance to protein based export sectors and a rapidly growing consumer cohort.

The score for 'clear market signals to all in the value chain' increased by 5.8% on last year, its highest score since 2018. During roundtable conversations, a contributor reflected on the success of the kiwifruit sector in growing demand in advance of supply, driving strong returns for growers. They noted that the system relies on growers and supply chain partners receiving clear signals from the market, supported by robust analysis to inform capital investment decisions. The signals are important, but the point was made that confidence in those signals is even more vital if the sector is going to optimise its returns into the future.

Market optionality is critical to creating value

Industry leaders have learnt a lot about agility over the last six years, so it is not surprising that 'high quality trade agreements' ranked second overall in the survey and 'manage exposure to clusters in export markets' achieved its highest score since it was added to the survey in 2022.

The last year has again demonstrated the need for organisations to have flexibility embedded into their DNA, with the introduction of tariffs by the US Government having an impact not just on direct trade with the US but causing shifts in global trade patterns, creating both new competition and new opportunities for food and fibre exporters. One contributor noted that the impact of tariffs has been fascinating to observe, highlighting that it appears US consumers have adapted to paying higher prices for products, which has had the effect of increasing prices for many of our key export products globally. Pointing specifically to the price of lamb, they noted that unlike

previous price spikes there has not been much evidence of lamb being substituted off the menu, which suggests that the mindset on where the price ceiling lies has shifted amongst restaurateurs and consumers.

Another contributor talked about the opportunities in Japan, which given its demographic position is expecting a decline in the number of farmers over the coming years, creating concerns about long term food security. As a long-standing and trusted trading partner with Japan, these shifts create opportunities for New Zealand exporters to fill emerging gaps in food supplies. Being alert to how conditions are changing in our current and future markets and taking a long-term, co-ordinated response to partnering with customers will position New Zealand's food and fibre sector to capture these opportunities. Contributors stressed that realising these opportunities will require New Zealand having the right market access settings in place. It's critical that the sector works collaboratively with government to address non-tariff barriers and phytosanitary rules in advance of the demand crystalising.

Contributors also focused on the opportunities for exporters in South-East Asia, which has become more of a priority focus in the last two years. One leader noted that over the last decade, we have not put enough effort into developing relationships and significant trading volumes with countries like Indonesia, Thailand and

Malaysia, in part because efforts have been directed towards the scaled opportunities in China. ASEAN markets, particularly Indonesia, stand out as markets that are worth investing in as the cost and complexity of shipping globally increases, given their relative geographical proximity to New Zealand.

While acknowledging the progress made in securing market access, leaders were clear that the task is ongoing.

Market optionality reduces risk and strengthens the sector's ability to contribute to New Zealand's economy. In a rapidly evolving world, this requires continuous effort to keep existing agreements relevant and address non tariff and phytosanitary barriers, as well as the ongoing work to engage with more countries to develop mutually beneficial trading relationships. As one contributor noted, placing focus on deepening relationships with other politically and economically stable middle powers should be a key priority in the current environment.





The opportunity in India is now more accessible

In December 2025, the New Zealand Government announced that it had concluded an agreement in principle with India on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), with the final agreement signed in April 2026 (after the roundtable discussions had concluded). Despite the agreement being announced prior to our conversations, the impending FTA was not raised often. Leaders who did reference it tended to view the agreement as important but more of a long term strategic opportunity rather than a near term value driver for the food and fibre sector.

The FTA with India - the world's largest democracy with a population of more than 1.45 billion people - is unlikely to deliver the same export boost the food and fibre sector achieved after the China FTA was signed in 2008. One leader noted that it is likely that initial exports will be about supplying farm system knowledge and technology to support the largely subsistence farming systems in India to transform both productivity and quality, with a suggestion we could provide a 20 times productivity lift through targeted agri-tech export packages. Long term, as the Indian market follows China and becomes more urbanised, diets start to westernise and consumer trends evolve, opportunities will start to emerge to export premium products. However, this is only likely to be successful if the effort has been invested in supporting the local farming sector to develop.

A consistent message from discussions was that India is, and is likely to remain, a value focused purchaser. Contributors observed that higher value returns can often be achieved in markets such as the United States or China, creating an opportunity cost challenge when considering whether to invest in growing the market, given any sales will come with the cost of the revenue lost in supplying existing demand in higher value markets. The way contributors looked at it was that the opportunity cost is the cost of maintaining market optionality in the unstable geopolitical environment we are operating in.

Controlling the supply chain controllables

Contributors reflected that recent years have reinforced a clear lesson: while global events remain beyond an organisation's control, resilience is shaped by how they run their business to ensure it balances scale and diversity. Consequently, their focus has been directed towards ensuring that cost structures enable them to remain competitive, alongside strengthening relationships with existing clients through consistent delivery.

For many organisations, it has not always been easy to deliver to global customers and contributors spoke of the supply chain challenges of the last 12 months. The vulnerability of the transport system supporting New Zealand food and fibre exports remains a key concern, with some leaders specifically highlighting concerns over the commitment that shipping lines have to serving New Zealand ports in the medium to long term.

One contributor suggested that most shipping lines operate their New Zealand trades at marginal profitability at best. We lack the port infrastructure and fuelling options to bring the next generation of vessels here, putting direct services at increased risk. The point was made that this is an area where the industry needs to work with government and the shipping lines to find solutions to the issues before they reach a point where key services are lost. The need to have hydrogen fuelling capability for ships was highlighted as one issue where a collaborative solution, which may also need to involve Australia, is needed in the medium term.



