

Episode 6: Don't Waste This | Roast Lamb in New Zealand

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

In New Zealand, being a food producing nation, we're food abundant. You'll often hear people say we have enough food to feed 40 million people. However, most of our food is exported. You probably eat, eat some of it, particularly dairy. And what we're experiencing in New Zealand as are many people around the world is the rising food prices and also rising food insecurity.

So it does mean that many families can no longer afford to access meals like the simple, humble Sunday roast, and then, on the contrary, we are seeing, you know, roughly 157,000 tonnes of edible food end in landfill just from the commercial sector and around \$3 billion end in landfill of food from the household level.

And the amount of land we use to grow wasted food is it can be likened to the top half of the North Island, so if you're picturing the long, skinny country of New Zealand, the top half of the North Island is essentially used to grow wasted food and so that land and that soil and the labour and the animal feed and everything that's invested into that is essentially what we're using to grow food that never makes it to the plate.

But what I see is that food waste is not yet considered one of those really available accessible levers for business and for government, it's not yet in policy like it should be, and like it could be to help our climate crisis and our food insecurity crisis. And we're not yet fully considering that every tonne of wasted food means that that is wasted land and wasted energy and wasted fertiliser and labour, and that those costs all ultimately drive up the prices of our food. So what we stand to lose is that connection to the food that makes us the country that we are, the food that New Zealand is known for.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

Welcome to Don't Waste This. I'm Talya Shalev, International Partnerships Manager at WRAP. And I'm here today with Kaitlin Dawson, Executive Director of the Kai Commitment in New Zealand to talk about the food system crisis and what's at stake if we don't fix it. Kaitlin, thank you so much for joining us.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Kia ora, or hello, Talya. It is so great to be here.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

It's a pleasure to have you. Let's start a little by getting to know you a little bit better, if that's all right, can you introduce yourself and tell the audience a bit about your role at the Kai commitment?

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Absolutely. So I lead the Kai Commitment. So we are the food pact in New Zealand. I'm actually originally from Australia and I've lived here for four years and I've chosen this to be my home and have developed such a love of the land and the people and such a drive to help it build resilience into the future and so I'm able to put that into my work every single day and we work with some of New Zealand's largest businesses to help them reduce their food waste, but most importantly enable them to collaborate together across the supply chain and we coordinate action on food waste across that whole ecosystem. So, we've got incredible partners and stakeholders and we work alongside government and solution providers to ensure that everyone is aligned on reducing food waste for Aotearoa New Zealand.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

And it's hugely impactful work and we're going to talk a bit more about some of those projects and activities that you've got going on under the Kai Commitment. But I just wanted to start a little bit to I wanted to start just to get to know you a little bit better if that's all right. And one of the questions that we've been asking all of our guests on the podcast, is to tell us about a food that means something to you or is particularly relevant in your life. Are you able to share something that represents who you are in terms of a dish or a food in New Zealand?

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Yeah, I did think a little bit about this because New Zealand is a food nation, right? And so we have so many incredible foods and ingredients and you know I contemplated the Kiwi fruit, which hopefully many people know when they think of New Zealand and, pavlova, which is something we eat a lot at Christmas, but I've had to actually go with a classic roast lamb with a plate full of vegetables, and that may actually sound pretty English. But as you know, here in New Zealand we actually have more sheep than people. And so lamb is really integral to who we are, and so the plate that I'm picturing is filled with whatever veggies are in season roast potatoes for me. Or it could be mash kumara which is sweet potato, carrots, pumpkin, peas. Yeah, that's my dish of choice.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

