“How secure is Wellington’s Food supply?” by Laura Beck.

A couple of years ago Frank van Steensel, Josje Neerincx and I embarked on a scoping study into Wellington’s food security (in relation to fresh produce). What we discovered confirmed what we had been feeling the tremors of for years but it was remarkable to be able to put a figure on the detail and to confirm clearly what had been happening on our farms. What it reflects is the hollowing out of our farming and gardening sector and a weakening of the fabric of our rural communities and connections between the urban and their rural hinterland. What this speaks to me is that the nurturing of our growers has never been more important nor more vital for building resilience into our food supply, cultural heath and sense of place and well being. Below is a synopsis of our research.

What we found is that Wellington imports up to 81% of its fresh produce from outside the region (the Wellington region being defined as, Waikanae across to Upper Hutt and down to the Cook Strait). This change has occurred in the last 30 years, where previously most, if not all, produce was sourced regionally.

The review revealed, alarmingly though not surprisingly, that all current official data sets were based solely on economic growth figures. This lack of depth in figures and commentary means that there is no basis for understanding the socio-economic drivers responsible for this regional dependency on food and disables a sound basis for strategic intervention as there is not the requisite information. Accordingly, the results of this study come with the caveat that they are based somewhat on anecdotal information and that extrapolations used are skills and experience based. However the value of this study is in the identification of the trends and impacts.

Here's a quick overview of what we found. Meat makes up one of the dominant parts of consumption. As an example, New Zealanders eat 34.9kg of poultry per annum. Poultry composes 39% of all meat consumed. Poultry is one of the main choices and therefore source of meat and protein for Wellington City. The Wellington Region produces no poultry and is therefore totally dependent on external regions for one of its main protein sources.

7% (by value) of a Wellingtonian's diet (excluding that of the service industry) is fruit and vegetables. The region is able to provide 21% of this demand but Wellington City is dependent on imports to provide the other 79%. Similar conclusions are drawn for Beef, Sheep and Pork with the majority of supply coming from outside the region.

Although 20% of the milk for the Wellington Market is produced regionally it is processed and therefore supplied from Palmerston North and Auckland. Wellington depends on external regions to provide all milk and dairy products.

Egg production is based in the lower North Island but only 16% is consumed in the region and this only composes less than 1% (by value) of consumption.

The major factors for this change from internal to external supply is the rise in dominance of the Supermarket and export industry. There are two major Supermarket chains in the country which control up to 80% of all fresh produce supplied to the market. This effectively allows them to dictate to the market. They have a preference to work with larger producers who can supply consistently large and continuous volume. In an industry where the profit margins are already tight it has created an environment where only the large can survive.

This has led to a significant trend in every production sector nationwide, that is, the consolidation and centralisation of specialist production into larger and fewer farms. Indeed Hort New Zealand's advice to growers has been "Get bigger, get together or get out." And we have seen this in action: over the last 30 years farms have become larger and fewer with less regional supply. In the early 90's there were 172, now there are 35 in the Wellington region.

Another significant factor was a change in transport regulations. Transport regulations prior to 1978 meant that most fruit and vegetables in NZ were produced and consumed within each region. The regulations favoured NZ Rail by prohibiting road transport of vegetables more than 50 kms. Then, there were wholesale food distributors in all regional centres, now they exist only in Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. Produce can now be shipped anywhere in NZ within 24 hours.

Increasing regulatory requirements, such as traceability and spray diaries, as well as fuel price increases which make local produce delivery runs uneconomic, are cited as reasons grower numbers and local sourcing have declined. Increase in land prices (and concurrent rate increases), 4^{th} generation family farmers choosing a different lifestyle are also contributing factors to the decline in grower numbers.

Major players in the wholesale market instituted a 15% commission for growers who supply less than $100,000 of product per annum. There is a 10% commission for those who supply over $100,000 of product per annum. This presents a barrier for smaller players to enter the market in an industry which has a tight profit margin. The increase in the import market that is supported by low tariffs and overseas farming subsidies continues to tighten the competitiveness of the market where only the large players which have the economies of scale can compete.

One of the largest issues facing the production sector is the capital cost of expansion. With the demand to become larger and more specialised to achieve “economy of scale”, producers are investing in capital intensive expansion. This expansion demands either maintenance if not growth of production size to justify and fund the expansion, a race without an end.

