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The current conversation

Water is back in the headlines, and so is the debate.

Whether it is freshwater farm plans, a water tax, or Greenpeace targeting a much-loved town icon in the name of activism (or, let's be honest, vandalism dressed up as activism), the conversation keeps circling back to the same place.

In this case, the defacing of the salmon monument in Rakaia was not just about a structure. It hit a nerve, not just because of what it is, but because of what it represents.

A conversation being had at farmers, rather than with them.

And that matters.

Because here is the reality. When it comes to environmental regulation, most farmers will comply. Not blindly, and not without question, but because it makes sense.

Most are already making practical changes on farm to lift environmental outcomes, off their own bat.

Farming is practical by nature. You are constantly making decisions based on what is in front of you, weather, markets, feed, stock, and adjusting as you go. If something works, you adopt it. If it does not, you question it.

That is not resistance. That is the job.

It lines up well with Gretchen Rubin's Four Tendencies framework, where "Questioners" meet expectations, but only if they believe they are justified.

Farmers are not anti-regulation. Most understand the need to look after water, manage nutrients, and leave things in better shape than they found them. Their livelihoods depend on it.

They understand the why. Protecting the environment is not the question. The question is whether the how makes sense on farm.

They want to see the evidence, and to know that what they are being asked to do will make a difference, not just tick a red-tape wrapped box.

I talk to farmers on the ground pretty much all day, every day, and I have yet to meet one who is not trying to do better environmentally on their farm.

We are heading into Ballance Farm Environment Awards season, and by the time you read this, some of the regional winners will already be out.

They are my favourite of all the industry awards, because they are real. Not policy or theory, and not something written in an office somewhere. This is what is happening on farms, every day.

Fencing waterways, planting, monitoring, trying new things, sharing what works and what does not, and adjusting as they go.

There is no silver bullet. This work takes time, often generations. But progress is being made on the ground, and that matters, because it shows the starting point is not zero.

And that is where tone matters.

Because when the work already being done is not recognised, it can feel like farmers are being talked at or judged without context. And when that happens, people switch off. It is human nature.

But when something makes sense, fits how farming actually works, and farmers feel part of the process rather than the target of it, with regulation that is efficient, effective, and not duplicated, you get buy-in and you get progress.

Most farmers are not arguing about the outcome. They are arguing about how we get there.

If the goal really is better environmental outcomes, then this has to be a conversation.

Not a lecture, not a headline, and not a stunt designed to provoke without understanding the reality on farm.

A conversation.

Because we will always do better talking with farmers than we will ever do talking at them.



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There's something in the water

Farm plans, freshwater and the question of what's really driving change



Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Canterbury farmers are being held up as proof that farm plans are working, with new data showing a sharp lift in environmental performance over the past seven years.

But not everyone is convinced the plans themselves deserve the credit.

Freshwater farm plans are expected to eventually replace many existing rules and become the primary way environmental risk is managed on farm, but the system is still being worked through.

That uncertainty is where the debate starts.

Progress on paper — and on farm

Environment Canterbury's Farm Environment Plan (FEP) audit results show farms receiving top grades have jumped from 14 per cent in 2017 to 77 per cent in 2024/25, while low-performing farms have almost disappeared.

The audits measure how well farms are managing environmental risks - from nutrient use and effluent to irrigation and erosion.

Groundwater monitoring in parts of Canterbury is also showing improving nitrate trends, particularly in areas with long-established farm plan systems.

Federated Farmers says the results show farmers are making real progress.

Vice-president and freshwater spokesperson Colin Hurst said the system provides a practical way to manage risk, but only if it simplifies things rather than adding more layers.

"It's like the speeding limit... people can get away with it, but if you keep doing it you'll get caught — and eventually you'll lose your licence," Hurst said, comparing it to a system where enforcement may not always be visible, but consequences still apply.

"If it's making less for farmers — less oversight and rigor than the current system — we'll support that," he said.

"If it's increasing red tape, we don't support that at all."

Hurst said any system needs to be proportionate, with simple plans for low-risk farms and more detailed requirements for higher-risk operations.

"In Canterbury a farmer could need three plans... what we're saying is reduce it to one."

"Not a strong link"

But critics say the data does not prove farm plans are driving improvement.

Groundswell's Jamie McFadden said the connection between audit scores and environmental outcomes is far from clear.

"The research is basically saying farmers are doing good stuff, therefore farm plans are working. But that's not a strong link," he said.

McFadden said farmers are constantly adapting their practices, drawing on advice, field days and experience — not just formal plans.

"Farmers pick things up from all sorts of places. It's not the plan that delivers the outcome, it's the actions."

He said the current system risks becoming compliance-driven rather than outcome-focused.

"A lot of it is about ticking boxes. Farmers are asking, 'Can I meet the requirement?' rather than 'What's best for the environment?'"

He said earlier catchment-based approaches were more effective at engaging farmers.

"What worked was that it sparked something. It motivated farmers and gave them a sense of stewardship. That's what drives real change."

McFadden also questioned the growing cost of compliance, warning the system risks building a "massive bureaucracy" around farm plans.

Finding the middle ground

Mid Canterbury Catchment Collective coordinator Angela Cushnie said the reality is more complex than either side suggests.

"You can't have one without the other," she said.

Cushnie said farm plans help set baseline standards, while catchment groups play a critical role in building farmer buy-in and long-term change.

"There's no use doing all the sexy projects — the plantings and the shop front looking lovely — if you haven't done the meaningful bit behind the scenes."

She said Canterbury's early adoption of farm plans has helped build momentum, with farmers now further along the journey than other regions.

But voluntary action alone would not be enough.

"Not everybody's going to respond to the carrot. Some people need a bit of a stick."

While acknowledging compliance has come at a cost, she said many farmers are seeing benefits.

"Some of these standards have helped farmers become more efficient — stopping and looking at where water and nutrients can be used better."

She said the goal is long-term, lasting change.

"We're looking for intergenerational change, and it has to be enduring. It can't ebb and flow as governments change."

Mandatory plans under scrutiny

The biggest point of tension remains whether farm plans should be mandatory.

A Beef + Lamb New Zealand survey found 83 per cent of farmers oppose mandatory certified freshwater farm plans, highlighting a disconnect between policy direction and farmer sentiment.

Federated Farmers has not opposed mandatory farm plans outright, instead taking a conditional approach.

Hurst said support depends on whether plans replace existing regulation or add to it.

"If it reduces red tape, we'll support it. If it adds to it, we won't."

Mid Canterbury Catchment Collective coordinator Angela Cushnie says real change comes from a mix of farm plans and farmer-led action at a catchment level.

PHOTO ASHBURTON GUARDIAN

System still evolving

The freshwater farm plan system itself is still being refined.

The Government says it is working to make the system more practical and cost-effective for farmers, while recognising work already done.

Changes already underway include adjustments to thresholds, certification requirements and allowing industry organisations to play a greater role in audits.

The reforms are part of the wider overhaul of the Resource Management Act, with further changes expected later in 2026.

Freshwater farm plans are intended to become the central tool for managing freshwater risks on farm, tailored to individual properties and catchments.

In Canterbury, many farms already operate under Farm Environment Plans, which are expected to form the foundation of the new system.

For now, farmers are being advised to keep existing plans up to date while the final framework is worked through.

Wider concerns

At the same time, Federated Farmers is raising concerns about other aspects of the proposed reforms.

The organisation has warned draft legislation could allow freshwater to be auctioned, tendered or levied — effectively introducing what it describes as a "water tax".

It also fears the new system could become more restrictive in catchments already close to environmental limits, potentially increasing the need for consents alongside farm plans.

Federated Farmers says any new system must provide certainty and avoid layering additional requirements on top of existing rules.

The bigger question

At the heart of the debate is a simple question: what is actually driving change?

