

## The odds are stacked against versatile soil: can we change them?

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Between the National Policy Statement (NPS) for Urban Development Capacity and the Productivity Commission's 'Land for Housing' and 'Better Urban Planning' reports, the odds appear stacked against protecting New Zealand's versatile land from urban development. This challenge dates back to the 1960's with the historical location of cities often reflecting proximity to versatile food production land; so as urban centres grow, it is precisely the high-value productive land on which food supply rests. It is estimated the majority of versatile land could be depleted within 50-100 years if these trends continue.

In deciding where to develop and which land should be preserved for food production, it is critical that explicit trade-offs are identified. Decision-makers confront real difficulties evaluating the impacts of development and the evidence to support development can appear incontrovertible with the public's awareness of housing unaffordability. Evidence on the long-term costs and impacts to a food system for society and future generations is far less well-known.

Do we need to go beyond influencing decision-making and influence policy-making at the highest level? The notion of a NPS on managing versatile land was signalled in 1996 by the then President of the NZ Soil Science Society. Over 20-years has passed and the resource continues to disappear. Will the same discussion be a possibility in 20-years' time? Will we have past the tipping point whereby solutions are still available? Or is there agreement that action is required now to commit to protecting a valuable national asset? Can we match progress in the freshwater domain; a resource no longer solely viewed as an environmental concern but of national socio-economic importance?

National research and monitoring advancements relating to these land use matters will be presented whilst revisiting the case for an NPS to manage versatile land and what that might mean.

Advances are being made, for-example, the development of national indicators to monitor the encroachment of urban development and rural fragmentation of versatile land. This will track the cumulative effect of these land-use pressures. The challenge is to progress these land-use issues onto the political agenda which will take time, resources and motivation. Can we match progress in the freshwater domain; a resource no longer solely viewed as an environmental concern but of national socio-economic importance?

The notion of a National Policy Statement on managing versatile land was flagged in 1996 by the then President of the NZ Soil Science Society. Over 20-years has passed, and the resource continues to disappear. Will we be having the same discussion in another 20-years' time, or is there agreement that action is required to commit to protecting a valuable natural asset?