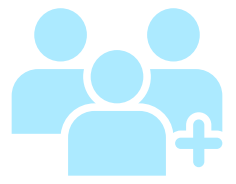


The tip of the GLP-1 iceberg is starting to emerge

GLP-1s (Glucagon-like peptide-1, a class of drugs being used for diabetes management that are also being used globally for weight loss under brands like Ozempic and Wegovy) featured prominently in roundtable conversations for the first time in 2026. The overarching view from contributors was that GLP-1s should be viewed as a significant structural signal rather than a short term trend, although the full implications of their use and how they will influence global food systems remains uncertain at this early stage in the product's evolution. The single most important factor to keep in mind is accessibility. GLP-1 products are beginning to come off patent in some markets, with the introduction of generic alternatives driving rapid price reductions. The reality is we are observing the tip of the iceberg in respect of long-term demand for this class of drug; however, demand is not going to behave in the same way for GLP-1s as it has for any other prescription drug in history. Demand is being driven as much by social media influencers and societal trends as it is by clinical decision making.

Our food exporters need to stay close to market signals and ensure invest in robust analysis to understand what this may mean for their business.

Discussions focused primarily on the opportunities GLP-1s present for the many organisations in the sector that produce and market proteins. As one leader noted, the world has been focused on calories for decades, but the emergence of GLP-1s is making consumers far more focused on overall nutrition, with a particular focus on protein. The challenge for companies is to be able to position and market their protein story effectively with key customers and consumers. While some organisations have been building capability and evidence in this space for several years, others are only beginning to engage. Drawing parallels with earlier surges in claims such as grass fed branding, contributors warned that late movers may struggle to differentiate if they have not already invested in substantiating protein quality, accessibility and nutritional outcomes.



People

Talent is becoming a limiting factor on sector growth

A recurring theme during this year's discussions was that people – not ideas – are becoming a significant limiting factor on the sector's ability to grow. Challenges with attracting, developing and retaining the right people have been covered in every Agenda to date, and the same themes were raised again by contributors this year. However, the evolution of the mission critical skills that are needed on farm, in the laboratory, and throughout the value chain made the commentary more pointed and urgent than we have heard in recent years.

The point was made that people capability is too often assumed in strategic planning. When this happens initiatives frequently underperform because the skills required to implement and sustain change are not in place.

With a wave of innovation and technology being deployed across the sector, solutions are increasingly requiring skills that many in the sector do not possess. As systems are digitalised, the key talent shortage the sector faces is data science. Contributors emphasised that the challenge extends beyond technical expertise alone, but to the ability to integrate advanced data capabilities with biology, ecology, psychology, oceanography, climatology and many other fields of expertise, in order to unlock opportunity and return across the value chain. People with these integrated skillsets are not easy to find, meaning contributors focused on the need to invest in broadening the capabilities of those in the sector, and for many this means a step-change in digital capabilities.

It was also notable that the connection to farm succession was linked directly to people capability in 2026, when historically this has been viewed as a capital availability issue. A hot topic last year was the future of vocational training and professional development across the sector, with the restructure of Te Pūkenga and the disestablishment of Muka Tangata pending at the start of 2025. However, vocational training hardly got a mention this year. This may be because legacy training agencies may not be sufficiently aligned to the digital and interdisciplinary skills now required.

Whether talking about attraction, development, retention, training or succession, contributors noted a lack of a broad, coherent, future-focused people strategy across the sector. This was viewed as making it harder to compete for talent, despite offering unique access to global careers from New Zealand. As one contributor noted, the general perception of jobs in the food and fibre industry remains that they are manual, low skilled roles. This can only be overcome with intentional, collaborative action co-ordinated across the sector.



The people basket – comparatively less prominent in 2026

People-related priorities ranked first among the thematic priority baskets in 2025, but fell to third in 2026 despite the score for the theme increasing from 7.26 to 7.50 (a 3.3% increase in score compared to the 5.3% increase in the average priority score, reflecting a lower comparative priority being placed on people issues by leaders). The scores increased for five of the six priorities in the basket, with only ‘enhance employee experience through automation’ declining. This was surprising given that the automation of manual tasks to make jobs more attractive is a key focus that leaders have indicated they need the capability to deploy.

Scores for people related priority statements				
	2026	2025	2024	2023
Maintain immigration settings	7.80	7.76	7.67	8.13
Co-ordinated promotion of sector careers	7.78	7.45	7.39	7.74
Ensure comprehensive protection of migrant workers	7.72	7.68	7.44	7.59
Seek diversity of thought and knowledge	7.56	6.86	7.02	7.06
Enhance employee experience through automation	7.10	7.13	7.02	0.00
Industry wide leadership development	7.06	6.65	6.57	7.09
Average market related priority score	7.50	7.26	7.19	7.52

The largest increase in priority score was for ‘seek diversity of thought and knowledge’ rising more than 10%, driven in particular by contributors in governance roles. While some workforce diversification will occur naturally across the sector through the evolution of business operations, the survey indicates leaders expect more intentional efforts to seek out and attract a broader range of perspectives into industry. The benefits of diverse perspectives in decision making are well understood; the challenge is ensuring the sector offers roles that are sufficiently appealing to the people they are trying to attract, particularly in governance roles, which can be challenging for boards where members are elected with the primary role of representing a specific constituency.

...the survey indicates leaders expect more intentional efforts to seek out and attract a broader range of perspectives into industry.

Building capability is a long journey – how do we go faster?

The capability across sector today reflects the historic skill requirements of organisations across the industry. The capability is relevant to the ways things have been done in New Zealand and has evolved through vocational training and, more importantly, extensive on the job coaching and learning. However, numerous contributors highlighted that the skill needs of organisations are evolving quickly. As a result, leaders see a growing need for a clear strategy to develop people capability – one that goes beyond updating the skills of existing team members to include attracting new talent from universities, other industries and back from overseas, while also building a pipeline of digital native, entrepreneurial future talent. Leaders highlighted that the sector’s future people system must be built around a capability led ecosystem that is highly attuned to the evolving needs of organisations across the industry.

Evolving a digital native workforce will take time. Given the competitive market for talent, the best chance of success will come from investing time and effort into working with schools and teachers to create



touch points for young people that spark lifelong interest and careers in the food and fibre sector. This might include supporting schools to integrate food and fibre case studies into their curriculum, putting people into classrooms to talk about their passion for the industry, and hosting visits that immerse students in the complexity of supplying high quality food and fibre to the world. For most organisations, this investment is discretionary. It is not going to materially improve results in the next few years. Numerous contributors highlighted that without a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to educating the next generation, outdated stereotypes of low-skilled, manual roles will persist, regardless of what the reality becomes.