Are farm plans improving environmental outcomes, or are they simply documenting progress already being made by farmers?

The answer, for now, appears to sit somewhere in between.

As Cushnie puts it, real progress is unlikely to come from regulation alone — or from voluntary action alone — but from a combination of the two.

And as freshwater reform continues to evolve, that balance is still being worked out - between compliance and stewardship, regulation and trust, and what really makes a difference on the ground.

Groundswell's Jamie McFadden says farm plans alone don't drive environmental gains, arguing it's farmer action — not paperwork — that delivers results.

PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON



Federated Farmers vice-president and freshwater spokesperson Colin Hurst says farm plans must simplify regulation, not add more red tape for farmers.
PHOTO SUPPLIED



Too Busy Mopping to Turn Off the Tap



Eva Harris
AUTHOR

As with most parents, my mornings and life blood are fuelled by the beautiful brown elixir that is coffee. We even splurged on our own machine and our Covid panic buy was not extra toilet paper, but 20 kg of green beans and an at-home roaster.

Owning a home coffee machine comes with both advantages and challenges. The water tank requires frequent refilling and it's easy to overfill when in a rush. After one particularly sleepless night, I did exactly that, but instead of the usual little spill needing a wipe, the water kept coming. And coming. Dish cloths, hand towels, and even a bath towel couldn't contain the mess, leaving my kitchen (and myself) soaked. Eventually, I discovered that I had accidentally knocked the view tube, causing all 4 litres of water to drain out. Had I noticed and corrected the tube earlier, the leak would have stopped immediately.

I've been thinking my reaction is pretty normal when we are under pressure with immediate challenges to address. We find

ourselves diving into solutions without diagnosing the problem. We focus our energy on managing the immediate consequences, rather than taking the time to identify and address the root causes. Often, we blindly respond to the most obvious symptoms, without re-examining the systems that allow these situations to occur in the first place.

This "problem blindness" can result in echo chambers as we seek help from those who re-assure ourselves rather than challenge. In a crisis, if you call for help and say, "It's an overflow, just mop faster" chances are your helpers will dive straight in, no questions asked. Which makes sense, as I'm pretty sure heads will roll if they didn't. But sometimes these helpers need to be free to point out the leaking tube, even if it's not what you want to hear at that moment. And when you're drowning under the pressure, there is no right moment.

For our environment, this reactive mindset can have real consequences. We scramble to create policy that appears good to the voting public, we protect the rights we have now without thinking about the next generation, and we look to blame rather than work together constructively, while the root causes — short-term thinking, systemic gaps in policy, and a lack of collective vision — remain unaddressed. We risk burnout, wasted resources, and, ultimately, missing the opportunity for lasting change.



The tough truth? Panic narrows our vision. Calm, creative thinking expands it — giving us the chance to innovate and adapt. When the water (or environmental challenges) is pouring out, what we need most is the uncomfortable pause to step back and look for the

view tube. Our best environmental policies and solutions are rarely quick fixes. They demand collective honesty, structural shifts, and the willingness to see what we've been missing in the rush to clean up.

With a complete overhaul of environmental regulations on the

cards, maybe it is finally time to take a breath and look at the big picture so we can finally lift the tube and get the environmental outcomes we all want.

Eva Harris is Principal Environmental Advisor, Enviro Collective



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'Work with us, not against us': Fishing group slams Greenpeace salmon stunt

JONATHAN LEASK

A fishing representative says Greenpeace's "vandalism" of Rakaia's iconic salmon statue has hurt a rural community just to make a political point.

Greenpeace protesters defaced the large statue on February 15 night, just weeks after a \$300,000 ratepayer-funded refurbishment.

The activists replaced the salmon's eyes with cartoon-style crosses and added a speech bubble reading 'Fonterra killed my family'.

Greenpeace Aotearoa freshwater campaigner Will Applebe said the protest aimed to highlight the damage to the Rakaia River.

It was inspired by the fact the upcoming Rakaia salmon fishing competition "won't involve any fishing this year and it's all because of the dirty dairy industry", he said.

Rakaia River Fishing Promotions, which runs the annual competition, issued a statement condemning Greenpeace's actions.

"Greenpeace were responsible for vandalising our local Rakaia Salmon Statue — a [rate]payer-funded community icon that has just received a \$300,000 refurbishment," the social media post said.

"We support protecting the salmon. We support holding corporations accountable. We support fighting for a healthier river.

"But we do not support vandalism. We do not support damaging public property. And we do not support hurting a small rural community to make a political point.

The group said Greenpeace's move to vandalise the town's icon instead of having a conversation showed a "complete lack of understanding of what this competition actually represents".

"Come and understand how much money, time, and effort we have poured into protecting this fishery.

"Come and work with us instead of against our community."

Greenpeace claims the activists didn't climb or use a ladder on the statue, and it's understood they used extendable poles to stick the items to the statue.

"We took care not to damage the fish," Applebe said.

"We chose this action to draw

attention to the issue, and we are confident with what we have done.

"Nothing was used to alter the fish, and we haven't left any damage."

Applebe said Greenpeace had used the iconic statue to take aim at the dairy industry.

Federated Farmers Mid Canterbury president David Acland said Greenpeace have every right to peacefully protest, but they don't have the right to break the law or unfairly target local farming families.

"If you were to believe Greenpeace's rhetoric, you'd think Canterbury farmers are total environmental vandals, but Environment Canterbury's data actually paints a different picture."

Farmers have made huge improvements when it comes to things like nutrient management, identifying erosion risks, handling effluent, and efficient water use, he said.

"Unfortunately, that kind of positive story doesn't fit Greenpeace's narrative where they feel the need to beat up farmers to help them fundraise in election year."

Ashburton District Council wasn't impressed that its freshly repainted statue had been targeted less than two weeks after it returned from an intensive restoration.

Ashburton Mayor Liz McMillan accepted "everyone has the right to protest".

