

PROCESS NOT PRESCRIPTION: CATERING TO THE HETEROGENEITY OF THE NEW ZEALAND FARMING LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

New Zealand sheep and beef farms are dynamic and heterogeneous. They are socio-agro-ecosystems with people and natural resources at their core. “One size fits all”, prescriptive farm plan template struggle to cater for this individuality and are often seen as little more than a regulatory tool. This is a lost opportunity.

At B+LNZ we are redesigning our approach to farm planning building on our successful LEP templates. Farmers have told us that with that there is:

- confusion with the amount of different templates in the market
- lots going on in the environmental and regulatory areas; and that it’s hard to keep track
- frustration that they don’t get the recognition for the good work they are already doing
- that they want ongoing support with their farm plans and that they want to integrate farm planning with catchment community groups.
- That they want farm plans to be useful planning tools for their businesses

In response we are taking two key initiatives:

1. Developing an Environmental Management System for farmers. EMS are a great business tool for farmers to manage their environment – not just their regulatory requirements a. EMSs help farmers navigate in this congested space, support continuous improvement, enable farmers to document their journey and provide the opportunity their work verified/checked.
2. Developing a Catchment Community Programme. This will connect farm environment plans to Catchment and Community planning. This programme will form part of the wrap around support for EMS implementation reducing the incidence of relapse or inertia, and supporting continuous action as a behavioural metric for continuous improvement.

Both these programmes are designed around establishing a process, not prescribing a standard of performance. It doesn't matter the starting point, what is important is that we start, document our journey of continuous improvement, and have the opportunity to have that journey independently verified. This will provide our consumers, society and government the assurance they require.

Background

The New Zealand red meat industry has evolved through many cycles of challenge and recovery without sustainably realising its potential. The vital signs of the industry today however present a more hopeful outlook. Some key indicators, such as the farm gate price, improved export returns, and increased alignment between consumer preferences and our red meat offering suggest the industry is in a better place than it was.

In parallel, the rapidly evolving consumer landscape challenges all food industries around the world and many struggle to keep pace with the change. New Zealand's red meat industry is no exception.

Future success will rely on the ability of our farmers, food processors and partners to clearly identify the unique needs of distinct consumer groups, and to align their products, services, brand strategies and value chains with these niches. It also requires the ability to maintain the alignment over time through innovation as the consumer's needs change over time.

Our research reveals an untapped demand for naturally raised, grass-fed, hormone-free and antibiotic-free red meat with consumers prepared to pay a premium for such products. Consumers are choosing to make what they feel is an ideological decision to eat protein. In part, this can be linked to the backlash against broken food systems e.g. factory farming and "big" food. There is a desire for better food at all levels which supports a strong future for "real" red meat.

New Zealand farming naturally fits in this category, and we have an opportunity to take advantage of this.

At the same time, New Zealand agriculture is increasingly coming under the spotlight. Key drivers for this include:

- changing consumer requirements;
- changing public perceptions;
- declining water quality; and
- increasing government regulation.

Multiple organisations, central government, and regional governments are developing different methods for addressing these drivers, with the combined efforts creating noise and confusion for all involved, especially farmers.

B+LNZ Response

B+LNZ is investing into four critical components to link the market opportunity for natural and sustainable red meat back to a natural and sustainable farming system, these are:

1. Taste Pure Nature - the red meat origin brand
2. Understand new or current pathways to consumers within critical global markets that will drive higher returns to New Zealand
3. A tiered approach to on-farm assurance e.g. the Red Meat Profit Partnership (RMPP) initiated New Zealand Farm Assurance Programme and the Sustainable and Ethical New Zealand Farm Assurance Programme (SENZFAP); and
4. Refreshing the B+LNZ Land and Environment Programme.
5. Developing a Catchment Community Programme

Unlocking market potential

There are many ways which the New Zealand red meat sector can create more value from less livestock. The role of B+LNZ market development is to explore opportunities where the sector can work together as opposed to where it is beneficial for an individual company to invest. Within this role, B+LNZ has identified three priority opportunities:

1. Work across the sector to create a tiered approach to on farm assurance
2. Work across the sector to create a tiered approach to brand development, including the development of a strong country of origin brand, raising the awareness and preference for New Zealand red meat products.
3. Understand the value chain in target markets, and identify opportunities where New Zealand red meat companies can work collectively to capture more value.

