

Remembering the good ol' days

Jack Keeyes

REMEMBER when New Zealand used to be the world's leading food producer?

The grandkids sit sprawled across the floor, gazing up at me, as I sit in an oversized armchair.

"What was it like, Grandad – did we really grow food all around NZ?" they asked.

"We sure did, kids," I replied.

"NZ was a world leader in food production. We used to produce enough food to feed more than eight times our own population and we had some of the most technologically advanced, environmentally-friendly and safe food systems in the world.

"We produced over 20 billion litres of milk, over 500 million kg of kiwifruit and processed over 30 million sheep and cattle for meat, in addition to so many other different foods."

"So what happened, Grandad?" the children questioned, eyes wide with interest.

"Unfortunately, there were three things that went wrong, and slowly NZ's food production started decreasing, until the point that almost all of our food is now imported from other countries," I said.

“Unfortunately, there were three things that went wrong, and slowly NZ's food production started decreasing, until the point that almost all of our food is now imported from other countries.”

"Really, Grandad?" they asked with grave concern.

"Well the story goes like this," I said.

"The first problem was our own food security here in NZ. Even though we could produce enough food to feed so many people around the world and produced some of the highest quality and nutritious foods, we had hundreds of thousands of people here in NZ that were suffering from poor nutrition and hunger,



that even reached one million people during the covid-19 pandemic of 2020.

"We also had one of the worst obesity rates in the world, with almost one third of people classed as obese.

"This caused lots of flow-on effects. Many young people grew up without proper nutrition and then struggled in the education system and were less able to contribute to the workforce and live fulfilling lives.

"On top of that, our healthcare system was constantly inundated with complications related to poor food choices, and the rest of the world slowly stopped wanting to buy from NZ because they saw how unhealthy our own people were."

"But surely if NZ produced such good food, people would still want to buy it?" they quizzed.

"Well the second problem was that NZ didn't keep up with trends in innovation and technology because we were so successful across agriculture and horticulture, and had some of the most efficient production systems around the world, we enjoyed getting premium prices for our products, and just assumed that people would always want to buy them," I explained.

"That's when the food technology revolution began.

"Internationally, small and large companies started investing in cellular agriculture, advanced fermentation technology and precision genetic engineering. People became even more health conscious and ethically health conscious too, as individualised



IMAGINE THAT: Agri-food research and insights analyst Jack Keeyes reimagines New Zealand in a time when it was too late to adapt to the world's ever-changing food needs.

health information and social media became even more established across society. Consumers no longer wanted to buy foods that had come from animals being killed, and instead wanted foods that were grown in controlled environments, with renewable energy and worked in harmony with farm systems without needing animals to be slaughtered."

"Why didn't NZ just do some food technology, especially if we were already the best?" they asked.

"Well, the last problem was a combination of poor collaboration, and regulation," I said.

"Regulation didn't allow us to use technologies such as gene editing, so our scientists couldn't use modern tools to improve

farm systems or use other new technologies.

"On top of that, NZ is still quite a small country, but our industries didn't collaborate and invest in new technologies together, or support farmers to transition to new integrated farm systems. Within just a few years, it was too late."

"Wow, Grandad, that's crazy!" they said.

"Sometimes I do wonder what would have happened if we had empowered people through making better food systems which supported all New Zealanders to eat healthily," I said.

"What would have happened if our regulation had actually supported innovation in food technology instead of preventing it.

"What would have happened if

our industries had collaborated and used our potential of unique NZ genetics, indigenous wisdom, renewable energy, quality farm systems and incredible farmers to be the leaders in new food technologies.

"But perhaps that's just easier to see in hindsight."

Who am I?

Jack Keeyes is an agri-food research and insights analyst at KPMG.

Your View

Got a view on some aspect of farming you would like to get across? The Pulpit offers readers the chance to have their say. farmers.weekly@globalhq.co.nz Phone 06 323 1519