

# COOK ISLANDS FOOD INNOVATION CENTRE

The proposed Cook Islands Food Innovation Centre is an initiative being led by the Cook Islands Ministry of Agriculture. It is intended to strengthen the country's food system, create jobs, and empower small and medium-sized food businesses. Its purpose is simple but potentially transformative — to help Cook Islanders turn local fresh crops into high-value products, reduce waste, and open new market and income earning opportunities for farmers, women and youth at home and abroad.

The vision is that the Food Innovation Centre can offer shared access to modern food processing equipment, expert technical advice and business support services for farmers, processors, women association groups, students, and entrepreneurs — bridging the gap between small home-based producers and commercial-scale manufacturing.

In 2022, PHAMA Plus supported a preliminary scoping exercise for a centre for food innovation. The scoping found the concept to have merit, but a more comprehensive business case was needed to inform viable operating models and long-term sustainability.

In 2025, PHAMA Plus engaged a consultant to work with the Ministry of Agriculture to develop the business case for a Food Innovation Centre. Consultations were carried out and a range of options considered for different operating models. Analysis of pros and cons resulted in a recommended pilot approach, scaling up over a 3-to-5 year period. This approach strikes a balance between affordability and functionality and offers a pathway to sustainable operations.

The proposed Food Innovation Centre would be more than simply an infrastructure project — it offers an investment in people, innovation and resilience. By supporting entrepreneurs and smallholders to create competitive, healthy and sustainable food products, the proposed Food Innovation Centre can help diversify the Cook Islands economy, create local jobs and training opportunities, and showcase Cook Islands' innovation and identity through food.

The Cook Islands Ministry of Agriculture will explore opportunities to take this initiative forward from 2026.

## WHY THE FOOD INNOVATION CENTRE MATTERS:



It can add value and reduce waste — enabling practical processing of local and fresh crops such as taro, breadfruit, papaya, banana, cassava, and pineapple into shelf-stable, market-ready products.



It can contribute to food security — by reducing import dependency and increasing the supply of healthy, locally-made foods.



It can build local skills and opportunities for women and youth — through training in food safety, processing, and entrepreneurship in partnership with Cook Islands Tertiary Training Institute and education institutions.



It can encourage inclusive economic growth — empowering women, youth, and small producers to start viable agrifood businesses.



It can strengthen resilience — turning under-used crops into new income streams and reducing vulnerability to global supply disruptions.



## THE PROPOSED MODEL FOR THE FOOD INNOVATION CENTRE

The business case advice recommended that the Food Innovation Centre start as a pilot facility housed at the Cook Islands Tertiary Training Institute (CITTI). Initial establishment costs would require upgrading the existing kitchen into a food-safe processing and training environment with equipment for juicing, drying, bottling and packaging of produce.

It is recommended that the Food Innovation Centre operates as a service centre, not a trading business, and that revenue could be generated through training, facility rentals and small-scale processing support through a fee for service model. Business case modelling suggests that successful small processors could earn up to NZD600 per production day, representing a major income boost for local entrepreneurs.

The business case proposes a phased approach to establishing and scaling up the centre:

### Phase 1: Pilot Establishment

- Facility upgrade and equipment installation;
- Launch of processing services for micro, small and medium sized enterprises;
- Providing or linking to business incubation services to build commercially viable products;
- Delivery of training programs in food safety, processing techniques and entrepreneurship.

### Phase 2: Small Commercial Facility

- Expansion to offer tenancy opportunities for small businesses seeking to lease space more permanently;
- Addition of product development and testing services;
- Strengthened linkages to tourism and export markets.

## GOVERNANCE AND PARTNERSHIPS

It is recommended that the Food Innovation Centre operates under a governance structure that combines government leadership with private sector participation. A Steering Committee, led by

the Ministry of Agriculture, is proposed to oversee planning, performance and partnerships, ensuring transparency and inclusivity. It is recommended that Memoranda of Understanding be established between key government partners including the Ministries responsible for Agriculture, Education, Health and Business Development outlining the collaborative efforts required for this initiative to work.

Key collaboration areas include:

- Ministry of Education (CITTI) – for joint use of facilities and training.
- Ministry of Health (Te Marae Ora) – for oversight of food safety, nutrition and standards.
- Business Trade and Investment Board (BTIB) – for support to MSMEs, trade facilitation, branding and investment.
- Tourism and National Environment Service (NES) – for connecting agribusinesses with the hospitality industry and sustainability initiatives.

## FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Analysis suggests that a financially sustainable pathway for growth of the Food Innovation Centre is possible. However, the early start-up phase would be reliant on a blend of revenue generation, donor support and strategic partnerships to remain financially viable.

The initial capital cost is estimated at NZD153,000 to upgrade and equip the existing CITTI kitchen into a food-safe processing and training environment equipped for juicing, drying, bottling and packaging. The annual operating costs are projected to be a minimum of NZD115,000 in the initial phase, assuming that collaborating Ministries and CITTI will provide support through time and other services on an in-kind basis.

With revenue projections growing over time (from training, workshops and a fee for service model), it is predicted that the Food Innovation Centre could reach break-even cashflow within three years. This will require energy and initiative from the centre's management to drive uptake of service offerings.

Expansion into Phase 2, a small commercial facility, would require an estimated additional investment of NZD350,000.