One contributor suggested the sector is already welcoming a generation of young entrepreneurs with very different expectations for their careers to those of previous generations. They are looking for insight, development and leadership delivered in different ways. They are looking for experiences and are less likely to commit to an organisation if the education, support, and mentoring does not hold their attention and keep them connected. Current leaders need to be aware that the future generation are not looking for a linear, job for life from day one; they are looking to accumulate skills and experiences. Therefore, the question becomes: can the industry come together to curate non-linear career pathways that keep talent in the sector?

Workforce ageing and the succession barrier

Last year, Rabobank reported on the succession challenges the sector faces from ageing farmer owners in a paper ‘Changing the Guard’. The report highlighted similar issues to a report released in 2012 by ANZ ‘Greener Pastures’ about the capital needed to enable landowners aged over 65 to exit their investments. Consequently, it is not surprising succession was a focus during several roundtables.

One contributor pointed out that succession challenges are already material. There are farm owners wanting to leave the sector as soon as possible and there are young people who are impatient to get an opportunity to lead their own business. With the level of change the sector faces, the right mindset is key to success. Contributors noted that those looking to exit the sector may be less likely to embrace change, particularly if it could be perceived as placing their investment

return at risk. It was also noted that periods of elevated commodity prices can create complacency, reinforcing a preference for maintaining existing practices rather than investing in innovation.

The succession challenge extends beyond New Zealand. Globally, the agri-food workforce is ageing and shrinking, increasing the critical importance of creating opportunities for young people, particularly those with an ability to interpret innovation and integrate it effectively into efficient farming systems. Contributors highlighted that long term success depends on as many businesses as possible being capable and willing to invest in their operations and value chains. With positive prices in many sectors meaning capital is available, contributors suggest the current environment presents an opportunity to rethink how value chains and how corporate farming and other leadership structures are designed. These will provide more pathways for young people to come into farm business leadership and, ultimately, ownership.

Investing in deeper leadership relationship capital

As in past years, leaders reflected critically on their own role in enabling and leading change. Discussions highlighted the important role leaders play in nurturing trust and confidence across the value chain - among farmers, growers, employees, suppliers or customers – so that participants are willing to experiment, learn and continuously evolve and improve their contribution to the system.

Once again, concerns were expressed about the limited leadership capacity across the industry with organisations continuing to operate at or beyond capacity, fully committing available leadership resources and leaving little bench strength to be drawn on when the next opportunity or challenge emerges. While numerous contributors described feeling energised by the amount of change facing the sector and the opportunities this presents for personal development and organisational growth, concerns over fatigue persist, with the risk that opportunities cannot be fully developed.

The change the sector will go through is not going to be delivered by any organisation in isolation, it will be driven through collaborative actions. Emphasis was placed on leaders' ability to build enduring connections and relationships. Initiatives such as Te Hono have supported the current generation of industry leaders to build networks across the sector; the benefit of these relationships has been critical to the industry in working through the pandemic, food safety recalls, biosecurity incursions and climatic events. The ability to pick the phone up and talk to a trusted peer has paid massive dividends for organisations and the wider economy.

With the key catalyst for breaking down silos between people gone, it is not clear how the next generation of trusted relationship capital will be built to enable the industry to manage through the next crisis when it hits. As one roundtable commentator suggested, current leaders need to invest in helping, supporting (even forcing) emerging leaders to learn how to build deep, trusted relationships. This requires current leaders to invest their time in mentoring and support, sharing their networks both in New Zealand and globally so that the hard-won collaboration established across the past decade is not lost.

The challenge is that this requires time, which most leaders lack. This constraint may help explain the higher priority that leaders have allocated to 'industry wide leadership development' which saw a 6.1% increase in priority score (above the average increase of 5.3%). The question not answered during the roundtable conversations is, what will the next generation of Te Hono style initiative look like? It is clear that something is needed, to ensure that enduring, trusted relationships are developed.





Innovation

Adopting technology is a core capability to drive productivity and profitability

Roundtable contributors were clear that change is not new for New Zealand's food and fibre sector. The industry has operated in a state of continual evolution for decades and will continue to do so. Farmers and growers are not constrained by subsidies and are able to innovate freely, however the sector has struggled to find technology solutions to deliver productivity step changes over the last decade.

Contributors highlighted that the historic productivity gains the sector delivered over the last 50 years have been largely realised, requiring the sector to explore new system-level approaches rather than expecting each farmer and grower to discover their own next step. The question facing the sector is not whether it can innovate - this has been very clearly demonstrated - but whether its innovation capability and capacity is pointed in the right direction to create solutions that are

intuitive, scalable and capable of being adopted and used effectively.

A key element of the roundtable discussions was the speed at which a good idea is transformed from a concept into a value driver for participants across the sector. Contributors noted that there is no shortage of promising ideas and solutions; the challenge for many entrepreneurs lies in demonstrating how those ideas can be integrated into existing production systems and deployed at scale. Too often, solutions stall at the pilot stage with no clear pathway to commercialisation, often because large gains from a small experiment are unable to be recreated when scaled up, meaning the disruption required to implement change is not justified by the return. Roundtable contributors repeatedly highlighted data and AI tools, automation, genetics and biological tools as productivity and resilience enablers, but expressed frustration that regulatory barriers, talent gaps and lack of implementation pathways continue to act as barriers, slowing adoption.

Historically, the sector has relied on leading edge innovation being at least partly funded from outside the industry; traditionally using government science funding. But as contributors highlighted, government investment can't be guaranteed. Innovation in the world of AI and genetic technologies is cash intensive. The challenge for many New Zealand organisations is they lack the size and scale needed to fund the innovation investments that will deliver the step changes they are looking for. A contributor noted that investment dollars will flow when innovation can be clearly linked to market opportunities. The implication of this is that New Zealand organisations do not have the luxury to cast a wide innovation net, we have an absolute need for a laser-focused innovation agenda targeted on delivering solutions the market demands. Numerous contributors highlighted that AI needs to be viewed as key collaborator in identifying these opportunities, and in delivering them.