It's a very strong dish of choice and I had actually had no idea that there were so many similarities between British and Kiwi cuisine, which is very reassuring to hear for whenever I finally make it over there. And just thinking about that statistic and also the dish, and the people that bring that dish to your plate when you do get a chance to eat it, there is an obvious crisis that exists globally, but also in New Zealand. And I think that might not be apparent for everyone when thinking about the food system in New Zealand, are you able to tell us a bit about that and what you see to be the crisis that you're facing in New Zealand.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Yeah, absolutely. So obviously here we're talking about food waste, but for me this is is, it's part of our food system and in New Zealand being a food producing nation, we're food abundant. You'll often hear people say we have enough food to feed 40 million people. However, most of our food is exported. You probably eat, eat some of it, particularly dairy. And what we're experiencing in New Zealand as are many people around the world is the rising food prices and also rising food insecurity. So it does mean that many families can no longer afford to access meals like the simple, humble Sunday roast, and then, on the contrary, we are seeing, you know, roughly 157,000 tonnes of edible food end in landfill just from the commercial sector and around \$3 billion end in landfill of food from the household level.

So we're throwing away so much of that incredible food and yet so many people are going hungry and we're kind of paying for it in, in the cost of our food as well, so that to me is the food system and food waste is just a byproduct of some of those decisions that we make along the way.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

That's an astounding amount of waste that you're seeing. Unfortunately, I didn't realise that the levels were so high and I'm glad that you called out that there are, there is food waste arising both in the home and also across the supply chain, and that it's decisions that we're each making, not just those individuals that work in the food system or the food supply chain, but also the decisions that we make at home as well that are causing such high levels of waste unfortunately.

Talking a little bit about now about the Kai Commitment and what it is that you're doing to solve some of those issues. Are you able to tell us a bit about, you know how long the Commitment's been around and what are some of the key programmes that you're running to try and resolve this crisis.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

So we as an organisation, as I've mentioned, working across the food system to make sure that food waste becomes a national priority in Aotearoa New Zealand, I would say as a country we are a few steps behind some of our friends in the global Food Pact Network. And so it's really our mission is to get food waste on the agenda of both industry and government and of different parts of the system. So we try and take a coordinating role to help enable those that are already acting to accelerate that action and to activate those that aren't yet realising that food waste reduction is a real priority. So the Kai Commitment programme, also known as the food pact, has some of New Zealand largest businesses who are committed to the target Measure Act collaborate framework, which is a really simple framework that businesses it can meet businesses where they are so they can join at any stage of their journey and see themselves, which is really important. But then also we bring international best practise and help build their capability to reduce food waste in a really meaningful and simple way, and we do that through whatever they need. So we've seen incredible examples of food waste reduction in our businesses through champions programmes is an is an example that

comes to mind. So some of our signatories have found those passionate people within their organisations, of which every business has, even if it's not in their job title or not in their job description, people all believe we shouldn't waste food, particularly people working in food businesses. They see the incredible energy and effort that goes into creating that food so they found their champions and they gave them the agency to make decisions and to bring opportunities to find food waste reduction. And then lo and behold, of course those businesses started realising cost savings from reducing that food waste and changing their processes. They started reducing the bins that they required which food was going in and the staff were really empowered and and it really creates real value within those organisations.

So I think for me working on the Kai Commitment programme, I'm really proud that New Zealand food businesses have never publicly talked about food waste before. It's a bit different to the UK and the Netherlands, where talking about food waste is really common and it's part of society. It's a social norm here in New Zealand, we don't publicly talk about food waste so much, particularly from businesses.

But I can recall one moment last year where we held an event with leaders from across the supply chain and leaders from government, and we had some of our Kai Commitment signatories on stage. And I remember one signatory in particular having his notes and reading them and then folding them away, putting them in his breast pocket and just speaking from the heart about micro interventions they've seen at their sites and with their staff where they have then seen an incredible impact that they've been able to scale and they really just acknowledge that this is action that they can take and empower their staff to take that will have a huge impact for our climate and for our people. So that's the proud moment for me with Kai Commitment is seeing that culture shift and seeing that behaviour change, which comes from real process change and actually has demonstrable impact in landfill and in emissions.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

That's incredible, and I'm curious to know. I mean, it's heartwarming to hear how much of a shift you've been able to create within business. Are you able to start tracking that impact in terms of progress, in terms of data that you're starting to capture from those businesses that are committed to the Kai Commitment?

