



Keeping dairy strong means keeping New Zealand strong.

Practical priorities for New Zealand's next Government to support a productive, resilient and sustainable dairy sector.





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New Zealand's dairy farmers help feed millions of people, support regional communities, and generate the export earnings our country depends on.

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Every day, DairyNZ works alongside farmers to improve farm and environmental performance and help rural communities thrive.

New Zealand's dairy sector is entering a new phase. Farmers have invested heavily in environmental improvements, animal welfare and more resilient farm systems, but global competition is intensifying, consumer expectations are evolving, and climate and biosecurity risks are increasing. The policy decisions made by the next Government will shape whether that investment delivers its full potential.

DairyNZ brings together science, farm systems expertise and trusted relationships with farmers that can help inform practical policy supporting productivity, sustainability, animal welfare, biosecurity and long-term investment.

The next Government has a clear opportunity to back one of New Zealand's most important sectors with evidence-based policy that gives farmers confidence to invest.

The following six priorities set out the practical decisions the next Government can take to strengthen dairy and the contribution it makes to New Zealand.

Dairy sector facts

 **Herds and cows** (in 2024/25)

10,370 Total number of herds.

451 Average herd size.

4.68m Number of milking cows.

 **Milk production**

22.4b litres of milk processed by New Zealand dairy companies in 2025/26.

2.03b kilograms of milksolids produced by dairy farmers in 2025/26.

1.7m total effective hectares of dairy land in New Zealand in 2024/25.

 **Export value**

(in the year to June 2026)

\$28.6b

Dairy is our largest export earner, generating more than \$28.6 billion, which is one-quarter of the value of all New Zealand exports.

New Zealand dairy products were exported to

149 markets in 2025.

 **Environment**

97%

The percentage of dairy farmers who have an industry farm environment plan in 2025/26.

 **GDP**

\$10.7b

direct contribution to GDP (year to March 2024), equal to **2.8%** of New Zealand's economy.

Dairy is regional New Zealand's economic anchor, accounting for

12.1% of West Coast GDP,

10.6% of Southland GDP,

8.3% of Taranaki GDP,

7.8% of Waikato GDP.

 **Workforce**

Close to

\$4b

paid in wages across New Zealand.

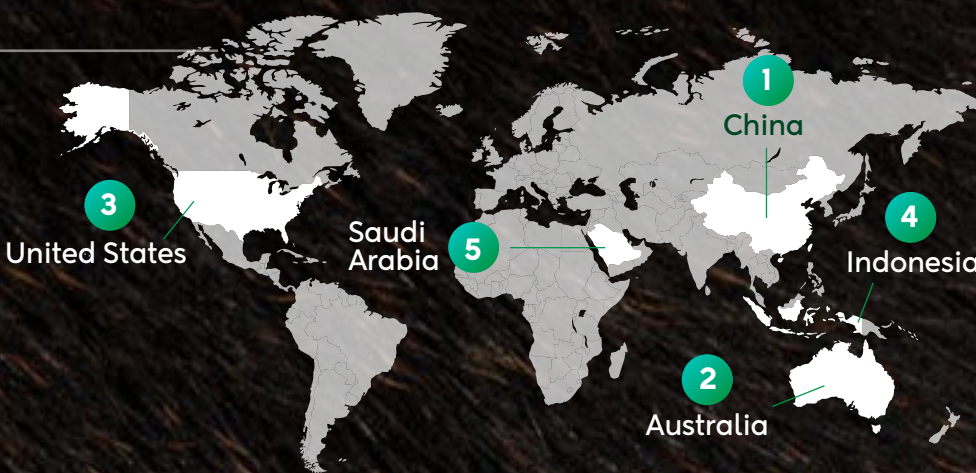
 **Employment**

51,800

people employed in the dairy sector.

Top 5 markets for New Zealand dairy exports 

(Year to 31 March 2026)



95%

of our dairy products are exported to around 130 countries. An estimated 90 million people annually could consume 2.5 serves of NZ dairy per day.



Dairy farmers know better than anyone that change is constant.

But farmers are looking for certainty. They need policy that rewards investment, encourages innovation and lets them get on with producing world-class food.

The challenge is to create more value while continuing to reduce the sector's environmental footprint.

To do that we need to ensure the sector continues to create value for New Zealand in a world shaped by environmental limits, climate pressures, changing consumer expectations, and increasing global competition.

Future success won't come from just producing more. It will come from producing more value.

'The next Government has an opportunity to build on the progress farmers have already made. Getting policy settings right, now, will provide the confidence to invest, adopt new technology and continue creating value for New Zealand. Delaying action risks slowing that progress.

Dairy farmers have spent years investing in environmental improvements, animal welfare, better infrastructure, planting, effluent systems, genetics and more resilient farm systems.

That investment has lifted standards across the sector and provides a strong foundation for the next phase of improvement.