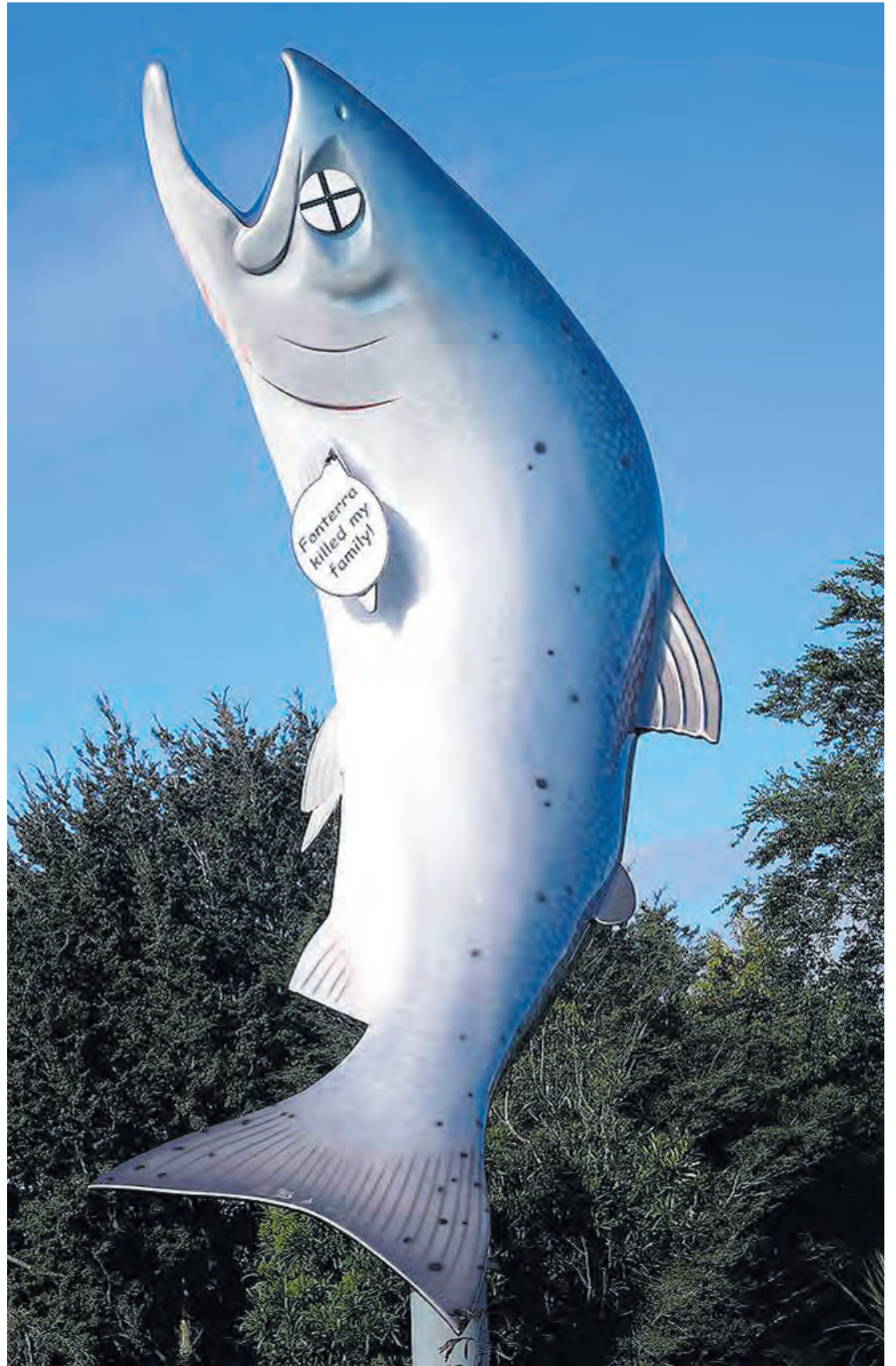
"I am disappointed to see our Rakaia salmon has been vandalised. So much effort and care went into the restoration of this community asset."

Council was yet to inspect the statue for any damage, which will come at ratepayer expense, and had referred the incident to the police.

Senior Sergeant Janine Bowden said police are investigating the matter and are following lines of enquiry to locate those responsible.

LDR Local Democracy Reporting

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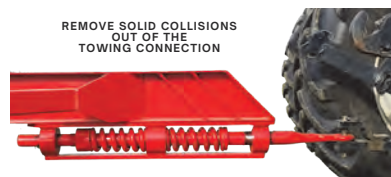
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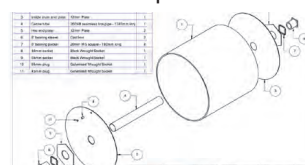


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From cows to camera: Renae Flett's journey through dairy and beyond



Claire Inkson

RURAL EDITOR

Renae Flett did not grow up dreaming of becoming a dairy farmer.

Her career began almost by accident.

"I think it was from a friend who took me to where he was working one day, milking. And from then on I decided cows were fun," she says.

That was around 18 years ago. Since then, Renae has climbed the dairy ladder, moving through the ranks to farm manager, contract milker and now sharemilker.

After spending her entire career in the North Island, she and husband James moved to South Otago, where they are now in their third season sharemilking on Hamish Anderson's property.

The move marked a major shift, both professionally and personally.

Most of Renae's farming life had been spent in the North Island, where she was born and raised. South Otago brought a new climate, new systems and a steep learning curve.

"It's dry land, so we have to rely very much on mother nature," she says.

The couple milk around 250 cows peak on 93 hectares, with approximately 10 hectares acting as a flood spillway when the river rises. The property is run through a 32-bail rotary shed and staffed by Renae, with a relief milker and James helping when he can around his off-farm contracting work.

"I do all the milkings and the animal health," she says.

Their herd is predominantly Friesian, with a small number of Ayrshires.

Renae uses SmaXtec boluses, which sit inside the cows and provide real-time data to support decisions around herd health and feeding, crucial when Renae is essentially running a one-person operation.

Pasture management sits at the centre of Renae's farming philosophy.

"Pasture's a big, big part of our feed system. It's also our cheapest form of feed," she says.

Her focus has been on growing quality grass efficiently and sustainably, reducing reliance on fertiliser, and building a system that can last.

"My goal's always been to learn how to be a good pasture farmer, how to grow grass, and trying to make sure that my business is going to be sustainable."

Despite drought in their first two seasons, the couple lifted production from around 93,000kg milk solids to 110,000kg.

"It took a bit of re-grassing, but we got there in the end," she says.

Breaking barriers

Renae says her climb through the industry was slower than it should have been.

"I faced a lot of challenges being a female," she says.

Most of Renae's farming life had been spent in the North Island, where she was born and raised. South Otago brought a new climate, new systems and a steep learning curve. PHOTOS RENAE FLETT



"When I was starting out, there wasn't a lot of females in the industry, so it took me a lot longer than probably the average guy to get to where I am."

One moment still stands out.

"When we were looking for our first 50/50 job, I was pregnant and no one would touch us," she says.

"We were still capable. We had plans in place."

She believes things are improving, but says women still feel pressure to prove themselves.

That drive led Renae to enter industry awards, including Manawatū Dairy Manager of the Year and the Primary ITO Power Play Award in 2016.

"I entered because I wanted that challenge," she says. "I'm a very shy person, so I wanted to showcase what I was doing on farm."

The process forced her to assess her systems, finances and goals.

"It made me have a look at my business, and the judges' feedback helped me change a few things to actually achieve what I was trying to do, easier."

Isolation and finding community

Moving south brought isolation, something Renae says many farmers underestimate.

"First year and a bit was really isolating. I didn't know a lot of people and I didn't have a lot of time to leave the farm."

She eventually reconnected through showing cattle, which helped rebuild a support network.

Her advice to others moving farms is simple.

"Go along to community run events. Rock up to your neighbours and introduce yourself. Get into a group or find a hobby."

"Once you find the people that understand farming hours, it gets easier."

A camera and a platform

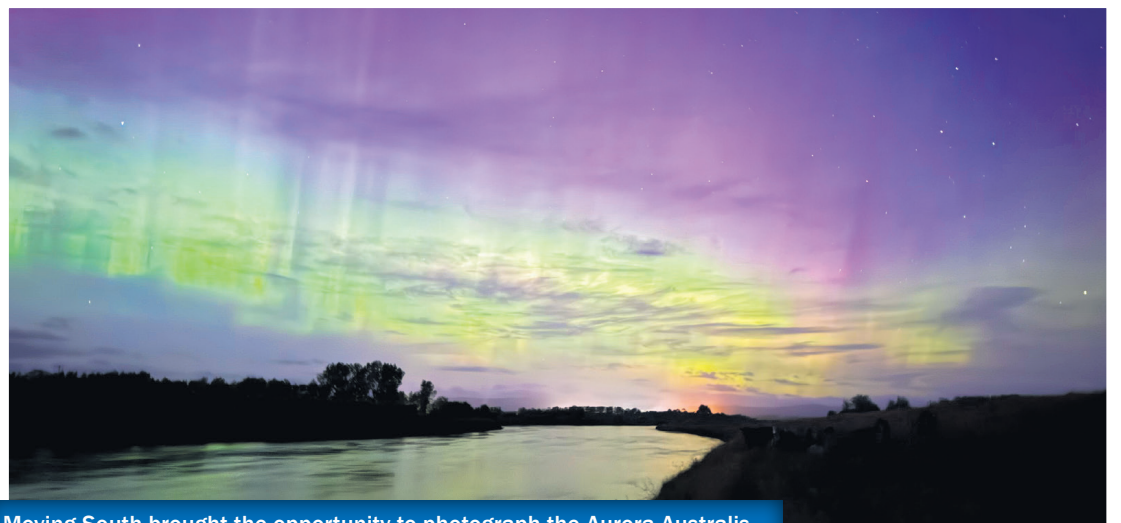
Photography began as a hobby, but quickly became a passion.