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Kai Commitment, launched just under three years ago. And so we've got eight businesses, almost nine who are signatories to the Kai Commitment and then we have a growing partnership base. I think we're around 10 at the moment, of partner businesses, so those solution providers that work with businesses to help them reduce food waste. Essentially though, we are growing a movement. So we work with we're collaborative by nature. So we have lots of organisations that align with our mission and so we hear every single day, all of the micro interventions and the incredible impact that's being made. But with the businesses who are committed to the car commitment, they have been measuring their food waste from the beginning with our internationally aligned measurement



process actually that is really aligned with WRAP and many of the food pacts. And so we've really started to see we've actually just completed our third measurement. And I haven't yet seen the results, but in the first two years we saw a 3% reduction in landfill, as an example. So it is so heartening to see that even just from 2 years businesses that hadn't been measuring their food waste and acting on it in this way before were already showing progress in a really short amount of time. And we've also seen those behavioural changes like 43% of businesses now have food waste KPIs. So we know that food waste reduction must be embedded in governance and in KPIs. And so we're really working on both the tangible reduction and those behaviour interventions and 100% of our businesses now have food waste reduction in their staff training, and once again, when every single staff is empowered to find food waste reduction opportunities, then we know those will take place and we've seen an incredible increase in food donations and in commercial redistribution. So while we're really young, the stats are going like that and we know that as we grow, we will just see more and more impact and need less and less landfill.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

Yeah, it's wonderful to hear. And and as you said that exponential growth will definitely increase year on year, especially as hopefully more businesses come on board and start to realise the impact they can also achieve if they get the support that you're providing to others.

I'm curious to know if for those businesses that are listening to this podcast and are interested or curious about the food waste activities that they can get involved in or or the support that might be available to them in New Zealand. Do you have any asks or key recommendations for where to start? If they are interested in starting to look at this?

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Yeah, absolutely. And it's actually the same for individuals as it is for businesses. I encourage people and businesses to understand their waste. And so for businesses, we've created some really incredible best practise actions. So 12 actions that businesses can take and I believe even if businesses are taking about five of the actions, they will be well on their way to be a food waste free business. And the very first one is to measure your food waste.

So we've got a tool called our rapid review tool and that helps businesses to start to measure in a really simple way. And it will start to show the insights and the hotspots as to where they should focus their energy, because as a business, as a food business, whether you're growing and processing beef and exporting it to countries like the UK or whether you're growing Kiwi fruit and exporting it. Or whether you're growing onions and and selling them locally in New Zealand, or whether you're a bread manufacturer. Either way, you have a lot that you're focusing on, and food waste is not your number one priority, so it has to be simple and it has to be really accessible. And so measuring and starting to understand, where's your low hanging fruit, and where can you get started? That is number one.

And if we liken it to humans in the home, I personally keep my food scraps on my bench so I know when I'm wasting food that shouldn't be wasted. And not just throwing away by my banana peels and my skins and and the surplus that I couldn't have eaten. And that is the best tell for me when I need to change my behaviour. So I think measuring and understanding, and then it's about engaging your staff. I've already mentioned it, but everyone on the ground has these ideas, and if they are empowered to bring those to the table, then you will see not only an amazing value that you've given an amazing gift you've given to your staff, but also gifts back to the business because they will identify opportunities to reduce food waste to save money and to reduce those emissions that we all know we need to reduce as a food system.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

In terms of you, Kaitlin, as an individual, you're clearly very passionate and very aware of what it means to reduce food waste not only as an individual in your own home but also across the supply chain. How did you get to where you are today? What was the journey that led you to being the leader of the Kai Commitment?

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Oh, big question, Talya, I think Curiosity is probably the short answer, but I'm going to give you the long answer. I have a real connection to nature, so my drive for working in food waste reduction and anything that I believe betters our planet is really because I want to leave our wild places where I go, camping and hiking as pristine as I was able to experience with them for my children, for our future generations.