Farmers need government to be a durable and practical partner, providing policy that gives them confidence to invest, encourages improvement and recognises dairy's critical contribution to New Zealand.

This document sets out six practical priorities: resource management and freshwater, biosecurity, workforce, science and data, climate and infrastructure, and animal welfare.

DairyNZ is ready to work with the next Government to deliver practical policy that backs farmers, strengthens regional New Zealand, and keeps dairy contributing to our country's success.

Together, we can ensure dairy continues to deliver for New Zealand for generations to come.

Tracy Brown
Chair

Priorities for the next Government

Six practical actions to support a productive, resilient, and sustainable dairy sector.

1

Get our resource management and freshwater systems right

2

Build and fund a strong biosecurity system

3

Strengthen the dairy workforce

4

Boost science funding and accelerate technology uptake

5

Promote low-emissions technology and invest in rural infrastructure

6

Back strong animal welfare rules



Priority ①

Get our resource management and freshwater systems right

Farmers need clear and practical resource consent rules and freshwater requirements so they can confidently invest in both the environment and their farms.

The system should protect natural resources while giving farmers the confidence to act.



The next Government must:

Deliver enduring resource management rules

Any reform needs to provide long-term certainty and avoid repeated policy resets.

Make freshwater rules practical and focused on outcomes

Ensure national direction and the methodologies supporting regional implementation are workable, science-based and developed with sector input.

Back effective freshwater tools

Support freshwater farm plans, catchment-led approaches, and nationally coordinated monitoring that improves outcomes and reduces duplication.

Improve water security

Reduce regulatory barriers and increase funding for large-scale water storage that supports drought resilience, environmental outcomes, and community needs.

Practical resource management improves environmental outcomes and gives farmers confidence to invest.



Cameron Henderson
North Canterbury farmer

Farming in North Canterbury, I've seen the positive effects of a well-structured, audited farm environment plan programme across our region. Unfortunately, national policy uncertainty and unachievable outcomes have left farmers disillusioned, putting progress on water quality at risk. My community needs to see a pathway that may be demanding, but is achievable, and backed by good data and practical tools like farm plans.

Priority ②

Build and fund a strong biosecurity system

Biosecurity safeguards the future of dairy farming and the wider primary sector.

Farmers need a better-integrated, easier-to-understand, and more resilient system, with clear accountability and sustained readiness funding.



The next Government must:

Complete reform of the Biosecurity Act and related settings

Create a clearer, more coherent system for funding and managing readiness, response, and long-term pest management.

Strengthen biosecurity governance and accountability

Ensure agencies and partners have clear decision rights, funding responsibilities, and transparent performance reporting, supported by a fair and sustainable funding model that reflects the shared responsibilities of government and industry.

Commit to sustained readiness funding

Provide enduring support for readiness against the highest-impact threats, including foot and mouth disease.

Strong biosecurity protects exports and regional economies.



Chris Lewis
Waikato farmer

During the Mycoplasma bovis outbreak, farmers saw how quickly an incursion tests the whole system. It was not just about managing disease; it was about trust, communication, and making decisions quickly.

For a threat like foot and mouth disease, New Zealand will need to move fast and work together.

Farmers need a system that backs them with secure borders, clear communication, faster decisions, and genuine partnerships before a crisis hits.

Priority ③

Strengthen the dairy workforce

A strong dairy sector needs skilled people, clear entry pathways and a workforce strategy that builds domestic capability while retaining access to targeted migration.



The next Government must:

Lift workforce capability and labour productivity

Bolster vocational education and industry-informed training that meets the needs of dairy farm businesses and learners.

Build clear dairy career pathways for New Zealanders

Ensure agriculture is prominent within the school curriculum at all year groups to encourage dairy careers on farm, in agribusiness and agriscience, and connect employers with schools and regional programmes.

Maintain workable immigration settings

Ensure timely access to skilled workers when domestic supply cannot meet demand, including viable residency pathways, while complementing longer-term domestic workforce development.

A skilled workforce lifts productivity, animal care and rural opportunity.



Campbell Parker
DairyNZ Chief Executive

The message from farmers is consistent: people are the backbone of every successful farm system. When the right team is in place, animal care, environmental management, and daily decisions all work better.

This is not just a labour supply issue. Dairy needs clear pathways from school into farming, practical training that matches on-farm needs, and genuine opportunities to build skills and progress.

Domestic supply alone will not meet demand in the near term. Workable migration settings remain critical, alongside longer-term investment in New Zealand's dairy workforce.

Priority ④

Boost science funding and accelerate technology uptake

New Zealand's future productivity and sustainability depend on strong science capability, trusted data, and faster adoption of practical on-farm solutions.

Policy and funding are needed to strengthen research capability, enable safe use of new technologies, and reduce duplication and uncertainty for farmers.



The next Government must:

Increase funding for applied dairy science

Grow the people, institutions, and research capability needed to deliver practical outcomes for farmers.