"I just picked it up one day. I liked taking pictures because pictures make people happy."

What began as a creative outlet



Renae with husband James and son William (four).



Moving South brought the opportunity to photograph the Aurora Australis.

grew into agri-photography, with Renae sharing farm life, livestock and South Otago landscapes, including the Aurora Australis.

"If I can make just one person happy with a memory or a photo, then it's been worth it."

Photography also became a way to show the reality of dairying.

"It was a platform to show city folk that dairy farmers aren't as bad as we're made out to be. We work day and night for these animals."

She says the camera changed how she sees the farm.

"You start to notice things differently. You try to find the beauty in everything."

While some photography brings in income, much of it is done simply for enjoyment or to record community events.

"It's another way for me to get off farm and do something different."

Renae and James have a son, William, who is nearly four, and she says balancing motherhood with running the dairy operation has been one of her biggest challenges and greatest rewards.

Why she keeps going

Asked what motivates her, Renae does not hesitate.

"The cows," she says.

"They're my why. They need me."

Her career highlight is not an award or production milestone.

"To be honest, it's being a mum on a farm. Being able to share my passion with this little human."

"And I guess that's been the highlight, showing that I can actually do it as well as being a mum, like all those other incredible mums out there doing it."

Weekend Mish: From school mates to backcountry storytellers

Riley Meason (left) and Gabe Ross have been mates since high school, and are turning their passion into a business. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



Gabe Ross (left) and Riley Meason became full time content creators last year.

The Weekend Mish blends humour with real outdoor experiences.



A key driver is encouraging people to get outside and explore the outdoors.



Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Weekend Mish didn't start as a business. It started with a group of mates filming their hunting trips for fun — and seeing what happened next.

Today, best friends Gabe Ross and Riley Meason run one of New Zealand's fastest-growing outdoor content platforms, sharing everything from farming skits to multi-day bush missions with hundreds of thousands of followers.

Their brand, Weekend Mish, blends humour with real outdoor experiences: hunting, fishing, camping, diving and exploring remote parts of the country — all told without filters or polish.

Ross says their content sits across a few simple pillars.

"One would be entertainment, two would be educational, and then three would probably be

putting out positive messaging encouraging people to get outdoors and push their comfort zones."

The pair met at high school and began uploading hunting videos with friends. Things shifted after they entered — and won — the survival reality show *Tracked*, hosted by Billy Jones.

"We were 19 and we won a hundred grand," Ross says. "That sort of gave us the idea that we could do social media as a career."

They went full-time last year — but Ross is quick to say it wasn't an easy road.

"In New Zealand it's a hard game to get into," he says. "It took a long time before we could actually make it work full-time."

What's helped Weekend Mish connect, particularly with rural audiences, is its honesty. The farming skits take the mickey, but never feel mean-spirited.

Ross grew up on farms and says most of their mates still work in agriculture.

"We've got a huge amount of respect for farmers," he says. "It's not even intentional — I think that just comes across."

Behind the humour is a strong focus on mental health and getting people outside.

Meason says encouraging people to step away from screens is a big driver.

"If we can use social media to get people off it and get outside, that's huge," he says. "Being in nature, hunting your own food — that's primal stuff. You spend a few days in the bush and everything changes."

Ross says pushing yourself physically helps reset perspective.

"We always talk about how important it is to do hard things, so when you come back to normal life, those problems don't feel so big."

Their hunting content is handled carefully, with an emphasis on responsibility and conservation.

Ross says attitudes are shifting, with more people understanding hunting as a sustainable way to connect with food and environment.

"There's a lot more education now around using animals as a resource," he says. "We try to show hunting as recreation but also show the positives — especially in New Zealand where all our species are introduced."

Not all of their adventures are light-hearted.

One of their toughest missions involved a 13-day crossing of the

Southern Alps, aiming to reach the most remote point from any road in the country.

On day nine, Meason was struck by a falling boulder, badly injuring his knee and triggering what Ross says was one of New Zealand's most remote helicopter rescues.

Despite the setback, Ross, his brother and a mate continued the journey, becoming the first people known to reach that point.

"It was a hell of a journey," Ross says.

There have been highlights too: from winning *Tracked*, to going full-time, to being trusted to MC at Fieldays alongside major brands, interviewing high-profile Kiwi sports stars in front of large crowds.

"To be given that responsibility at 22, and actually nail it, was pretty cool," Ross says.

Learning how to make content has been another challenge altogether.

The pair started out with a friend handling much of their editing and filming, but when they went out on their own, they had to learn everything from scratch.

"A lot of trial and error," Ross says. "Posting stuff, realizing it didn't go well, then figuring out why. Was it the hook? Was the audio bad? Did we ramble too

much?"

He says good content isn't just about having a great story — it's about learning pacing, sound, framing and how to grab attention in the first few seconds.

"You can have the best content in the world, but if you don't have a good hook or good audio, it might get a hundred views."

Closer to home, the boys will also be on the ground at the upcoming Wānaka show, where they'll have a stand and be keen for a yarn with anyone wanting to talk hunting, the outdoors, or life in general.

Alongside Weekend Mish, the pair are now also working on a new hunting app called Wild Vision, using AI to help people plan trips based on weather, animal density and experience level.

And their business philosophy is refreshingly straightforward.

"The best advice I ever got was just say yes and figure it out," Ross says.

For two young blokes who started out filming weekend missions with mates, it's advice that's carried them a long way — and judging by their growing audience, plenty of Kiwis are happy to come along for the ride.



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Kerry Harmer, Paul Harmer and Ben Harmer on Castle Ridge Station, high in the Ashburton Gorge. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

Castle Ridge: Farming to the conditions



Fine Merino wool is a key part of the Castle Ridge system, with a long-term supply relationship with Icebreaker.



Claire Inkson
RURAL
EDITOR

High in the Ashburton Gorge, Castle Ridge Station is the kind of place that doesn't let you farm on autopilot.

Frost can hit in any month. Snow isn't off the table either. One day can be 30 degrees, the next can slide into a week of bitter cold. For Paul and Kerry Harmer, that reality has shaped a system built around flexibility, practicality, and a constant awareness of the environment they farm in.

Now, after years of "beavering away under the radar", the Harmers have stepped into the spotlight as regional finalists in the Ballance Farm Environment Awards.

For the Harmers, it's just how they farm. If anything, Kerry describes their work as simply what makes sense for where they live.

"Everything you do, every decision you make is made through an environmental lens," she says.

A high-country breeding operation

Castle Ridge Station spans 5,930 hectares and runs as one farm, made up of multiple blocks.

The Harmer family has farmed in the area since 1992. Paul's parents, Peter and Mary Harmer, purchased Castle Ridge Station that year, later adding the Clent Hills block in 2004, and the Barrosa block in 2011.

Today the business is a breeding operation producing Merino wool, sheep, cattle and deer, with a strong focus on fine wool and a long-term supply relationship with Icebreaker.

Numbers shift with seasons, but the farm typically runs around 14,000 to 15,000 Merinos, about 800 cattle, and around 250 deer.

While the landscape is spectacular, Kerry is quick to point out that it's not a "paint-by-numbers" farming operation.

"It's dynamic and moving and shifting all the time," she says.

Farming to the conditions

The Harmers talk about farming "to the conditions" — because they have no other option.

"You can't manipulate the system. You have to farm with what you're dealt," Kerry says.

