

Is New Zealand's food system unsustainable?

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Two thirds of respondents questioned in a recent study believe New Zealand's current food system is not sustainable. Credit: Massey University

New research from Massey University's College of Health shows overwhelming support for sustainability characteristics to be included in the Eating and Activity Guidelines for New Zealand Adults, set out by the Ministry of Health.

Calls for action to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals highlight food as the single strongest lever to optimise [health](#) and environmental sustainability.

Associate Professor Carol Wham from the School of Sport, Exercise and Nutrition says national guidelines represent a key opportunity for policy makers to address food consumption patterns, and several countries have taken the lead to include sustainable diet characteristics into their guidelines.

This research found 77 percent of 298 agriculture, environment and health sector professionals supported the inclusion of sustainability characteristics. In particular there was high agreement to promote whole foods, sustainable seafood, sustainable lifestyle behaviours (i.e. physical activity), limit processed foods and reduce [food waste](#).

Dr. Wham says two thirds of respondents (63 percent) believe New Zealand's current food system is not sustainable, however there was a divergence of opinion by sector. "More than half [57 percent] of the agriculture sector respondents believe New Zealand's food system is sustainable, compared to less than 15 percent of respondents from the health and environmental sectors."

Disagreement between sectors has been demonstrated in other countries and previously led to the abandonment of [environmental sustainability](#) considerations into Australia's National Food Plan, Dr. Wham says. "In the United States, where dietary guidelines are jointly developed by both the US Departments of Health and Agriculture, opposing sector opinions have led to nothing changing. By contrast, in Qatar, food sustainability principles are integrated into national dietary guidelines. With little domestic food production this would seem unlikely but it seems strong authority of the Supreme Council of Health (supported by an Emirate government) and a lack of food industry influence, facilitated the

process."

This is the first study internationally to assess the degree of convergence between sectoral groups for the inclusion of sustainability characteristics into national dietary guidelines.

"This research has brought together a diverse range of professional expertise that spans the agriculture, environment and health sectors. Findings should be of interest to government sectors that can influence sustainability and health, for example, departments or ministries of health, education, primary industries, regional development, [agriculture](#), food and finance," she says.

Although academics have been promoting [sustainability](#) in [dietary guidelines](#) since the 1980s, currently no country meets basic dietary needs for its citizens at a globally sustainable level of resource use, Dr. Wham says.

"The environmental impact of our [food](#) systems is already very evident in New Zealand—we have damaged ecosystems, depleted fish stocks, soil degradation and loss of biodiversity, with more change still to come."

The paper, titled "New Zealand's Food System Is Unsustainable: A Survey of the Divergent Attitudes of Agriculture, Environment and Health Sector Professionals Towards Eating Guidelines," was recently published in *Frontiers in Nutrition*.

More information: Rebekah Jones et al. New Zealand's Food System Is Unsustainable: A Survey of the Divergent Attitudes of Agriculture, Environment, and Health Sector Professionals Towards Eating Guidelines, *Frontiers in Nutrition* (2019). [DOI: 10.3389/fnut.2019.00099](https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2019.00099)

Provided by Massey University

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