And secondly, my granddad was a farmer and so I grew up with a real love of the land and connection to the land. And I really believe that every ingredient tells a story of the people and the place and the planet, the fenoa, the land from where it came. So that is really my driver. Wasting food just doesn't make sense. I've also worked in business a long time and believe that business is a lever for change and that is why I lead the Kai Commitment is because I can see the real opportunity that we have by leveraging the the influence that businesses can have on food waste reduction. And so my career journey, if you will, has been led by the curiosity of those elements as to how can I best have impact through my work and and how can I best, I guess, enable and help others to see that they can have that impact every single day in in their organisation.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

And that curiosity and that passion is very infectious, I have to say I was spending time with you earlier this year and it's really it does. It reminds me why I work in this space when I meet other individuals that feel that passion so deeply and that it's not just a job, it's very much how we want to live and breathe and also, what we want to leave behind after we're not here anymore, which is incredibly important to me as a millennial, of course. And obviously we are also engaging with other very passionate and very knowledgeable individuals across the Food Pact Network. I'm curious in

your experience, how is being part of the Food Pact Network helped you in terms of what you're doing in New Zealand.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Yeah, being a part of the Food Pact Network is incredibly valuable for us in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are a small but mighty country at the bottom of the world, and so for us it really connects us to the global movement of organisations that are working towards the same goal of having food waste by 2030 and importantly of valuing our food and our food system. For me I have connected with like you so many incredible individuals internationally. I feel like my friendship circle has expanded but more importantly, I've been able to meet people that I can call on at any moment, albeit maybe early in the morning or late at night with those kind of curly questions that we're all facing. You know, we this is a global challenge. We're not unique in our challenges. While New Zealand has some uniqueness within those, but it is just so valuable to have people to, to share and to learn off and to adapt tools from. Everyone is just so generous with their learnings. As you said, we're all here because we care. Most of us are nonprofit and are.

Investing in the future of our society and of our planet, and so we all share what we learn and what we create so we can accelerate and not need to reinvent the wheel. And then I think secondly, it really gives New Zealand businesses the confidence that they are a part of something bigger and the actions that they're taking locally contribute to global change because we're part of a global food system.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

So you mentioned before that lamb is a significant dish for you and that there is unfortunately a crisis in terms of access to food. In the UK, lamb is seen as quite an expensive or specialty item that we can't eat regularly. And maybe we shouldn't. Different people have different opinions on that. I'm curious to know, in your opinion, the urgency is clear in terms of what we need to achieve. But if we don't start to take action, if businesses don't come on board and they don't feel it is their responsibility to start to think about their impact from the food system, thinking about measuring their waste, trying to create some more equity in the food system in New Zealand, what do you feel is going to be lost in terms of the cultural representation that you have of those dishes in New Zealand?

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

I think connection is a really important part of food and kai in New Zealand, and of people, and of connecting together, and connecting with our food and connecting with the whenua, the land. And for me I see connection already beginning to be lost because of the inequities with how expensive food is becoming and with the food insecurity crisis deepening in New Zealand. So one in four families are struggling to put food on the table and as an island nation, climate change is already being experienced. With our extreme one in 100, but more often than that, weather events and sea levels rising. We know in New Zealand food waste contributes around 10% of our biogenic methane

emissions, which we all know methane is at least 25 times worse than carbon pollution. So it's contributing to our changing climate.

We can't afford not to activate every single climate and social lever that is available to us. And but what I see is that food waste is not yet considered one of those really available accessible levers for business and for government, it's not yet in policy like it should be, and like it could be to help our climate crisis and our food and security crisis. And we're not yet fully considering that every tonne of wasted food means that that is wasted land and wasted energy and wasted fertiliser and labour, and that those costs all ultimately drive up the prices of our food. So what we stand to lose is that connection to the food that makes us the country that we are, the food that New Zealand is known for. More will be exported and more will be imported, and we're starting to see growers kind of start to shut down because more food is imported because it's cheaper to do so as opposed to accessing that local food.