Castle Ridge is effectively split into two climatic zones. The higher country is lower rainfall and more exposed, while the lower Barrosa block receives significantly more rain. Most cattle are run down there, and in certain summers more cattle can shift up top to manage feed, then move back down again before winter.

The key point is that decisions are made with both climate and water quality in mind.

Cattle might be used strategically in summer, but Kerry says virtually no cattle are wintered on the more sensitive upper blocks.

"That's for water quality as much as anything else," she says.

Riparian fencing and native planting

Central to the farm's environmental programme is riparian protection: practical work that's built up over time.

Castle Ridge has fenced around 17 kilometres of waterways to reduce bank erosion and exclude stock. The work is ongoing, and fencing in this country doesn't happen in neat straight lines.

"These streams aren't straight. They meander," Kerry says. "So, 17 kilometres sounds like a lot, but one paddock has four kilometres of fencing in it because of spring heads and wee legs of the same stream."

Alongside fencing, the Harmers have planted more than 3,000 native plants in riparian areas, with a focus on Carex and other species that strengthen stream margins and slow nutrient movement into waterways.



Merino ewes and lambs at Castle Ridge Station. Stock numbers shift with the seasons in a highly variable environment.

Most of the creeks already carry natural vegetation, Kerry says, so the aim has been to fill gaps and build a corridor of native pockets down through the farm towards the lake.

“The hope is that in time we’ll end up with a corridor... not only good for nutrient management, but also shade for fish, and bird habitat,” she says.

They’ve also been collecting seed from the property in recent seasons, with a focus on planting locally sourced native species that suit the environment.

Winter grazing, catch crops, and wind erosion

The Harmers are also looking closely at wintering and feed systems, particularly in a catchment that sits under tight scrutiny.

Winter grazing is planned carefully, with particular attention paid to crop placement near waterways and the way soil is protected through the colder months.

A long-running part of their system is drilling winter crops with a catch crop — often grass — so the ground isn’t left bare heading into spring.

In this country, wind erosion matters as much as water.

“Wind erosion is an issue with the north-westerly in spring,” Kerry says. “So that catch crop helps with nutrient soak-up, but it also means we don’t have bare ground.”

Monitoring what’s actually happening

One of the strongest parts of the Castle Ridge story is the emphasis on data and measurement, not assumption.

The Harmers are involved in extensive surface and groundwater monitoring alongside their catchment group and the University of Canterbury, measuring water quality at multiple points as it enters, travels through, and leaves the farm.

The aim is simple: understand what is actually happening in their water, and what effect management changes are having over time.

That monitoring isn’t cheap, and it’s not always easy to do as individual farms in a small catchment. Kerry says the formation of the Ashburton Lakes Catchment Group in 2023, supported by the Mid Canterbury Catchment Collective, has been a turning point.

As chair of the Ashburton Lakes Catchment Group, Kerry says the wider structure has enabled access to funding that a small group of four farms could not have secured on their own.

“We’d been trying for years,” she says. “But we were only four farmers... a lot of criteria said you needed a minimum of 10 farmers, or you had to be an incorporated society.”

Through that structure, the

catchment has secured significant MPI funding — support that has helped with planting costs and enabled monitoring and science work to get underway.

“We can’t do it overnight”

For Kerry, part of the frustration in the national conversation around water quality is the expectation of quick change, even in environments where improvements may take decades to show up.

“I think that’s the key thing,” she says. “Everybody thinks if you write all these things down, you can measure them again in 12 months’ time. If there hasn’t been change... you make the rules harder.”

In the Ashburton Lakes high country, she believes much of the change will take a generation.

“We can’t change it overnight. And we can’t do it on our own,” she says.

Kerry is not anti-planning. She says freshwater farm plans have their place, particularly in sensitive environments, but they need to be practical, tailored, and coordinated with existing assurance systems.

“It doesn’t want to be a tick-box exercise,” she says. “But it also doesn’t want to be really expensive... there has to be a level of trust and understanding.”

A family focus

The Harmers’ approach is

heavily shaped by a long view — not only of the land, but of the family’s future on it.

All three of their children are connected to farming in different ways. Ben has returned home and is beginning to take on more responsibility within the business. Sam is a wool representative and wool classes on-farm, and also runs her own superfine Merino sideline flock. Annabel is studying animal science by distance through Massey University while in the UK, with an ongoing interest in veterinary science.

For Kerry, that connection to the next generation is part of the “why” behind the farm’s environmental work.

“We are just stewards for a short space of time,” she says. “Our job is to leave an environment in a better place for everyone who has a relationship with it, not just us as landowners.”

That stewardship idea isn’t new for the Harmer family. Castle Ridge has been in the family’s hands since 1992, but their farming roots in the wider area stretch back much further.

“It’s a really strong value,” Kerry says. “That we leave it better than we arrived... and that it follows on for each generation.”

Old skills, modern pressure

Even some of the farm’s day-to-day practices reflect that mix of tradition and pragmatism.

Castle Ridge still blade shears, largely for animal welfare in an environment where snow can strike unexpectedly.

“Blade shearing leaves a little bit more wool on,” Kerry says. “We do it for an animal welfare point of view, and it’s less stressful for the sheep.”

It’s a skill Kerry worries is disappearing, with fewer young shearers coming through to learn the craft.

Alongside that sits a modern focus on genetics and animal health, including long-term selection for footrot tolerance in their Merino flock — a project Kerry says the next generation is heavily invested in.

A positive story worth telling

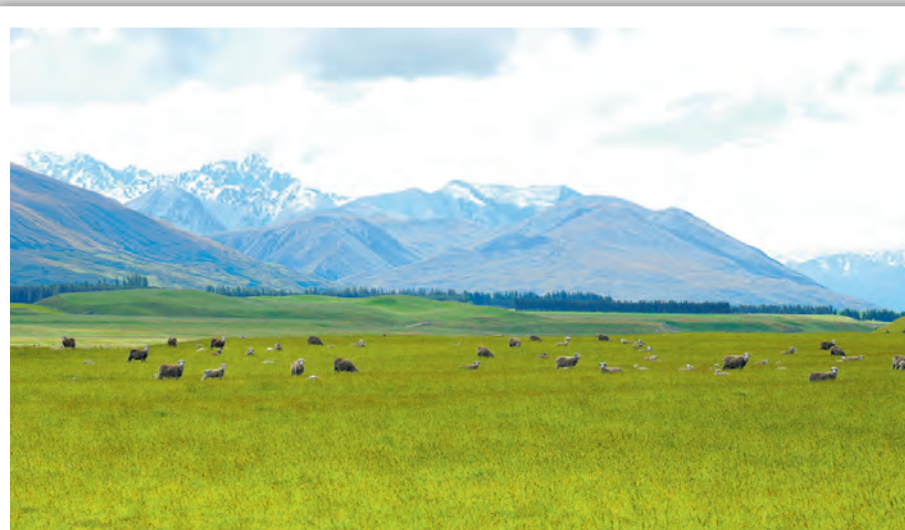
The Ballance Farm Environment Awards are often described as a way to celebrate best practice — but for the Harmers, being a finalist also represents something else: a chance to put a positive story on the record.

Not the loudest farm — and not the most public. But a high-country business that has been steadily adjusting, monitoring, planting, fencing, and learning — because it has to, and because the place matters.

“We live here all the time and we love and respect it,” Kerry says. “We are only caretakers, here for a short time, looking after it for those who come after us.”



Sheep spread across the high-country landscape at Castle Ridge, where farming decisions are driven by climate and terrain.



The Ashburton Gorge landscape shapes every decision at Castle Ridge Station, from stock movements to environmental management.

Young Farmers are the future of New Zealand agriculture, so each issue we shine a spotlight on a Young Farmers Club member. This month we chat with Upper Manuherikia Young Farmers Club member Kaitlin Hedges.

