

REPAIRING OUR FOOD WEB

Accelerating the transition from industrial food systems to regenerative food systems in Te Tai Tokerau



Introduction

Restoring our Food Webs

The purpose is to support the shift from the industrial food system to a regenerative food system by a collective envisioning of the future, and articulating pathways to achieve it. In doing so we will contribute to healing the climate and fostering resilient communities.

This document presents a snapshot of collated interviews from people who are intertwined with Northland's food system, including challenges and opportunities moving forward.

Scan the QR code to download the full report, or visit www.northlandclimatechange.org



Funded by Northland Regional Council and Foundation North.

The programme is a partnership between Climate Action Tai Tokerau, The Northland Regional Council, Te Whatu Ora (Public Health), Pai Ora, Whangārei District Council, Far North District Council, and Healthy Families Far North.

Process

- 31 interviews conducted
- 1 Workshop (20 participants)
- 1 Conference Workshop (60 people)
- 6 stakeholder meetings

Who we talked to

We spoke with people working within our food system, as well as those striving to transform it.

Such as:

- Organisations working in the food system
- Local Government
- Health
- Not-for-profits
- Farmers
- Food Stores
- Educators
- and more

The questions we asked

- Please tell me about your interest or involvement in food systems change.
- Can you describe what our ideal food system would be like by, say 2040?
- What are the major barriers to achieving that vision?
- What are the pathways to achieving it? And what do you want to do?

*Note: We acknowledge we have not covered everyone and the diverse voices and experience of people and whānau in Te Tai Tokerau. We encourage people working in this space to contact us.



The vision

Our food system is local. Increased home-grown food production. More small producers, supplying local markets. People actively engage with food production, distribution, and consumption at a village level.

Our food system is accessible. We can access local, healthy and affordable food.

Our food system provides nourishment as a foundation for good health, collapsing the cost of our health system.

Our food system reinforces Te Ao Māori. Strengthened traditional practices, such as māra kai, guided by mātauranga Māori and enhance spiritual and cultural connections to the land.

Our food system is transparent. People know where their food comes from and know how their food choices support their health.

Our food system benefits nature. Food is grown in a way that contributes to long-term environmental health and wellbeing.

Themes

What we heard

"We need to transition from a mindset that says 'I'm in this for me' to one that affirms 'I'm in this for my community'. Hence the word *commune* – community, we are all in this together."

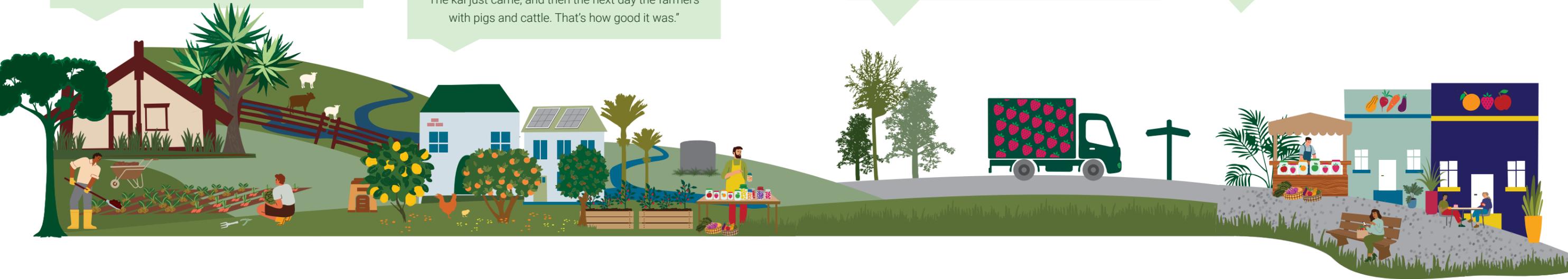
"By becoming [increasingly] self-sufficient we're undermining the market system, we're undermining all of that capitalism, we're taking ourselves out of [that] equation."