So that kind of divide really will mean a loss of connection, and that means so much culturally, particularly in New Zealand. We have a really strong, beautiful indigenous culture, Māori, and that connection to the whenua and the land and the Kai is really important. And so I think that's the that's the biggest thing that we'll lose and and it's really hard to quantify to put a value on that. And so we don't speak in that language so much. We speak in, you'll save money if you reduce food waste, we'll reduce emissions, we'll be able to feed more people, but really, it's about valuing our food and ensuring we keep that connection to our food 'cause that's who we are as New Zealanders.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

I'm curious to know, in terms and whether you know this was top of your head or not. So forgive me if I'm putting you on the spot, but whether you know how many people in New Zealand are directly connected to the food system in terms of people they know that are working in it or they are very much part of it?

Just thinking about how much the land is available and is used and is so fertile in New Zealand compared to other countries where that we have within the Food Pact Network.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

I often say if I'm speaking to a crowd, I have no doubt that every single person in the crowd has either worked for or knows someone that has worked for one of our large food businesses, whether it be from the farm and production all the way to retail because we are a food nation and ultimately it's the backbone of our nation and of our economy. So it's very important for the survival of our economy as well as connection to the land. But I'll tie it back to, I guess, kind of the size and the shape of New Zealand. So we have two islands, the North Island and the South Island. Very original names. And the amount of land we use to grow wasted food is it can be likened to the top half of the North Island, so if you're picturing the long, skinny country of New Zealand, the top half of the North Island is essentially used to grow wasted food and so that land and that soil and the labour and the animal feed and everything that's invested into that is essentially what we're using to grow food that

never makes it to the plate. And that affects every single New Zealander and many people in the world because we are an export nation, we export 95% of our food, so it touches everyone.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

That's an incredible visual to have in my mind, and you could see my my eyes glaze over as I was actually visualising the map of New Zealand and thinking about that the scale of what you're describing, which is enormous, that is enormous.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

I've got it in a presentation because it, you know, you can't grasp the volumes when you talk about 157,000 tonnes or \$3 billion. What does that mean? And and when you hear when you're a Kiwi, when you're a New Zealander, you know what that land is and everyone has a really strong connection to their land in New Zealand when we introduce ourselves, we introduce the mountain that is our represents our home and the river or the hour or the moana, the ocean. And so we're really connected to land in New Zealand and that comes from the beautiful Māori, the indigenous people here. And so speaking to that land and what we're losing when we waste food, I think has a better connection than, say, a pile of food that we're trying to visualise.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

No, absolutely. And as a city girl myself, or born and raised a city girl, I'm. I want to be and wish to be a much a person that's much more connected to the land. One day I hope that I'll be able to grow my own food if I don't live in such a cold and wet country. Maybe I'll come over to your side of the planet and just live my dreams.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Come visit. We've got plenty of land.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

Thank you. So, before we wrap up, I was wondering if in just 10 seconds if you could give us what you think is the most urgent message that you want to give the people to help them to understand why we have to fix the global food system crisis.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Really, our food system connects us. It feeds us, but it also heals us. It enables us to thrive. But right now it is fragile. Here in New Zealand and globally. If we fix it, if we see it as an opportunity, it we can restore the planet. It can reduce our emissions. It can bring people together and unlock the solutions to so many of the challenges we have. I believe that if we fix food waste in New Zealand or

in the world tomorrow, so many of our other systemic challenges that we're seeing play out would be fixed along with it.

Talya Shalev, WRAP

Thank you, Kaitlin. We started this episode talking about the roast, the Sunday Roast, which is also a huge favourite of mine and it obviously carries so much meaning for you and for the people in New Zealand and their connection to the land and the supply chain that they are very much reliant on, but also very connected to and obviously, hearing your story and the work that you're doing with the Kai Commitment really helps to represent everything that's happening within New Zealand and all the opportunity there is for others to get involved with that so that we can protect it for generations to come.

All I have to say is thank you so much for sharing your story with us for coming on and it's very early in the morning for you compared to where we are in the UK at the moment. So thank you. And yeah, all the best in terms of bringing more businesses on board to try and shift the crisis a bit more in our favour.

Kaitlin Dawson, Kai Commitment

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. And I mean I think it's a no brainer. Everyone believes we shouldn't waste food, so we should all be a part of the movement.