- 1 What is the name of your club, and how long have you been a member?**
Upper Manuherikia Young Farmers club and I have been a member for about two years.
- 2 What has been the highlight for you of joining Young Farmers? What are the benefits and experiences that you feel have helped you most?**
A massive highlight for joining young farmers would be meeting all the people in the club and making new friends in the area. Benefits would be meeting new people within the community and stepping out of my comfort zone and trying new things within farming.
- 3 How did you become involved in agriculture?**
I had studied a small amount at university but the rest of this has come from my partner who was raised on a farm and now gotten himself farming jobs and we live in a farm house.
- 4 What is your job now?**
I currently work for Fulton Hogan as a laboratory technician. It's a new job that I found when trying to find something within my field of study.
- 5 What do you think the future of farming will look like, and what would like to see happening in New Zealand agriculture going forward?**
With what I hear from those that are more involved in the farming community I know there are many people out there that are keen to keep it going on and allow a future for farming and our next generation (especially now that we are expecting and we want to keep the best environment for those to come). Having more farms owned and used by New Zealand farmers would be amazing and allows more jobs for those in the country.
- 6 What are your future plans?**
I guess I never know what my future may look like. I never thought I'd be where I am today a year ago, but things change and we're always ready to adapt to whatever comes along.
I would like to slow down a little bit as we are very busy people especially within young farmers. But figuring out our lives with a new born will definitely be an adventure. I would love to stay on farm and be able to bring my child up with more free range in their life and go from there.
- 7 Who has been your biggest inspiration in agriculture, and why?**
I can't say I have one specific person who is an inspiration. But seeing those that I have studied with at university and seeing how they have progressed and their achievements within agriculture is awesome.
And learning more about this industry from my partner and his family has been amazing.



Nomination —

Kaitlin is an awesome all rounder in the club. She stepped into secretary without knowing buggar all about how the club works or farming in general but she has taken off running, learning and improving the club every day. We recently had our 90th jubilee where she stepped forward running back and forth from town throughout the week leading up to it. Sorting food, booze, bar leaners, silage wrap for slip and slides, you name it she properly sorted it.



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A win, a wedding, and a shot at the national title



Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Less than two weeks out from his wedding, Bryce Win has added another milestone to what is already shaping up to be a big year.

The 29-year-old Upper Moutere farmer was crowned Tasman's FMG Young Farmer of the Year, earning his place at the Grand Final in July.

"It is starting to sink in now," Win said. "On the drive home, I realised I have actually earned this and I deserve it. It feels quite nice."

Win, a sixth-generation sheep and beef farmer, runs a 380-hectare hill country operation, carrying around 1700 Romney ewes and breeding Angus cattle, alongside buying and finishing additional stock.

It is a system he knows well, and one that helped carry him through the practical elements of the competition. But like many competitors, it was the unknowns that proved the most challenging.

"There were quite a few theoretical things that I know I am not as clued up on as others," he said.

"The exam, I knew I left a lot of points behind there. There were modules where I didn't bomb out, but I wasn't sure if I had got them right either."

Among the tougher moments were questions around injury management and farm purchasing scenarios, areas not always front of mind for young farmers.

"That one where you had to talk about buying a farm, that is pretty hard when you are a young farmer," he said.

"You don't really know how to explain what you would do."

Despite the uncertainty, Win put himself in a strong position heading into the final stages of the competition.

"Before the quiz on Saturday night they show the scores, and my name was at the top," he said.

"I was like, okay, time to lock in."

The pressure of competition is something Win has learned to manage. Having previously competed at regional level in 2023, he returned this year with a clearer understanding of what to expect.

"It took away the big nerves," he said.

"But there were definitely moments where I had to stop and take a breath."

One of those moments came during a head-to-head practical challenge.

"We had to put a chainsaw back together and my chain kept getting tangled," he said.

"I couldn't figure it out, so I just had to stop, breathe and work through it properly."

It is a familiar feeling for many competitors, with routine tasks suddenly becoming more difficult under pressure.

"It is one of those things you do a million times by yourself, but as soon as someone is watching you,

you have suddenly got two left hands," he said.

Preparation for the event was deliberately broad, reflecting the unpredictable nature of the competition.

"They don't tell you anything, they keep it all pretty tight-lipped," Win said.

"I tried to keep my study as broad as possible. Sheep and beef I was pretty happy with, but then I was studying fertilisers, botanical names, weeds and pests."

Even YouTube came into play. "I heard there might be a wheel bearing, so I watched a couple of YouTube videos."

Win's path to the regional final was not without setbacks. After missing out on qualifying the previous year, he returned with renewed focus.

"I just missed out last year at districts," he said.

"Watching the regionals, it looked like so much fun, especially the practical races. I got a bit jealous, so I thought I had better take it seriously and try and get through."

That decision has now paid off, with Win turning his attention to the Grand Final in New Plymouth later this year.

"It is going to take a team," he said.

"I will talk to previous finalists and a lot of other farmers and try to get experience in areas I am not as familiar with, like machinery and different systems."

"It is always fun learning new things. It is just trying to retain it all and bring it back under pressure."

Before that, however, there is another major event on the



Bryce Win working through one of the practical challenges at the Tasman regional final, where even the simple jobs get harder with a crowd watching.

horizon.

Win is set to marry fiancée Briar Kinney in just days, with the ceremony to be held on the farm.

"We have got a stand of native bush, and the reception will be in the middle of a hay paddock," he said.

"It should be nice."

With a stag do, wedding preparations and a busy farming season all colliding, it has been a hectic few weeks.

"It all comes thick and fast," he said.

"But it will be hard to beat."

As for advice heading into married life, Win said the advice from fellow farmers has been simple.

"Mostly just say yes when you have to," he laughs.

"And don't go to bed angry."



Bryce Win with the Tasman FMG Young Farmer of the Year trophy after taking out the title and earning his spot at the Grand Final.

Giving the finals a red hot crack



Amy Riach
AUTHOR

The Woodbury Domain erupted with applause, when Coldstream local Jack Taggart was announced as the winner of the Aorangi Young Farmers regionals.

"This is Jack's year," said Aorangi Chairman Mitch Aldrigre, cheering along with the crowd. "He really deserves this, we're all rooting for him."

26 year-old Taggart, a young dairy farmer from the Hinds Young Farmers Club, usually spends his days at Skibbereen Farm in Coldstream, where he manages the 680-head herd.

But this year, Taggart will also have to carve out some time to study, in preparation for the Young Farmers Grand Final this November.

A generational farmer, Taggart was "born and bred in Ashburton", and there's still nowhere else he'd rather be.

"I was always that school kid who would spend every other second

on the farm," he laughed.

At 17, with his University Entrance already secured, Taggart left Mt Hutt College early and spent 9 months shepherding in kiwi High Country before he started at Lincoln University: where he completed a Diploma of Agriculture, a Diploma of Farm Management, and a Bachelor of Commerce in Agriculture.

As a young University student, Taggart joined the Young Farmers competition for the first time, qualifying for the Tasman Regionals.

And from then on, he told the Guardian, "I was well and truly hooked."

The recent competition at the Woodbury Domain was Taggart's 5th shot at the regional finals, after he had competed twice for the Tasman region, and twice for Aorangi.

"I always enjoyed the challenge," Taggart said. "But that pressure cooker environment [at Young Farmers] can make things tough."

This year though, Taggart had an ace up his sleeve.

Despite winning the regionals, Taggart had no plans to qualify for the Grand Finals this year.

His original goal was to grab another opportunity to wheel-out his skills, and then qualify next year for the Grand Final in Christchurch

2027.

"I didn't really stress about a single thing," Taggart said.

"Removing all that pressure is what gave me the advantage I think."