Taste Pure Nature (The Brand) is a New Zealand origin brand which has been designed to raise the awareness and create a customer and consumer preference for New Zealand beef and lamb. It has been developed in consultation across the industry and after considerable in-market research and consumer focus groups. The role of Taste Pure Nature is:

- To provide a marketing umbrella for New Zealand meat exporter brand building activities.
- To provide integrity to product sold under the brand.
- To form part of a long-term strategy to grow value for New Zealand beef and lamb supply chains by differentiating the product from competitors.

The pillars which Taste Pure Nature is built on are common across all farms in New Zealand, and include New Zealand's unique natural environment and New Zealand's unique, and light touch, approach to farming which combine to create a unique, pure natural taste experience.

The sector has recognised that we must underpin and provide credibility to Taste Pure Nature. To do this the sector has created a tiered approach to on-farm assurance. Consumers are seeking proof to the claims while farmers want to demonstrate that their farm practices are sustainable.

The Taste Pure Nature trade mark and associated brand is owned by B+LNZ and will be licensed for use.

The New Zealand Farm Assurance Programme

The RMPP's *NZ Farm Assurance Programme* (NZFAP) is the foundation upon which the collective red meat industry can deliver an authentic and independently verified best-practice animal raising and production assurance standard to our International consumers.

There are currently 15 meat processor members of NZFAP, including – ANZCO, Silver Fern Farms, Greenlea, Duncan Processors, Mountain River Venison, First Light, Fresh Meats, Wilson Hellaby, BX Foods, Te Kuiti Meats, Progressive, Ovation, Taylor Preston, AFFCO, and Blue Sky Meats.

It should be noted that the eligibility criteria for Taste Pure Nature will change over time to reflect changing consumer drivers. These changes will be made by B+LNZ, but with input from across the red meat sector.

Enabling Farmer Participation

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Farm Environment Planning

Qualitative and quantitative reviews of the existing B+LNZ farm planning programme were conducted, and from this B+LNZ identified a number of ways to help sheep and beef farmers 'get ahead of the curve'. In particular, B+LNZ identified that regional councils and others were designing a vision of success for sheep and beef farmers, and any work to refresh the B+LNZ farm planning programme must be farmer-led. Developing an environmental management system is an innovative and potentially game changing way to do this.

The review process identified that it is not the type of farm plan or the provider that is important. The importance lies in having the right process to develop a farm plan in place. With the right process behavior will change, but prescription or input standards dictating how farmers must manage their property to achieve desired outcomes will constrain outcomes leading to lost opportunities.

B+LNZ is developing an Environment Management System that ensures no matter who the provider is or what form the farm plan takes, farmers follow a process of:

- identifying their own vision or policy statement;
- identifying their current and potential environmental impacts, assets and opportunities (in conjunction with the Catchment Plan);
- developing a plan for action;
- identifying how progress will be audited (self and external) and monitored (at a sub-catchment scale in conjunction with the Catchment Community, rather than at a farm scale); and
- providing for continual review.

This cycle will ensure that plans are current and fit for purpose. The strong connection and integration with the catchment community programme ensures that farm based actions are strongly connected to wider catchment or regional priorities and outcomes; and that a farm planning approach provides for peer-to-peer interaction and accountability.

ISO 14001 is an example of a process standard for an environmental management system. It is used all over the world and widely understood. We are proposing a similar process for on-farm environmental management within the red meat sector.



By having a standardised process, all farmers will be able to join the movement of continuous improvement, no matter their starting point. Farm plans may look very different from farm to farm, which accommodates the diversity of the sheep and beef sector and ensures a fit-for-purpose product. Prescriptive farm plans remove the farmer’s personal investment in the “why” – the vision or policy statement.

The private sector will be able to continue to use their own environment planning processes and templates, and simply assure farmers that they conform to the B+ LNZ standard, rather than feeling they have a competing product in a busy market. It provides a clear market choice for farmers to work with their own trusted providers, while ensuring quality assurance that a robust process will be followed that focusses on farmer behaviours and actions, not the form of how that is expressed.

