

Speech to the Forum for the Future of Agriculture

Minister for Primary Industries Hon Nathan Guy

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Thank you for the invitation to speak at today's forum in the great city of Brussels. What a fantastic opportunity to exchange ideas on the role agriculture plays in global sustainability.

It was a pleasure to hear from the previous speaker, Kofi Annan, given the wealth his experience brings to the conversation. I also look forward to hear from my fellow speakers in the panel discussion on this vital issue.

The Sustainable Development Goals have placed agriculture at the forefront of the global development agenda, and have helped bring an important focus on issues of food security and sustainable agriculture.

The scale and speed of our rising global population is well-understood, however the ability of agricultural production and distribution to meet this demand is a challenge that we must all address.

For example, global population is forecast to grow by 2.3 billion by 2050. Global agriculture demand will need to increase by 60 to 70 per cent to meet this demand.

Farmers worldwide are realising they will need to produce more safe and nutritious food while operating but within increasingly tight environmental constraints.

Of course, the Sustainable Development Goals are all interrelated and cover a number of areas of importance to food production, however I want to draw on a specific few of these goals, and elaborate on how they relate to what we have experienced in New Zealand.

New Zealand has a population of around 4 and half million people, and we can currently feed around 40 million people. We won't be able to produce much more food, yet we've set a target to double the value of our primary sector exports by 2025.

The defining moment in this ambition actually started in the 1980's. Prior to the 1980's, New Zealand was very much the UK's farm. The majority of our agricultural production was basic in nature, and predominately exported to one market.

After the UK joined the European Market, we were forced to adapt. Almost overnight we moved from an inefficient Government-subsidised production system to the subsidy-free system we still have today, and are proud of.

At the time, many thought this would be the end of farming in New Zealand. But farmers are innovative people. When required to, they can follow market signals.

These days, the signals farmers respond to come directly from consumers. In response, farmers have adapted, making higher quality products that people want to buy, responding to changing tastes and demand, while ensuring the safety and sustainability of their products.

In order to find the most efficient way of improving on-farm performance, farmers need to be at the centre of innovation, and listening carefully to these desires of the consumer.

The Primary Growth Partnership in New Zealand is designed to help find new technologies and production systems that fix problems facing the industry. Farming groups put up their own money to make them happen – and the challenges we've set ourselves demonstrate how much environmental and economic drivers are united:

- We're working for a 50% increase in the efficiency of nitrogen fertiliser, and a 20% increase in the efficiency of phosphates, reducing nutrient losses and preventing harm to waterways
- We're using advanced monitoring and breeding techniques to produce sheep with a higher level of naturally present omega-3 fatty acids – meaning healthier sheep meat.
- We're developing and promoting technologies that help farmers digitise information about their farming practise, track a number of indicators and ultimately share their best on farm techniques with others in a way that improves productivity

We know all of these projects can help empower farmers to do what they do better, and in the process create more sustainable farming businesses.

Today we live in an age where consumers are increasingly more aware of the products they consume. However, at the same time, they are also more detached from the processes that occur inside the farm gate.

We all have a role to narrow this urban/rural disconnect. Consumers need to know we are good stewards of our land and sea, and we need to understand that we require a social licence to operate.

In my opinion, farmers and growers are naturally environmentalists. They want to leave the land in a better state than they found it – for their children and their grandchildren.

Similar to the aspiration of SDG 6, the New Zealand Government has recently set a target to improve the quality of our waterways. New Zealand is blessed with beautiful natural resources, however agriculture and urbanisation have had an impact.

Currently 72 percent of New Zealand rivers meet a 'swimmable' standard – meaning that you can swim without getting sick from bugs in the water. The Government has set a target of having 90 percent of rivers 'swimmable' by 2040.

This will involve farmers fencing off 56,000 kilometres of our waterways to exclude livestock and reduce levels of eColi. This follows the great work dairy farmers have already voluntarily done over the last decade to exclude nearly all dairy cows from waterways from milking platforms.

As outlined in SDG 13, we also must take urgent action to tackle climate change. New Zealand is also keen to be a part of setting the global economy on a pathway to a low-emission future under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. We realise our emissions profile is different to many other countries, with 50% of our emissions coming from animals.

That's why we helped support the establishment of the Global Research Alliance on Agricultural Greenhouse gases which has seen 47 member countries join – including 15 from Europe. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach with the work programme, including focuses on rice paddies, pastoral livestock and cropping.

As a niche producer that makes its living in global markets, New Zealand experiences every day the obstacles in place for agricultural producers seeking to make a sustainable income from trading internationally. Developing countries face the same issues.

We need to move away from jealously guarding domestic markets, and consider how we can best work together to seize the far greater opportunities and challenges being generated by spiralling global demand.

As mentioned in SDG 17, a sustainable global agricultural sector requires stable trade flows between countries, and the increased involvement of farmers, harvesters and processors in the global value chain.

Populations are growing, and food production must grow too – but this won't necessarily happen in the same places. Food has to cross borders to get to growing population centres, and at the same time we need efficient global food markets to cushion the impacts of local environmental and climactic events like famines, floods, and other issues that lead to avoidable food price volatility, hunger and deprivation.

At the centre of the global food security equation is the multilateral trading system, underwritten by the World Trade Organisation. That institution still sets the rules that govern the flow of food around the world, as it has done for the last 23 years.

Increasingly though, regional and bilateral trade agreements are forming – coalitions of countries who realise the importance of upgrading the rules of global commerce.

New Zealand and Europe are key players in many of those coalitions, just as we are partners in helping to improve the WTO framework.

For example, many New Zealand companies are now cooperating throughout European countries with other producers.

This involves complimenting one another on seasonality differences and different access to markets to benefit farmers in each country.

These partnerships need to provide a firm basis for the enormous investments needed to sustainably lift agricultural production to meet demand in the coming decades.

There is a multitude of areas we should be focusing on to address the Sustainable Development Goals. However, one thing is certain, for anything to be successful, the farmer must be at the centre.

Thank you.