Lifting innovation is a key priority for sector leaders in 2026

The innovation priority basket recorded an uplift of 7.2% in its average score this year, exceeding the average increase in overall priority scores of 5.3%. This uplift reflects leaders' recognition that accelerating innovation across the value chain is increasingly critical to maintaining global relevance and delivering acceptable returns on investment. Six of the eight priority statements in the innovation basket increased this year, with 'track global developments in food tech' recording the largest increase.

The score for broadband equality also rebounded in 2026, returning to around its long-term average after a decline in 2025. As leaders increasingly recognise that AI and digital underpin innovation and the ability to extract value from it, it is not surprising that focus has returned to the adequacy and affordability of the infrastructure required to run future food and fibre production systems. While many farming systems can still run in analogue mode today, this is changing as animals are fitted with wearables, sensors are deployed across farms, and a greater share of the work is delivered by autonomous agents. Future farming systems will require fast, stable connectivity to the data centres that are powering their operations. Digital infrastructure will be as important to food and fibre businesses as it is to any other business, as will the ability to manage cyber threats and ensure the digital environment is secure.

It was also interesting that the priority score for 'direct levies towards intergenerational projects' increased by 9.3% on last year. This priority was introduced to the survey in 2013 and has never attracted much attention, however has achieved its highest score and ranking in 2026. Directing this year's conversations towards 2050 may have encouraged more long-term thinking. However, during the roundtables it was also recognised many of the innovation step changes that have driven sector

Scores for innovation related priority statements				
	2026	2025	2024	2023
Broadband equality for all	8.04	7.45	8.00	8.06
Public/Private mission based science partnerships	7.92	7.74	7.99	7.79
Deepen capabilities to maximise use of AI	7.78	7.30	6.60	0.00
Act on the results of gene editing discussions	7.31	7.40	8.19	8.03
Direct levies towards intergenerational projects	7.28	6.66	6.63	6.16
Track global developments in food tech	7.19	5.50	5.40	5.86
Enhance employee experience through automation	7.10	7.13	7.02	0.00
Create single open access data platform	6.81	6.28	6.40	6.71
Average market related priority score	7.43	6.93	7.03	7.10

growth were enabled by intergenerational investments made by previous generations, raising the question of whether enough has been done in the last decade to ensure a platform for success for the next 25 years. The comments made about the need for innovation suggest a sense of urgency in putting innovation into the hands of organisations across the value chain, indicating that the pipeline of intergenerational investment is not delivering what it has done in the past.

Digital infrastructure will be as important to food and fibre businesses as it is to any other business...


The platform for innovation: Data sharing and human capability

As one contributor noted having comprehensive, high quality data is becoming foundational to the sector's ability to innovate. Whether an organisation is looking to utilise AI tools to optimise the use of feed on a farm or to create a digital twin to enable them to simulate the consequences of a specific management decision, emerging tools will only be optimised if the sector comes together to create an industry wide data pool. Previous Agendas have commented on the importance of data sharing, noting that integrating an organisation's data with third party information increases the potential of uncovering valuable insights. However, this year contributors saw effective data sharing as essential to productivity, trust and resilience, with several leaders highlighting that the existing co-operative footprint across the sector could be a platform to achieve data sharing, given the underlying mission of co-operatives is to create benefits for their members.

At the same time, contributors were clear about the challenges. Apart from ensuring

that data is collected in a consistent manner to enable comparability, questions remain around data ownership, who sets the rules for data use by supply chain partners, and under what conditions, regulators should have access to the information. These are challenging, ethical questions which need to be worked through with the data creators, often farmers and growers. The point was made that the sector needs to get better at articulating the financial benefits that data insight can deliver, to help build momentum towards the establishment of a shared data platform.

Other contributors highlighted that data is only part of the platform needed to deliver long-term value. Advanced technologies need people with deep skills and experience and, as one contributor highlighted, these people don't typically come from food and fibre sector backgrounds. We will attract them to the sector through a technology pathway and the technology challenges the sector can offer them to solve. They have no desire to be on (or even anywhere close to) a farm or an orchard, but that doesn't mean they can't support organisations across the sector to unlock value. The contributor also noted we don't have a deep pool of these people in New Zealand. Many will need to come from overseas, requiring careful thought into immigration policies that enable us to attract the best technology teams from around the world, if we really want to create long term growth.



...questions remain around data ownership, who sets the rules for data use by supply chain partners, and under what conditions, regulators should have access to the information.



Leaning into an AI-enabled future

The survey priority 'deepen capabilities to maximise the use of AI' saw a 6.5% increase in priority score this year, ranking 13th equal overall compared to 16th last year. Last year's Agenda noted that AI had not been the dominant theme that we had expected during the roundtable discussions. It was very different this year; AI permeated all discussions with some contributors focusing their comments on the opportunities AI presents to the sector, and others highlighting areas they expect AI to evolve or disrupt in the short to medium term.

One contributor, however, issued a warning as to whether we are just talking about AI in New Zealand or whether we are serious about implementing AI. They pointed to international data suggesting New Zealand remains among the more cautious developed economies when it comes to AI adoption. As highlighted last year, successfully implementing AI requires leaders to be vulnerable, to take the lead and demonstrate that they are prepared to experiment and learn along with their teams about where tools create value and where they don't. It is not clear whether this shift from "do as I say" to "do as I do" leadership has yet occurred across the food and fibre sector in respect of AI.

The overall message however, was that AI and digital tools are essential enablers of productivity, resilience and credibility. One contributor noted that AI has the potential to allow small teams to achieve far more than their physical resource constraints would otherwise permit. They suggested that the ability to deploy digital agents will provide the opportunity to scale impact and drive productivity, and drew parallels with the arrival of the internet, which delivered a step change in quality of life in rural communities, suggesting AI could enable a similar transformation in how farming businesses operate. It was noted that we should not expect AI to fundamentally change what the sector does - grow food and fibre to meet the

needs of local and global customers - but instead change how we do it dramatically.