"When we were growing up the kai used to be stacked up in the *whare kai* before the *tūpāpaku* turned up. The kai just came, and then the next day the farmers with pigs and cattle. That's how good it was."

"For those groups who are very vulnerable, the thought of food sovereignty is just not even there... it's about poverty, it's about...more day to day survival stuff."

"For me, it is all body, mind and spirit and when we're out of balance with planet because we've put our material interests before human interest... the planet becomes diseased, we become materially diseased, and we become spiritually way off kilter."

"Food has a value. And those who produce food need to be able to make a living. So food cannot be free, because it's not free. It costs time, energy, land, and effort."



1. Cultural and spiritual connections

Many interviewees emphasized the spiritual and cultural dimensions of food systems. The term Food Sovereignty means different things to different people, but is necessary for everyone's sovereignty, regardless of ethnicity.

2. Cultural shift and leadership

Those working in regenerative systems, including traditionally-based Māori and community-centred food producers, are naturally leading the way. They are forming their own processes and ways of distributing kai that works for them.

3. Community and local food systems

Most interviewees were enthusiastic about developing a much more local food system. Citing the importance of farmers' markets, shortening supply chains and investing in local processing facilities and food hubs.

4. Eliminating food poverty

The current industrial food system exacerbates food poverty. Eliminating poverty may support people to make healthier food choices (rather than being forced to buy processed foods to stretch budgets).

5. Economic constraints

Interviewees consistently identified the current economic system as a major barrier to change. Such as the dominance of profit-driven corporate food systems and the economic pressures on consumers and small scale food producers.

6. Health and wellbeing

The connection between industrial food systems and poor health outcomes was a recurring theme. The importance of fresh, nutrient-dense food, that brings whānau and community together was highly noted.

7. Generational change and careers

Farm succession is a concern as younger generations seek different paths, making it harder to attract them to food production. Bridging tradition with modern aspirations is key to creating new food system careers.

Themes

What we heard

"Food is the most essential part of living [aside from air and water], so why don't we have a deeper understanding of it?"

"I see the marae space as a vital part of the puzzle. Marae are where intergenerational knowledge is shared. Others come and go, but marae remain as enduring archives, despite many challenges."

"When you regenerate those waterways you're regenerating yourself."

"Lots of people think that the way they eat is cheaper. They might find that if they did the numbers, it's not necessarily cheaper, especially if they take into account the doctor's bills. It's not cheaper in the long run."

"We're spending thousands more a year to comply to new testing requirements. We have to send a sample of yoghurt every 10 days to test for coliforms, despite never having detected coliforms in our yoghurt in over 30 years of testing."

"I think the thing that's going to turn the tide is actually experiencing joy alongside other people – as you grow food, or as you exchange food, or as you share food, or cook food."



8. Education and knowledge transfer

There was acute awareness of the barriers small businesses face with compliance – both financially and logistically (including the impact of food safety regulations on traditional practices). Policy reform is needed to support regenerative practices.

9. Regenerative agriculture

Regenerative agriculture has progressed significantly in the past decade, with ruminant-based pastoral farming leading the way. Farmers report improved soil and animal health, better mental wellbeing, and lower input costs, though pathways for orchards and vegetable production remain less defined.

11. Regulatory and compliance issues

There was acute awareness of the barriers small businesses face with compliance and the cost of compliance. Including the impact of food safety regulations on traditional practices, and the need for policy reform to support regenerative practices.

12. Resistance to change

Interviewees identified multiple forms of resistance to transitioning food systems, including cultural attachment to fast food, the convenience of supermarket shopping, corporate opposition, the influence of advertising, and psychological barriers to changing food habits.

10. Environmental sustainability

Environmental concerns were widely expressed by interviewees, highlighting the importance of regenerative practices to build soil health, protect water quality, support biodiversity, and reduce food waste and packaging.