Enable safe agricultural innovation

Complete the gene technology reform process, ensuring the new tools can be safely tested and used, while managing trade, market, and co-existence risks.

Accelerate digital and AI-enabled tools for farmers

Simplify and align farm data requirements, reduce duplication across freshwater, emissions, soil, biodiversity and other reporting, and support trusted digital and AI-enabled tools that improve decision-making, lift labour productivity, and protect farmer privacy.

Science turns environmental ambition into practical on-farm progress.



Dr Jacqueline Rowarth
Waikato farmer

Productivity improves when decisions are grounded in credible evidence - credible because it is the result of scientific research. That is why sustained investment in science is essential for New Zealand's future.

Farmers need science that translates into practical tools fitting the on-farm system. Applied research delivers real solutions that lift profitability while improving environmental performance.

Farm data also needs to work better for farmers. When information is aligned, trusted, and protected, farmers get clearer insights, reduced duplication, and policy is more likely to be equitable and practical.

Priority ⑤



Promote low-emissions technology and invest in rural infrastructure

Farmers need policy that supports resilience and strengthens adaptation.

The focus must be on practical action that works on farm, reduces uncertainty, and avoids unnecessary cost and complexity.

The next Government must:

Maintain stable, science-based methane targets and accelerate practical low-emissions solutions

Ensure climate policy is enduring and reflects farm realities. Support approval, extension, and uptake of proven emissions tools, and remove barriers to on-farm solar, battery storage and grid connections where practical and cost-effective.

Strengthen rural responsiveness

Improve adaptation, preparedness, response, and recovery systems, including funding for Rural Support Trusts.

Invest in resilient rural infrastructure

Prioritise power, connectivity, transport, and critical services that withstand severe weather and keep farms and supply chains operating.

Low-emissions solutions and resilient infrastructure keep rural New Zealand moving.

Priority ⑥



Back strong animal welfare rules

Good animal welfare is critical to the sector's global reputation as a supplier of premium, sustainable, and ethically produced milk.

Government policy needs to be practical, evidence-based, and adequately resourced, with credible institutions and workable implementation pathways.

The next Government must:

Ensure animal welfare institutions are fit for purpose

Provide sufficient resourcing and governance for bodies responsible for animal welfare advice and standards development.

Improve engagement and standards development

Work with sector partners on practical, evidence-based codes of welfare and regulation updates, including the Dairy Cattle Code of Welfare.

Make implementation workable

Provide clear timeframes and practical guidance so farmers can adopt animal welfare rules with confidence.

Strong animal welfare protects trust in New Zealand dairy



Tracy Brown
Waikato farmer

On our farm, and others I am involved with, climate is not abstract. It shows up in day-to-day decisions, risk management, power outages, damaged infrastructure, disrupted milking, and animal welfare pressures.

Farmers are already making changes to improve efficiency, build resilience, and reduce emissions while continuing to produce. Policy needs to recognise and support practical progress.

Resilience is just as important as mitigation. Reliable power, connectivity, transport, water storage, and recovery support are essential if farms and rural communities are to keep operating efficiently and be future-proofed.



Richard McIntyre
Horowhenua farmer

As farmers, looking after our animals is one of our biggest priorities. It is fundamental to how we operate and how New Zealand dairy is judged here and overseas.

Farmers need rules that are grounded in real-world conditions, applied consistently, and updated through a predictable, well-resourced system.

Strong animal welfare protects trust in New Zealand dairy. The solution is clear: invest in governance, strengthen capability and work with farmers to deliver standards that are credible and practical.

At a glance

Priorities for the next Government

1 Get our resource management and freshwater systems right → Deliver enduring resource management rules → Make freshwater rules practical and focused on outcomes → Back effective freshwater tools → Improve water security Practical resource management improves environmental outcomes and gives farmers confidence to invest.	2 Build and fund a strong biosecurity system → Complete reform of the Biosecurity Act and related settings → Strengthen biosecurity governance and accountability → Commit to sustained readiness funding Strong biosecurity protects exports and regional economies.	3 Strengthen the dairy workforce → Lift workforce capability and labour productivity → Build clear dairy career pathways for New Zealanders → Maintain workable immigration settings A skilled workforce lifts productivity, animal care and rural opportunity.	4 Boost science funding and accelerate technology uptake → Increase funding for applied dairy science → Enable safe agricultural innovation → Accelerate digital and AI-enabled tools for farmers Science turns environmental ambition into practical on-farm progress.	5 Promote low-emissions technology and invest in rural infrastructure → Retain existing climate targets and accelerate practical low-emissions solutions → Strengthen rural responsiveness → Invest in resilient rural infrastructure Low-emissions solutions and resilient infrastructure keep rural New Zealand moving.	6 Back strong animal welfare rules → Ensure animal welfare institutions are fit for purpose → Improve engagement and standards development → Make implementation workable Strong animal welfare protects trust in New Zealand dairy.
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For more information, visit
dairynz.co.nz/election-priorities

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