While the rest of the crowd celebrated Taggart's well-deserved win, for Taggart himself, excitement came second.

"My very first thought was just, oh shit, what have I got myself into now?" Taggart laughed.

"It's definitely been a long time coming, and I still can't quite believe it," he said.

For a very busy Taggart, preparing for the Grand Final is mostly happening on the job, and he is still focused on the day to day of farm life; keeping both stock and Fonteara happy campers.

"At the moment it's a very full plate," Taggart said.

"But I am very grateful for all the support from my employers, and the Hinds Club."

Skibbereen Farm has given Taggart two extra days off a fortnight, to study for Young Farmers, and every challenge on the farm is an opportunity for this finalist.

Every fence that needs repair, every flat tire, or farm invoice that comes Taggart's way, is a chance for him to practice "high volume under pressure".



Jack Taggart wins the 2026 Aorangi Regionals, now bound for the New Plymouth Grand Final in July. PHOTO SUPPLIED

But Taggart knows he also needs to spend some time "hitting the books".

Although he excelled in the practical challenges of the competition, Taggart freely admits that the theory components of the challenge aren't his strong suit.

But Taggart's love for the farm trumps his aversion to the library.

"I'm mad about dairy, I just love it," he laughed.

Taggart also has the backing of the Hinds Young Farmers Club, who successfully propelled him through to Regionals, and intend to carry him all the way to New Plymouth.

Young Farmers is a community, more than a competition, Taggart said.

"You're working with these amazing people who are so enthusiastic about what we're doing in New Zealand agriculture."

"I feel very spoiled to have the opportunity," he told the Guardian.

Surrounded by friends and mentors, freely donating time, advice, and experience, excitement for the rest of the year is building.

"It's got a really good flavour about it, 2026," Taggart said.

Next year, Taggart will be moving into contract milking, but he has found his place here in Ashburton, and he has no plans to leave Mid Canterbury anytime soon.

"This is the land of milk and honey in my mind. It has everything I need, and nothing I don't."

With plans to one day expand into 50/50 sharemilking, Taggart told the Guardian, "I'm at a real growth stage in my career now, and that's always exciting."

Ahead of the Grand Final, Ashburton's finalist is exactly where he wants to be, "outside in the fresh air".

And although Taggart is finals bound a year ahead of schedule, he is determined to give New Plymouth "a red hot crack".

Third time lucky for Slee in Otago Southland Young Farmer final



Thomas Slee after being crowned the 2026 Otago Southland FMG Young Farmer of the Year in Gore on February 7. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

CLAIRE INKSON

Nightcaps dairy farmer Thomas Slee is heading to the FMG Young Farmer of the Year Grand Final after taking out the Otago Southland regional title in Gore on February 7.

The 28-year-old accumulated 271 points across five demanding modules at the Gore A&P Showgrounds, finishing ahead of Henry Smith of Clinton (258) and Harry McCallum of Te Anau (234).

For Slee, it was third time lucky.

"It was good to get there in the end," he said.

Having previously placed second and fifth at regionals, Slee said experience likely made the difference this year.

"Don't really know, to be fair. Probably just a bit calmer and a bit more relaxed about it, I suppose. And it was good having done a couple before. You get a bit more of a feel for what might be thrown at you. You just try to get the points in the right spot."

The competition featured a mix of technical, practical and mental challenges, including machinery tasks, an ACC module, Agri-Sports and the fast-paced buzzer quiz.

The competition is deliberately varied, testing competitors across a wide range of skills. Each finalist has their own strengths and weaknesses, and with limited warning about what challenges will involve, they have to think on their feet.

Slee admitted machinery isn't his strongest area.

"I'm not very good with machinery, so that was a challenge. I haven't done heaps of that kind of stuff."

Despite describing himself as "not that good" in the quiz this year, Slee said sitting near the top of the leaderboard changed his approach.

"Usually if you're halfway down you can just go for broke. But I was sitting near the top of the leaderboard, so I was probably a bit more cautious than usual."

In Agri-Sports, he surprised even himself.

"I ended up winning it. It was probably the same thing - just trying to gather up some points rather than rushing through everything. In the past, that's probably what I've done."

From banking back to the farm

Slee grew up on a sheep farm 20 minutes from where he now contract milks approximately 1,000 cows alongside his parents near Nightcaps.

After school, he completed a Bachelor of Agricultural Commerce at Lincoln University before working at BNZ in Invercargill for three years.

Returning to farming was partly about lifestyle and family.

"It was good to get out of that corporate world. I was working for someone else, I suppose. I'm sort of my own boss now, which is quite nice. It's good to be near

home and involved with the family."

He believes the mix of university, banking and practical farming experience may help him at the national final.

"I've done a few different things now. I've just got to try and put it all together and do some study."

Preparation for the Grand Final in New Plymouth from July 2-4 is already front of mind.

"I'll probably just try and make a bit of a plan and get some study underway. There are a few different sections - a technical day and interview, and a project you've got to present."

Slee says winning the grand final would be "pretty special".

"It would be a pretty cool accomplishment. It's definitely been a goal of mine for a while. I just haven't been able to make it through the bloody regionals."

Strong showing across age groups

The Otago Southland final also showcased emerging talent across the younger divisions.

In AgriKids NZ, Slade Thwaites, Fletcher Duff and Lucian Webster of Northern Southland College claimed top honours. Angus Officer, Will Riley and Hunter Legg of Limehills Young Farmers (Limehills School) were second, while Toby Beer, Jack Drain and Cole O'Meara of Drummond School placed third.

In the Junior Young Farmer section, Lara Heiss and Emily Reid of Blue Mountain College took the title, with Jack Horrel and Hunter Norman of Southland Boys' High School finishing runners-up.

Slee, along with the top AgriKids and Junior teams, will now represent the region at the Grand Final in July.

New Zealand Young Farmers chief executive Cheyne Gillooly said it was encouraging to see strong community support at the event.

"FMG Young Farmer of the Year is a true celebration of agriculture and the people who drive it. From the youngest contestant just beginning, to the oldest giving it their last shot, the strength in which people show up for their community makes me so proud of what Young Farmers represents."

While Slee admits he doesn't love the spotlight, he accepts it comes with the territory.

"I don't really like it that much, but it's part of the competition. You've got to put yourself out there."

For now, the focus is simple as he looks towards the national event - with his Mum giving him a helpful push.

"Mum's been bombing me with stuff to start studying for the Grand Final. I think she was more hyped up than I was at regionals," he laughs.

"My parents will be good support people to have for the coming months."

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Thomas Slee competes during the Otago Southland FMG Young Farmer of the Year regional final at the Gore A&P Showgrounds.

Ravensdown scholarship for Mayfield young gun

CLAIRE INKSON

Eighteen-year-old James Clark was in the middle of farm work when he got the call telling him he'd won the 2026 Ravensdown Hugh Williams Memorial Scholarship.

"I had to take a couple of minutes just to stop and get my head around it," he said. "I was quite amazed, really."

Clark, a Lincoln University agriculture student from Valetta, is about to begin his second year studying Commerce in Agriculture.

The scholarship provides \$5,000 a year for the remainder of his studies, something Clark says will make a real difference.

"I just paid five grand for my first semester courses, and it means I can do that or pay for my year's rent. It's just amazing."

Clark grew up helping on the family farm near Mayfield, where his parents, David and Jayne Clark, run an arable operation.

Like many agricultural students, Clark regularly heads home to work on the farm to help fund his studies.

"Growing up on a farm, it's just somewhere I like to be," he said.

"It's physical, it's mental, it's got a lot of variety. I just like the agriculture sector."

While his parents have been strong supporters, he says the

decision to pursue a career in agriculture is his own.

"They've definitely encouraged and helped, and I owe a lot to them, especially with the Young Farmers competitions and all the time and money they spent taking me around the country for those."