One example discussed the role that AI and digital tools will play in providing total transparency to international partners and customers. This reinforces the importance of implementing technology in ways that benefit and build New Zealand's global reputation as a reliable, trusted supplier of quality products. The suggestion was made that a transparent, trusted verification platform could become one of the most strategically important technology investments for the sector.

Finally, contributors acknowledged that the sector will not be able to build all required tools and digital agents that it needs fast enough to meet demand, making it even more critical that we invest in relationships that will provide rapid access to the best tools available globally.

The outlook for public (and private) science investment

Last year, the impending launch of the new public research organisation was a hot talking point during the roundtables. Twelve months later, we now have the Bioeconomy Science Institute (BSI), but very little talk about the progress that has been made or the role of public funded science in the sector's future. A few contributors did suggest that the public funded science system (which also includes the universities and the other public research organisations) will play a different role in the sector's future than it has in the past. The point was made that following the reforms, funding is likely to be more constrained meaning there may be fewer programmes and a greater focus on initiatives that can demonstrate a clear contribution the economic growth of the country in the short to medium term.

For the food and fibre sector, this heightens the importance of understanding where public funding will be directed. As one contributor noted, recent government signals point towards a focus on advanced technology, particularly digital products and solutions. This will require the sector to clearly demonstrate links between the work it is looking to do and the overarching focus on digital. While many contributors would like to see more funding available, there was realisation that this is unlikely.

Consequently, we heard that it is important BSI is clear on the science missions it is going to pursue and ensuring these are closely aligned to priorities that will deliver the biggest benefits to the industry.

Several contributors highlighted that the burden of funding science does not sit solely with government; organisations across the sector need to be prepared to step up and play a greater role. It was highlighted that more projects will only progress if they are co-funded, making industry investment into innovation increasingly critical if significant science is to progress. One contributor highlighted how their organisation's investment of 15% of revenues into R&D can be directly correlated to faster growth. While this is a significant level of investment for a New Zealand company, they highlighted it is still less than many of their international competitors.

Contributors also pointed to the need to explore new ways to innovate to deliver faster results at a lower cost than traditional science projects, which would make projects more affordable for organisations across the sector. One suggestion was to place greater emphasis on capturing and applying the insights generated by the large number of experiments conducted each year on farms and orchards around the country. Breaking the connection to traditional scientific processes could reduce feedback loops, speed the development of knowledge and accelerate the pace at which solutions are able to be commercialised. Pointing more researchers towards farm-generated knowledge could reduce costs, accelerate technology uptake and enable real time solutions to be shared for challenges like droughts and floods.

...the burden of funding science does not sit solely with government; organisations across the sector need to be prepared to step up and play a greater role.





Are we ready to compete in a food-tech-empowered world

Globally, the food discussion has moved from alternative proteins to the balance of protein and nutrition that a particular food is able to deliver. Having reworded the alternative protein priority to make it a broader statement about food technology this year, the score increased 30.7% on 2025, highlighting that sector leaders have a much greater interest in how the wider food system will evolve than the previous generation of alternative proteins. There was recognition amongst contributors that as trends get established in North America and Europe, they will influence our markets around the world and ultimately, organisations across the sector will need to respond.

A contributor noted how the growing focus on the composition of food is also connected to the role that food security plays around the world in supporting stable, functioning societies to plan for climate and geopolitical shocks. As they always do, global food businesses are reviewing their product portfolios to ensure that they are aligned with the long-term trends in food supply and demand. What differs now is the actions they are taking. One contributor pointed to a recent investment made by a large global agricultural commodity trader into a start-up working on cellular chocolate, tiny in the greater scheme of things but a signal that, given the climate challenges and price spikes the chocolate market has experienced in recent times, there may have to be different pathways to source critical commodities.

The point was made that while it appears that there will be increased focus on nutrient dense, affordable food, the pathways through which this will be developed and delivered are not yet clear. The split between what is produced through traditional food production systems and what is produced by the modern food technology system using precision fermentation, culturing, cellular and controlled production systems is still a point of uncertainty and debate.

It was also noted that recent conversations on gender-based health initiatives have been dominating discussions at global conferences, however similar discussions are less prominent in New Zealand. While we don't have unlimited budgets, we do have a role to play in the future of food. Consequently, it is important that we talk more about the factors shaping future food demand so that farmers, growers and their supply chain partners can ensure that the investment dollars they have available are spent in a way that optimises their long-term return.



Regulation

Avoiding the rules acting as a handbrake when they lag reality

Regulatory systems and the regulations that they enforce have been a longstanding source of frustration for industry leaders. The dominant perspective has been that the industry is subject to too much regulation, which adds cost without commensurate value. Last year, there was tangible evidence that confidence was recovering in many key industry sectors. While leaders still had frustrations with specific regulations, they were more focused on the opportunities available.

There was plenty of comment on regulatory matters this year but contributions to roundtable discussions were more nuanced. Leaders highlighted that the right answer is not always less regulation, but the correct regulation. Several contributors called for regulatory frameworks that enable experimentation, adaptation, and scaling of proven solutions

(particularly solutions that have already been adopted in countries with similar regulatory environments) while continuing to protect trust and enforce standards that matter to New Zealanders. Others were frustrated that some regulatory regimes – particularly around gene technology, biological controls and new cultivars – are slow, risk averse and, too often, disconnected from defensible science-based positions as rules seem to be set based on political perceptions rather than clear principles. One contributor noted that good regulation creates value for the industry, whereas poorly aligned regulation risks constraining long term value.