This consolidation, centralisation, specialisation and growth of large scale production and supply creates a variety of impacts on Wellington City’s food security with regards to its locality and risk factors. The risk factors extend to include: peak oil; extreme weather events; climate change; and global economic instability. The current trend of production and supply serve to exacerbate the impact of these risk factors and make food security more vulnerable.

The reduction in grower numbers has resulted in a reduction in the range of produce planted by individual growers. While there has been a huge increase in the variety of crops grown compared to 15 years ago (e.g. cilantro, celeriac, aubergine), growers have become more specialised, planting only two to three crops each instead of the 10 to 20 lines of several decades ago. This movement to uniformity rules and high inputs are hiding the weakness of this poorly adapted system to local diversity in soils and climates. There is a focus on the supply side at the expense of the production where there is a shift from growing to the climate to growing to global demand. Consequently there has been serious genetic degradation, where breeding, now orchestrated in the laboratory, not the land, has resulted in crops that are not suitable for regional production as they have been developed outside the region for global variety. These crops therefore require an increasing amount of agro-chemical inputs to support their maximum development as they are not developed for the region's soil and climate.

Specialisation and genetic erosion (e.g. lack of functional diversity and therefore loss of ecosystems services) further enhances the susceptibility to pest and disease requiring again an increasing use of pesticides or other means of intervention. This increase of inputs results in greater pressure on the environment from increased fossil fuel and chemical use. In turn, regional authenticity and integrity are being ignored, creating a negative feedback loop for alienation between rural and urban, human and nature. An increasing amount of comprehensive studies are showing that this trend puts serious pressure on farm sustainability.

The increase of supermarket purchasing has added to this alienation of consumers from producers. Trust and context are no longer obvious, resulting in buyer prejudice. Food issues presented at single factor levels cannot be judged in context resulting in poor perception of quality and more often than not, food scares (e.g. campylobacter and growth hormones) that further enhance the alienation between the two groups.

Through bulk and all season supply there is less emphasis on a region's seasonal and unique local produce. This results in a loss of food culture and identity, increasing alienation of cities from their resourceful hinterland, reducing the natural, human and social capital. But, most importantly there is a discernible lack of value placed on the people who grow food and even on the integrity of food itself. Food is valued for its aesthetic and shelf life, not for its nutrition, vitality or its potential to voice the landscape and therefore allowing us a more intimate connection with our environment.

If the market continues uninterrupted it is likely that the large players such as Fonterra, Tegel and supermarkets will maintain their market share if not grow it. This trend, combined with the lack of regional supply and growing concerns about the impact of climate change, peak oil, natural disasters and unpredictable global markets on regional security and consequently food security, are accumulating factors that lead to significant insecurity of food supply to the region and Wellington City.

Genuine progress in this area would require a focus on diversification at every level of the supply chain (economic, social, cultural and environmental), a connection back to the regional production capacity (soil and climate) and the development of regionally adapted crops and animals (diversity in varieties and genetics) which is based on ecosystems diversity and integrity. It also provides a broad basis for an authentic innovative food processing industry and food culture. It integrates food security as an integral part of environmental, social and economic accounting in an integrated and holistic fashion.

We can see that consumer demand is changing the tide with the explosion of farmers markets around the country and expansion in niche food markets. Recently Pak n Save were advertising themselves as a 'farmer's market, just inside', that tells me that they're concerned enough about the advance of the farmers market that they've started to green wash themselves with the label.

I know I'm preaching to the converted on these issues but I think change at the soil level is where real meaningful change happens and to enable that we need to keep active, informed and engaged. To put a voice to these issues again and again, to be prepared to charge and to pay the cost of our food so our gardeners and farmers are given a bit of grace and space to grow what they know their land needs to support their community and their environment. (by Laura Beck 2011).

This is one of the main reasons why we find it so important to grow local food for local people. Trying to fight against the trend!

Recently, we have been made aware of the "Food Bill" that is being worked upon by parliament. We hear different things about the impact it will have on our CSA, an interesting development that will most likely increase, rather then decrease the food growing developments in the Greater Wellington region. For more information on the impact of the Food Bill see this article.

The government's own commentary on the bill is here.