13. Raising Conscious Consumers

Interviewees stressed the need to grow a cohort of conscious consumers who value local regenerative food systems. Addressing the convenience of industrial food alongside modern time pressures requires new models that support healthy, connected choices.

Insights & Reflections

A deeper dive

Over our 13 themes, we uncovered 4 high level insights that directly link to our landscape in Te Tai Tokerau.

"[gardening] is a non-threatening way as well. You can go ahead and agitate, you can protest. But this kind of activity, because it's within the domain of Rongo, which represents not only cultivated crops, but also peace, it's a kind of passive resistance, and it's still taking a stand."

"The stories of the food have not been carried with them because the people haven't been carried with the food either, and the land is not with the people, so there's a lot of disconnect. But there's also a lot of opportunity to relate those stories."

"Systems changes and behavioural strategies are hard, but we need to look deeper and come up with broad and varied strategies to create change instead of always going back to education alone".

The scope is much wider than food, so that's why I'm more interested in regenerative, because regenerative has a wider scope ...regenerative is inclusive for everyone. So, for me, that is a much smarter way to go because we can encourage biodiversity.

I now have to do a mock recall, every year, once a year, recalling my product and showing them all the paperwork of how I would do it if I had to... It's ridiculous because if I have to recall my bratwurst as one batch it would involve recalling 50 kilos... I shouldn't have to do this silly exercise.

Our current food system is not set up to help the environment and the health of the producers as well as the consumers. It's trying to feed consumers and that's it.

Insight 1

Kai strengthens connections to whakapapa and whenua.

Transformation of the food system begins with returning to these ancestral ways of knowing and being. We are already seeing examples of what this looks like in Te Tai Tokerau.

Te ao Māori offers a holistic, intergenerational worldview in which food is not just sustenance, but a connector —to whakapapa, whenua, atua, and community. Mātauranga Māori and indigenous leadership are essential to regenerating not only ecosystems, but also social and cultural wellbeing.

Insight 2

More than education is needed to transform our food system.

We heard that education and engagement are foundational to transforming our food systems. However, we also found plenty of existing educational initiatives. Alongside this, we need broad and varied strategies to shift our food culture.

Insight 3

Policies and regulation make it difficult for local food systems in Te Tai Tokerau to thrive.

Current central and local government policies and regulation make it difficult for local food systems to thrive. Many small-scale and regenerative producers are burdened by compliance frameworks designed for large industrial operators. Meanwhile, extractive economic systems prioritise profit and scale over wellbeing, resilience, and local ownership. Shifting toward thriving, localised food systems requires bold policy change, economic rethinking, and a rebalancing of power.

Insight 4

There is a compelling value proposition for the shift to regenerative food systems.

Current industrial food production creates environmental harm by creating pressures to raise production. Social harm is created by the health costs and debilitation from food-related diseases. Economic harm ensues by sourcing food from outside the region and nation, and by the domination of "big food" corporations.

Conversely, regenerative practices, starting with the soil, produce a cascade of benefits for the farm environment, the wider environment, human and animal health and regenerating communities.

Change Pathways

The actions are compiled from interviews and themes that came out of the workshop and conversations with the steering group.

Pathway

Vision statement

Actions

Amplify our collective voice

We are already seeing positive shifts in food systems, but further change requires strong policy advocacy. We must identify and mobilise others in the community to amplify our collective voice.

Te Tai Tokerau has a well-organised, well-connected body of advocates that work together to drive change in policy, industrial food production and supply chains.

Create online resources to support a diverse range of kai advocacy efforts and campaigns

Work with others to develop submission templates for food and related legislation.

Identify possible advocacy groups and opportunities to support a Te Tiriti-based citizens' assembly.

Biodiversity, ecosystems and land use

Healthy habitats (including wild food sources) and communities are needed for a regenerative future.

Te Tai Tokerau's food systems are regenerative and include a mosaic of native forest, integrated pasture and cropping systems. Rural communities thrive with diverse land-use and diverse local economies. Wild food sources flourish.