Ultimately, effective regulation is most likely to emerge through collaboration. Contributors highlighted that engaging constructively with regulators can accelerate processes and lead to frameworks that are easier to integrate into production systems. Several also noted that well-designed regulation can create commercial opportunity by meeting the needs of markets, providing confidence and trust to customers and consumers. Leaders cautioned that approaching

regulation from a position of grievance risks missing opportunities, whereas a constructive mindset can unlock them. Roundtable participants reflected on the pandemic period as an example of what is possible – where both industry and regulators developed a much more agile working relationship. It was suggested that this agility remains in the sector’s muscle memory, although not always used. It is, however, currently being observed as the sector and government work together to ensure that energy risks are understood and managed.



Regulatory concerns remain on the agenda

Regulation remains the fifth-ranked of the priority baskets we track this year, despite the theme's priority score increasing by 6.1%, which is above average increase of 5.3%. Six of the seven priority statements within the basket recorded higher scores, with items relating to food safety, a national provenance system and defence investment showing significant increases.

There was a notable increase in the priority attached to 'recognise the strategic importance of food safety', which in recent years has been treated as an assumed hygiene factor. With several significant product recall issues occurring around the world over the last year, it is not surprising to see the priority achieve its highest score since 2020. As one contributor noted, the global rise in demand for traditional protein sources is very much to New Zealand's benefit, but only if we can verify the authenticity of our food and the effectiveness of our production systems. Once again, food safety is viewed

Scores for regulation related priority statements

	2026	2025	2024	2023
World class biosecurity	9.40	9.03	9.16	9.06
Tougher penalties for animal welfare breaches	7.39	7.14	7.29	7.48
Recognise the strategic importance of food safety	7.70	7.08	7.04	6.88
Quickly work to reduce food insecurity in NZ	7.14	6.96	7.36	7.62
Enable new entrants to NZ's food retail sector	6.26	6.34	0.00	0.00
Implement a national provenance system	6.93	6.14	6.53	6.90
Lift defence investments to reflect national security risks	6.04	5.29	0.00	0.00
Average market related priority score	7.27	6.85	7.48	7.59

as a strategic value driver rather than an operating cost that needs to be minimised.

The priority statement on 'lifting defence investment to reflect national security risks' was introduced last year due to the alignment of defence, national security, and food security being increasingly discussed internationally, although not getting much focus in New Zealand. The priority statement remains low-ranked (38th overall) however the priority score increased 14.2% in 2026. In an increasingly geopolitically unstable world, the connection between food and national

security has become a priority focus of many governments around the world, particularly those in Europe and the Middle East. While we are lucky to live in a more stable region of the world, many of our key markets are increasingly concerned and are identifying the controls that they can put in place to support food and national security. Our exporters need to be alert to the trend as it will increasingly shape how customers behave in international markets.



Biotechnology reform remains a point of contention

The reform of New Zealand's dated biotechnology legislation, the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act 1996, has been a talking point for leaders for more than a decade. Contributors noted that technological progress over the past three decades has significantly outpaced legislative change, limiting access to tools, such as gene editing to improve the traits of crops, that are increasingly accepted internationally.

Concerns have been expressed that the absence of these tools risks eroding long-term competitiveness in export markets, and consequently changing the legislation will unlock competitiveness. While most contributors have supported changing the legislation it has been far from unanimous, with some leaders concerned that relaxing the rules could put economic returns at risk, particularly from the loss of the clear GMO-free position New Zealand currently holds in the market.

Frustration was evident among those supporting reform that the Gene Technology Bill introduced in 2024 has made little progress over the past year, meaning the sector is no closer to getting faster access to globally available technologies to lift productivity and resilience. The concern is that the issue has again become politically sensitive, reducing the likelihood of substantive progress in the near term.

Robust discussions highlighted the importance of not moving too fast, to ensure credibility and market trust are maintained. It was also acknowledged that moving forward requires clear guardrails, and conversely, conversations stressed that with the way the science is evolving means failing to update the legislation may create problems for the sector in the future. Leaders suggested these could include limiting the ability for New Zealand organisations to partner globally,

the ability to attract and leverage international investment and weaken our innovation positioning in the minds of current and future customers and partners around the world. There was recognition that there is no easy way forward with this issue. Although as one contributor noted, the current government has talked a lot about delivering regulatory certainty for the food and fibre sectors but in respect of the most impactful thing they could do, it appears the window has been missed to make substantive change.

While most contributors have supported changing the legislation it has been far from unanimous...



Aligning regulation with future sector priorities

Contributors consistently highlighted the scale of opportunity facing the sector. Capturing that opportunity will depend on having the right people and the right innovation systems in place, making it critical that regulation enables change to happen in a cost-effective way.

Contributors argued that many regulatory systems remain oriented towards historical operating models rather than the innovation step changes the sector needs to move forward. Again, this year leaders pointed to two specific regulatory challenges that are preventing New Zealand farmers and growers from accessing leading edge technologies; the time and cost associated with getting new cultivars and germplasm across the border, and for gaining registration for new lighter chemicals and biological control agents that have already received regulatory approval in other countries. These frustrations have been raised over many years with leaders noting

that the challenges can deter companies from bringing their most advanced products to New Zealand, as our market is simply not big enough to justify the time and cost in getting a solution across the border.

Concern was expressed that regulatory agencies are not always adopting new technologies themselves. One example cited was the preference for using traditional methods to test biomass rather than adopting new gene sequencing technologies which would materially reduce the time and cost associated with testing. The call was made for regulators to be more open to the use of technology, particularly when it improves the overall quality of the regulatory system and frees up resources to support exponential increases in demand.

One leader noted that a well-designed, technology-enabled regulatory system would empower growth, however it does require regulators to break ties to what they have done in the past, while still maintaining the stability and credibility they hold with customers around the world. As is the case with so many issues facing the sector, the path forward appears to be one of collaboration, where regulator and industry look to find common ground to create pathways forward that work for all.

Compliance is at risk of crowding out innovation

Several contributors warned that when regulatory success is measured primarily through compliance rather than the overall performance of a system, incentives can become misaligned. Effort may be disproportionately directed toward low-value activities, crowding out innovation.

