

WHAT ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES ARE FACING NORTH ISLAND PASTORAL FARMERS?

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The environmental management challenges facing pastoral farmers in the North Island are numerous and often complex. While diffuse nutrient loss to water is an issue many are familiar with, environmental challenges are not limited to N & P losses. Sediment loss, bacterial contamination, discharge to air of fertiliser and agrichemicals, contamination of soil by heavy metals and agrichemicals, effluent disposal, water use and the spectre of carbon losses are all having to be considered by many of our pastoral farmers. Animal welfare and managing inaccurate public perceptions might also be considered environmental challenges to modern farmer in a wider sense.

These issues, associated regulation and tighter supply requirements don't solely impact farm management and the physical farm system. They can also impact asset values and increase administrative pressure. This can be exacerbated by difficulty in accessing the necessary knowledge and support from competent rural professionals. Variation in the methods by which environmental externalities in different catchments or sectors need to be managed also provide a strong basis for confusion and frustration amongst farmers and service providers alike.

Unsurprisingly, the attitudes of farmers to address these new challenges and their capacity to adopt new practice varies considerably. This seems to be particularly so where adoption of best practice alone is insufficient to meet community expectations, the required rate or extent of change is significant and/or where [new] science or public perception is challenging long held beliefs or conventions. Variable leadership amongst sectors and industry has also, in my view, contributed to the extent of farmer action or inaction. The "move along - nothing to see here" mantra or "greenwash" of existing practice can send the wrong signal to both farmers and the community alike. Consequently, many of the positive actions and voluntary change by farmers have been ignored by or lost on the wider community, as has the magnitude of change and financial burden that will face numerous farming businesses.

The key to accelerating farmer engagement and practice adoption is lifting farmer knowledge, farmers acknowledging ownership of the issues, improved empathy by agencies and collaborative and positive engagement with their communities.

Editor's Note: An extended manuscript has not been submitted for this presentation.