

Let's tell the world how we farm

Plant protein that mimics meat and dairy could be a threat or an opportunity for New Zealand livestock farmers. In this, the final part of a series looking at the looming competition from plant protein, reporter **Neal Wallace** concludes the opportunity comes with some challenges.



GET IN QUICK: New Zealand must tell its free-range, grass-fed story before vegan plant protein advocates pigeonhole its products and taint them with anti factory-farming rhetoric, NZ Story advisory board member Steve Smith says.

THE looming threat of plant protein mimicking meat and milk has renewed debate on the merits of a brand promoting food from New Zealand grass-fed, free-range livestock.

That is the view of two marketing experts who say NZ livestock producers risked being linked by association with the anti-factory farm rhetoric that motivated several key plant protein developers.

The founders of two United States plant protein companies, Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, did not hide the fact they were vegans and had a total disdain for factory farming.

They also had an altruistic desire to feed nine billion people by 2050 and believed that can be done only by eating their animal-free, low-environmental-impact products.

Regardless of the motivation of those market disruptors, two of NZ's largest export earners risked being tainted by the anti-factory farm animal rhetoric.

NZ Story advisory board member Steve Smith said that was a real risk and highlighted the need for NZ producers to tell consumers our story.

"No one else will tell our story for us. We need to get our act together and tell it or people will

pigeonhole us," he said.

Plant protein manufacturers had a compelling story but so did NZ animal protein producers.

"I believe there will still be people wanting to eat real meat made from a cow that had a fantastic life and produced a piece of meat that was absolutely delicious."

Smith believed there was a place for a NZ brand promoting the attributes of naturally farmed, grass-fed, free-range animals but the whole sector needed to buy in to the philosophies, values and systems that would underpin such a brand.

"We have not really told the world how we farm."

And many New Zealanders did not understand our pastoral farming system so we needed to break down the urban-rural barriers and realise we were one community.

"We need to engage in a conversation and agree that what we produce is really good and that 'we want you to come with us and craft a future together, that we are all in this together.'"

The recent Fontterra television advertisements helped tell urban NZ what dairy farmers did and that they did it well.

Auckland University senior

marketing lecturer Dr Mike Lee said plant-based protein producers needed to educate consumers it was not some highly refined, processed product but being animal-free and having a low environmental footprint would draw some consumers.

In vitro meat and milk, in which stem cells were extracted from animals then cultured in a laboratory, faced a greater challenge convincing consumers they were safe.

Lee said history showed technology initially considered questionable could become mainstream.

To counter the challenge animal protein producers needed to ensure production systems and the supply chain met required standards and could withstand scrutiny.

"Having an entirely transparent supply chain is becoming more and more critical, especially if competing plant protein and in vitro meat promote their supply-chain."

He, too, supported the creation of a NZ brand to promote free-

range, grass-fed animal protein.

There would always be consumers wanting to eat meat but they also wanted to know where it came from, how it was raised, that it had a good life and was slaughtered humanely.

“If they are going to eat real meat they know something has to die but they also want to know it has had a good life and when it came to slaughter that it was done quickly and humanely.”

Dr Mike Lee

Auckland University

"It will never be a rosy picture compared to plant protein but people are pragmatic.

"If they are going to eat real meat they know something has

to die but they also want to know it has had a good life and when it came to slaughter that it was done quickly and humanely."

Lee said the sector needed to be proactive to protect its market position because competitors certainly would.

"They need to be more proactive because these guys will be very proactive.

"They know there is a market for plant protein food and it will not take long, a couple of celebrity endorsements and a few studies."

Chef Simon Gault said restaurant diners increasingly favoured fish over meat but those choosing meat wanted to know the story behind it, something NZ producers needed to do better.

Australia's Flinders Island and Nieman Ranch in the United States included a story about where their meat came from, how the animal was treated and what it ate because consumers wanted to know.

"I say to suppliers tell us a story, give us a birth certificate with that meat."