Continued sector coordination, engagement and profitability for commercial farm plan providers will be an important component in resourcing our goal of all farmers being actively involved in environmental planning by 2021. It is critical that the growing capability and capacity being developed by the private sector to respond to farmer need is not disrupted by attempts to standardise the form of a farm plan, while the resulting actions of farmers meet the objectives of every farmer identifying and managing their risks, optimising flexible land use and recording their actions and progress.

Coordinated Action

The Catchment Programme is designed to support sheep and beef farmers to actively participate in existing and new catchment/landscape management. It is designed to complement as opposed to duplicate existing delivery and supports consistency across the nation.

Currently catchment groups are generally self-initiated, forming around a central theme or issue - a 'trigger for action'. They may or may not align with freshwater management units and are often concerned with wider interests than just fresh water.

Farmers have worked together at catchment scale for a long time. However, water quality decline and the threat of greater regulation has spurred a resurgence in catchment groups. There is significant opportunity for improved environmental and social outcomes by working at catchment and landscape scale.

Catchment Communities now tend to be self-initiated, self-defined, autonomous groups that form around a central theme or issue - a 'trigger for action'. This may or may not fit the confines of a single catchment or a fresh water management unit outlined in the NPS for Freshwater. Catchment communities can be connected socially, culturally, economically and environmentally. They have shared interests, accountabilities and enjoy shared benefits from sustaining the catchment values that support their ability to live productive and healthy lives. They also share responsibility for the cumulative effects of their activities on land and water and the impacts of these on down-stream communities.

The programme is progressing in two stages:

Stage 1 Develop resources to meet the immediate need to support existing and emerging catchment groups. It supports their work to increase collective efficiency and effectiveness to drive collective impact.

Stage 2 Implement a programme to support the formation of catchment groups to meet wider goals and a vehicle to record sector progress.

Stage 2 includes the development of a series of delivery ready facilitated workshops where groups can identify why they are coming together, what their vision for the future is, what actions they are going to take and how they are going to tell their stories. This will result in a catchment (action) plan based on a process that supports continuous improvement rather than a prescribed content. Existing groups may access only part of the process to enhance their collective impact.

Actions from these plans sit at both the farm and catchment level. Actions at the farm level will be supported through prioritised actions in farm plans. This approach supports peer review and accountability. Catchment actions will be a collective of farm based actions or may involve collective and coordinated investment such as constructed wetlands, managing drainage networks to reduce contaminant loss, landscape scale species restoration or predator control. This catchment programme will dovetail and support the adoption of active farm plans, and the B+LNZ Environment Management System (EMS)

The programme will provide:

- Catchment Groups where participants are connected with each other, knowledge owners and knowledge, with B+LNZ as a broker of knowledge and innovation, as an integration hub.
- Aligned extension resources and programmes to support coordinated catchment action, including catchment planning development workshops designed to be delivered by B+LNZ approved providers.
- Integration of farm planning delivery and catchment/landscape planning, based around continuous growth and improvement
- Strategic partnership with providers to support existing and new initiatives and to enhance catchment coordinator delivery and funding.
- Tell the sheep and beef story and build farmer pride

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Farms, catchment and landscapes are heterogeneous and dynamic socio-ecosystems. A prescriptive approach to developing catchment and farm plans can therefore become unnecessarily complicated and not well received by communities that are all at different stages of working together and each with a unique set of problems and opportunities. The proposed Catchment Programme focusses on a process that supports continuous improvement.

This Catchment Programme uses Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a planning and evaluation tool that focuses on strengths and assets rather than problems and deficits. We work through a modified series of iterative steps that follow the Catchment Action Cycle (Table 1). This process supports continuous improvement by focussing on learning by doing and can be applied at all scales, farm, catchment and landscape. Communities may be supported at different stages of the cycle with different products, services or actions.

Table 1: Catchment Action Cycle

1	Why are we coming together?
2	What's all the great stuff we have go going on?
3	What's our vision for the future -where are we going?
4	What actions are we going to take?
5	How are we going to tell our story



Summary and Conclusion

New Zealand sheep and beef farms are dynamic and heterogeneous. They are socio-agro-ecosystems with people and natural resources at their core. “One size fits all”, prescriptive farm plan template struggle to cater for this individuality, so B+LNZ is leveraging the Taste Pure Nature campaign, alongside other drivers, to help farmers to follow a process of continuous improvement. This is both at the individual farm level with an Environmental Management System for farm environment planning, and at the catchment level with the Catchment Communities Programme.