Many frustrations with impractical regulations have been addressed, however, the government getting clarity on the real risks that the sector faces, in particular the risk of events compounding within a single growing season, are key to establishing a regulatory agenda focused on securing the right settings for the most important risks.

One sector that has faced significant change over the last two decades is the poultry and egg sector, where regulation has forced farmers to completely change their production systems. The compliance driven approaches imposed substantial cost without delivering

corresponding innovation or consumer benefit. Contributors cautioned that regulation imposed without sufficient industry buy in, economic understanding or clarity of customer demand can create unintended consequences for both producers and consumers.

Numerous roundtable contributors suggested that the industry has not fully moved on from the pandemic period, when many expected the government to have all the answers. As one leader noted, the industry will struggle to keep up with international competitors if farmer mindset is tied to (largely unmanageable) government policy, rather than the things they can control to determine their own future in the short, medium and long term. Leaders have a critical role to play in ensuring every participant in the industry understands the actions they can take to shape their own future. This means leaders need to take real care to work with facts, so that those they lead understand where to obtain credible information, understand real risks, and identify the actions which will shape their future.



Investment and infrastructure

The trillion-dollar question - how is the future financed?

One word featured more prominently in this year's discussions than it ever has in the past: infrastructure.

A dominant concern across the roundtable conversations was about the level of underinvestment in the enabling infrastructure required to support the industry's long-term success, be that investment in transport and ports, water storage, communications, energy systems, social infrastructure (like schools and hospitals) or data platforms. Leaders questioned whether sufficient investment is being made today in intergenerational assets to ensure the sector can remain competitive in 2050.

As one leader observed, confidence remains high in New Zealand farmers' ability to optimise outcomes within the farm gate. The greater challenge lies beyond it: ensuring the enabling infrastructure is in place and operating effectively to support future growth.

Historic deficits in infrastructure investment are an issue for many developed nations. Countries have deferred the costs of upgrading and replacing historic infrastructure to the next government or the next generation. The New Zealand Infrastructure Commission has priced the cost of addressing historic under investment alongside meeting future demand at more than \$1 trillion over the next 30 years. While this challenge is economy-wide, contributors noted that the food and fibre sector is likely to be disproportionately affected given its geographic footprint and reliance on physical and digital infrastructure. Concerns expressed included whether there are credible plans to invest in infrastructure so that capacity is available to support growth as it comes along (particularly when it comes to water); how critical infrastructure will be funded; and whether rural regions will receive investment aligned with the wealth creation capability of the food and fibre sector.

While recognising the sector has a role to play in supporting the development of critical infrastructure, leaders also considered the other investment needs of the sector, most notably enabling the transition of farm succession, investing in innovation across the value chain and in enhancing long term client relationships. With so many demands on capital, it is critical that organisations across the sector lift their sophistication in terms of capital allocation. Decisions need to reflect a comprehensive assessment of the costs and benefits of an investment, to ensure available funds are optimally allocated.

...confidence remains high in New Zealand farmers' ability to optimise outcomes within the farm gate.



Two perspectives on the priority placed on investment

Once again, the investment theme basket recorded the lowest average priority score of the six baskets tracked in the survey, with an average score of 7.13. This result was heavily influenced by the low priority leaders attached to ‘reduce emphasis on environment in lending decisions’, which remains the lowest priority across all cohorts in 2026.

When this lending related statement is excluded - along with the newly introduced priority ‘launch innovative risk management products’ - the picture changes materially. An investment basket focused solely on infrastructure related priorities records an average score of 7.68, making it the highest ranked basket in 2026. This more accurately reflects the prominence of infrastructure funding and development in this year’s roundtable discussions.

Similar infrastructure-only basket of priorities would have recorded an average score of 7.30 last year, suggesting the strong focus industry leaders are placing on infrastructure is not new, but is now of sufficient concern that has become the top-of-mind priority many talked about during the roundtables.

The basket is also unique in that the infrastructure and investment theme is the only one which has seen each priority score increase between 2025 and 2026. Three priorities drive the increase in score for the basket (water storage, resilient rural infrastructure and sustainable local energy platforms) with the other items reporting largely unchanged scores. The challenge for leaders is that the urgency to invest spans multiple infrastructure areas simultaneously, meaning there was limited consistency around the key investment priorities facing the sector today.

Scores for investment related priority statements

	2026	2025	2024	2023
Build water storage to manage water resources	8.39	7.75	7.89	7.61
Investment in resilient rural infrastructure	8.20	7.14	8.00	8.00
Build platform for local sustainable energy schemes	7.81	7.41	6.73	0.00
Co-invest to support tech adoption	7.28	7.27	7.45	7.63
Launch innovative risk management products	7.11	0.00	0.00	0.00
Set FDI rules to enable sector to realise potential	6.72	6.68	6.44	6.02
Reduce emphasis on environment in lending decisions	4.41	4.38	0.00	0.00
Average market related priority score	7.31	6.82	7.30	7.32



Selecting infrastructure investment priorities

With a national infrastructure bill exceeding \$1 trillion over the next 30 years, the likelihood of every required investment being funded is remote. This meant roundtable contributors were very focused the importance of prioritising investment in resources that enable the sector, and the wider economy, to succeed into the future.

As one contributor noted, the food and fibre sector is very unlikely to shrink its way to success. This perspective reinforces the case for prioritising collaborative investment into key infrastructure that will support the long-term growth of the sector, with water storage and transport being regularly identified as the most critical focus areas.

Progress on water infrastructure has been discussed earlier in the Agenda. A number of contributors highlighted the constraints the sector faces in respect of transport, with one noting it is not just about how

we get products from the wharf to the rest of the world – challenges extend to the significant costs and constraints in moving products from A to B to the wharf within New Zealand, with extreme weather events making some parts of the country increasingly vulnerable. The point was made that our supply chain is less resilient than often assumed and not yet fit for the level of disruption expected in the future. While upgrading physical infrastructure was seen as part of the solution, contributors stressed that resilience also requires rethinking supply chain design. Questions raised included where buffer stocks should be held, how we work with in market partners to leverage their capital and networks, and how trade agreements and free trade zones can be utilised to optimise our outcomes.