Identify and map organisations involved in rehabilitating te taiao. Support their work that in particular contributes to food production.

Identify food distribution and food hub networks. Enhance existing, or create new, channels to connect local producers directly to food.

Direct resources towards seed banking and protections of native and taonga species diversity.

Building the network and celebrating

Facing a dominant industrial food system, emerging enterprises and individuals must connect, collaborate, and celebrate achievements to build strength and resilience.

Te Tai Tokerau's regenerative food system is held up by a connected, collaborative and diverse network of groups, organisations, communities, businesses and individuals that supports and celebrates one another to drive change.

Develop a GIS food mapping system of changemakers to reveal the growing momentum and connections across the region.

Celebrate and showcase those primarily engaged in food production who are also delivering strong environmental outcomes.

Establish a Regenerative Food Awards to recognise change-makers in the food web.

Education and schools

Our education strategies must support the shift to regenerative food systems, including outreach to school communities and nurturing a new generation of supporters.

Regenerative food system values, know-how and motivation is normalised through local education, producing a flourishing succession of champions of all ages.

Investigate education system needs alongside existing kai educational groups and identify opportunities to enhance an existing, or develop a new Te Tai Tokerau kai education strategy.

Support schools' Environment Committees to set up a gathering of their design. Support regenerative food system youth-led initiatives generated by this gathering, and by other Northland colleges.

Find ways and connect for those in the food system to learn regenerative practices from one another.

Kai Communities

Kai communities bring people together through shared health journeys, home gardening, foraging, cooking and eating, and collective efforts to address food poverty.

Te Tai Tokerau has thriving kai communities, where people can share knowledge and resources to support changes at individual, family and neighbourhood levels.

Support an existing, or create a new, consumer-focused kai community to steer food purchasing towards regenerative consumption.

Identify existing networking platforms and start a Tai Tokerau kai collective / kai alliance network.

Connect with consumers willing to pay a premium for regenerative food to support regenerative practices.

Measuring success

Quantifying environmental, social, and economic benefits will strengthen the case for regenerative and cultural food systems.

Te Tai Tokerau has expertise to generate strong and diverse value propositions that showcase the environmental, social, and economic benefits of regenerative food systems.

Identify and resource an expert working group to build the compelling, comprehensive case for regenerative food production.

Investigate options for quantifying and modelling the social, environmental and cultural benefits of regenerative agriculture in Northland.

Infrastructure Pathways

When engaging with multiple community groups, we hear common expressions of what is emerging and what is needed. How might we strengthen what's already happening?



Initiative 1. Localising production

The need for diversifying food products is crucial to setting up a local food network. Despite our benign climate and extensive coastline, we still import large quantities of food, including pork and even beef. Producing more of what we currently import would create jobs and strengthen the local economy.

Action

Conduct a feasibility study on import substitution opportunities, including pasture-based pork farming and bananas.



Initiative 2. Kai distribution network

Currently, food distribution systems are dominated by corporations, with South Africa's BidFood being the dominant player in food transport. A regenerative food distribution would be designed to collect food from local producers and distribute it through local distribution routes to food hubs such as marae, and food outlets such as retailers and restaurants.

Action

Support resourcing streams to be community-led first, enabling them to make the decision for their community, and resourcing them to do the things they're already doing well.



Initiative 3. Micro or mobile abattoir

Farmers using regenerative practices lack options to process animals in ways that differentiate their products. This pathway calls for investment in infrastructure and enabling policy changes.

Action

Support Farming Diversity and Regenerative Kaipara to establish a series of micro or mobile abattoirs, and investigate options for marketing and distribution



Initiative 4. Co-operative food stores

After repeated government failures to address the supermarket duopoly, we propose supporting food retailers rooted in values of equity, ensuring everyone has access to nourishing, nutrient-dense kai.

Action

Develop a cooperative grocery / food supply business case, including distribution hubs and routes.

Acknowledgements

Repairing our food webs

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