Contributors consistently highlighted infrastructure underinvestment as a structural risk to the long-term prosperity of the sector. Leaders stressed that fragmented, reactive investment will be insufficient, calling instead for coordinated, long term infrastructure planning that supports productivity, market access and climate adaptation across the value chain. As always with large infrastructure investment, the question is who is going to pay for these intergenerational assets, when benefits will flow widely over significant periods of time. One contributor noted that business too often looks to the government to foot the largest share of

the bill for large scale investments, which then ties projects up in rigid government investment processes. It was suggested that the sector should actively pursue public/ private partnerships for critical investments, leveraging the scale of the government's balance sheet to reduce funding costs, while ensuring projects are commercially led so delivery is timely and benefits flow sooner.

Benefiting from the food, fibre and fuel triple play

Energy has emerged as an increasingly important theme in roundtable discussions over recent years, reflecting global recognition that food and energy systems are becoming more closely interconnected. Internationally, investments in food production assets are being evaluated not only for the food returns that they generate but also the revenue that they can produce from fibre and fuel product streams. The triple F (food, fibre and fuel) conversation is not as common in New Zealand, although a growing number of contributors have highlighted the importance of energy to the economics of their farming business. One contributor highlighted that within their own business, a plan to convert a small plot of land into solar farm will deliver six

times more return on investment than their farming operations. They added that even with the returns that can be delivered and an increasing number of practical options to electrify farming systems, the uptake amongst farmers is still slow across the industry.


Other contributors recognised that many farmers and growers operating in rural parts of the country are increasingly exposed to grid fragility and cost volatility, as they continue to rely on under resourced transmission and distribution networks. Implementing on-farm generation, be it solar, wind or bioenergy, de-risks a business from the supply risks associated with ageing transmission distribution networks, as well as having the potential to reduce operating costs (particularly in the high energy cost environment businesses are facing at the current time) and contribute an additional revenue stream. Internationally, it is also creating a platform for farmers to play a role in powering their local communities, strengthening the sector's license to operate. It is becoming increasingly certain that part of the solution to New Zealand's energy challenges lies inside the farmgate, however the point was made that the industry has not yet fully realised the opportunity that is available.

Insurance and risk management tools are increasingly needed

Several contributors highlighted growing interest across the sector in improved risk management and insurance products, particularly parametric insurance products (data driven insurance contracts that enable farmers to insure for a specific event not occurring, a particular amount of rain for instance, with a claim process that is triggered and paid if the event does not occur) and liquidity support tools. Internationally, an increasing number of food production systems rely heavily on crop insurance and similar products to give farmers and growers the confidence and surety to plant for another season (particularly in the face of an increasingly unstable climate). By contrast, New Zealand farmers and growers have been left to cover all production risk and underwrite it using their own balance sheets.

As the frequency and severity of extreme climate events increase, contributors noted that carrying all production risk is becoming less attractive - particularly for those that are aging - impacting their willingness to invest and grow their businesses. There is no question that climate volatility and infrastructure risk are increasing the complexity of risk management for the food and fibre sector but, as contributors noted, there is not yet a critical mass of demand for insurance and risk management products (apart from dairy price futures contracts) in New Zealand.

The contributors that identified the need to place more focus on risk management tools, suggested that we should not interpret the current lack of demand as an indicator that demand will not emerge in the next couple of years. It was suggested that now is the time to be focused on ensuring that relevant products are designed and available to meet demand as it emerges.



Internationally, an increasing number of food production systems rely heavily on crop insurance and similar products...

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Simon Limmer
Simon Saunders
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How KPMG can help

KPMG is uniquely positioned to support organisations in navigating and transforming the future of food. From farm to finance, policy to packaging, our global network of multidisciplinary professionals brings deep sector expertise, cutting-edge technology, and strategic foresight to help clients unlock resilience, create value, and lead systemic change.

01.

Strategy and foresight

Our local and global teams help clients anticipate disruption and prepare for emerging risks and opportunities across the food system. Through scenario modelling, geopolitical analysis and ESG benchmarking, we support leadership teams in designing adaptive strategies aligned with long-term value and resilience.

02.

Sustainable supply chain transformation

We help businesses redesign supply chains to improve transparency, reduce emissions, manage climate risks and enhance traceability. Our supply chain optimisation, decarbonisation roadmaps and circular economy solutions help ensure systems that are both commercially agile and environmentally aligned.

03.

Capital and finance innovation

KPMG works with investors, banks, and agribusinesses to structure innovative financing models - including green bonds, sustainability-linked loans, carbon market participation and blended finance platforms. We help clients unlock capital flows for regenerative transitions and nature-based solutions.

04.

Regulatory navigation and policy influence

We advise public and private sector leaders on evolving regulatory frameworks affecting food, climate and sustainability. From compliance to strategy, we enable organisations to engage constructively with local and global regulations and actively shape the policy environments critical to their future.

05.

Technology integration and digital transformation

Our digital and innovation practices work at the intersection of food and technology-delivering AI-enabled forecasting, blockchain traceability and smart farming solutions. We also help scale agrifoodtech platforms and digital twin capabilities to improve productivity, resilience and consumer trust.

06.

Collaboration and ecosystem building

We facilitate multi-stakeholder coalitions across sectors-energy, health, infrastructure and food-to build integrated solutions to systemic challenges. Our convening power and cross-sector networks help align incentives, share risks and deliver collaborative impact.

07.

People, culture, and capability development

Through leadership development, workforce upskilling and ESG culture transformation, we help organisations build internal capacity to lead in an era of rising stakeholder scrutiny and evolving consumer values.

Whether you're a farmer cooperative, food manufacturer, technology innovator, financier, or policymaker, KPMG can help you move from insight to action. Together, we can reimagine and help build a food system that delivers for people, planet, and profit — resiliently and equitably.



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