"But it's also a path I've wanted to take myself."

Clark has competed in Young Farmers for three years, reaching grand finals twice, and says the organisation has helped build his confidence.

"Having interviews through Young Farmers and talking to professionals has helped an awful lot," he said.

"It definitely gave me confidence when it came to applying for the scholarship."

The application process involved written work, references, and a phone interview, but Clark said it was straightforward.

Now settling into his second year at Lincoln, he says university has broadened his thinking and opened up new opportunities.

"As I've studied, I've found more of the direction I want to get into," he said.

"But I'm also opening up other doors and learning things I'd never considered, and meeting people with different experiences and backgrounds."

Looking ahead, he is keeping his



Lincoln University agriculture student James Clark says the Ravensdown scholarship will make a big difference as he heads into his second year.



James Clark in the paddock at home near Mayfield, where his interest in farming first took root. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

options open, particularly as the future direction of the family farm remains uncertain.

"I don't know what direction our farm is going to go in the next five or ten years," he said.

"I honestly don't know what sort of place I'm going to come home to. It's highly likely it'll be different, and I don't know what that different is."

Despite the challenges facing the sector, he remains optimistic.

"There are always new challenges, but we're always

finding ways around them," he said.

"I think I've got a hopeful outlook, but it's definitely got some challenges."

For other young people considering a career in agriculture, Clark's advice is simple.

"Definitely give it a chance. If not straight at university, get involved with Young Farmers or something similar and get a taste of it."

"See what you like and what you don't like and then look at university from there."

Ravensdown chief executive Garry Diack said the panel was impressed by Clark's application.

"James is exactly the kind of young farmer this scholarship was designed to encourage. We recognise the passion he has for agriculture and the long-term success of the industry."

"The country relies on agriculture, and the next generation of farmers will help shape the future of the industry. The sector needs young farmers like James."



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Bringing Dog back to the paddock: Ravensdown meets Footrot Flats



Footrot Flats has been part of kiwi culture since it was created by Murray Ball in the 1970s. PHOTO SUPPLIED

CLAIRE INKSON

After several tough seasons in the agriculture sector, there's a sense things are finally turning, says Garry Diack, Ravensdown chief executive.

"We're a bit of a cork in the tide of farmer fortunes. When the fortunes are going well, so do we. The long-term outlook for sheep and beef has given a bit more confidence to the sales process around fertiliser. The weather's been a bit of a problem, but in reality, there's growth everywhere. So, it should be a good season for our farmers, which is great."

That cautious optimism forms the backdrop to Ravensdown's new collaboration with Footrot Flats — the iconic New Zealand comic strip created by Murray Ball.

Set on a small sheep farm, it follows the dry humour of farmer Wal and his loyal (and often wiser) Dog, capturing everyday farm life with warmth, honesty and sharp Kiwi wit. For decades, the strip reflected the realities of rural New Zealand — from weather and stock to isolation and resilience — earning its place in homes, sheds and smoko rooms across the country.

The collaboration brings together two long-standing rural icons, with the aim of reconnecting farmers with a bit of humour, familiarity, and shared experience.

The idea came from Ravensdown's marketing team, prompted by a wider conversation about identity and longevity.

"We're coming up for our 75th anniversary in a couple of years," Diack says. "We're a long-standing entity in New Zealand farming. There's pressure all around farming right now, including questions about the role of co-operatives. But the essence of a good co-operative will always be here if things are managed well. We want to get across to our shareholders — current and future — that this is a stable business that will always be here."

Just as importantly, he says, they wanted to bring some lightness back into the sector.

"It's been hard work the last three or four years. We wanted to get a bit more joy back into it all."

With that brief, the team started thinking differently.

"They came up with the idea: why don't we track down Footrot Flats and see where it's at? The alignment between Dog — all those seasons we confront, and all the fun bits of farming is right on brief."

The result is a licensing arrangement that allows Ravensdown to use Footrot Flats characters across its brand and communications.

"It brings two old iconic brands together and puts a bit more joy back into life."

Why Footrot Flats still matters

Diack believes Footrot Flats has endured because it captured the basics of farm life better than anything else.

"At the end of the day it's still about the paddock, the farm gate, the gumboot and the weather," he says.

"That's what Footrot Flats captured more than anything else — the basic simple things farmers run every day. They take risks with the weather, the ability to grow stuff, and they enjoy it."

He recalls studying farmer motivation while completing his master's degree in industrial organisational psychology.

"There's a model that basically says if you get paid a lot, you work harder. When I researched this with farmers and farm workers across New Zealand, the model broke down.

"What motivates farmers more than anything else is lifestyle and commitment to the land: intrinsic things that money doesn't supersede. It's about joy on the farm. That's what Footrot Flats always

captured really well."

For Diack, that thinking closely mirrors Ravensdown's own origins.

"How does a company stay New Zealand-owned and do the best deal for farmers? That's always been our question."

Inside the farm gate

Diack draws a clear distinction between co-operatives operating inside the farm gate and those outside it.

"Outside-the-farm-gate co-operatives buy product from farmers and sell it into markets. Inside-the-farm-gate co-operatives have a day-to-day relationship with farmers."

Ravensdown sits firmly in that inside-the-farm-gate space.

"Whether you buy all your feed at once or bit by bit, fence posts all at once or when needed — farmers have a relationship with the people providing the products and services that allow them to be successful.

"We're that internal partnership that helps farmers do the best they can as true farmers of the land. The outside companies go to market and do battle. With us, we're partners on the day to day."

That distinction mattered when approaching the family of Footrot Flats creator Murray Ball.

"It wasn't a lay-down-the-zero situation. We had to sit down and explain who we are — that we're farmer-owned. If we'd been a private equity-driven commercial entity, this wouldn't have gone anywhere."

Diack says the family wanted reassurance the characters wouldn't simply be commercially exploited.

"We said this is another way Murray's humour and insights can live on alongside the people he was targeting. They liked the fact we're a co-operative and any benefit goes back to farmers. Murray's wife was very much part of the decision-making.

"We had to pass the down-to-earth test and the non-commercial exploitation test."

Leaning into the season

Asked what Wal might make of farming today, Diack laughs.

"It'd just be another bad season. You confront it. If it's raining, you lean into it. If it's hot, you put the sunhat on and keep moving."

He believes farmers have adapted quickly after several challenging years.

"We're in a good period for farming right now. We've adapted and learned after the last three or four years. Farmers are getting smarter with money and technology. They're making stronger demands on suppliers for real solutions, not just flashy stuff."

And, he says, that ability to keep moving matters.

"We're leaning into the nor'wester so to speak. That's what Wal would say. You lean into it, because the next season will soon be upon us."

Staying connected

For Diack, the Footrot Flats collaboration is about more than branding.

"The two messages we push internally are: co-operatives owned by farmers will do okay if we stay in touch with farmers. What they want from their co-operative is what we have to deliver. When that insight gets lost, that's when things unravel."

He also sees it as a way to connect with the next generation.

"Most farmers retiring now were around when Ravensdown was formed. They knew why it was created. The next generation needs a reason to support a co-operative.

"Our focus is giving them that reason — through culture, approach and services that meet what farmers need today."

And that work, he says, is ongoing.

"We're doing it every day."

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Cristy Benson

WHERE AND WHAT ARE YOU FARMING?

I'm an agricultural photographer travelling the country in a Jayco Silverline Outback, towed by a Ford Ranger. I picked up both the Jayco and the Ford from Auckland over a year ago and have spent the last year winding my way south staying at dairy farms, on sheep and beef stations, horse studs, wineries and market gardens. I build a library of on-farm imagery that I license through my website to industry bodies, government departments, marae and commercial agricultural companies, for use in marketing campaigns, websites, annual reports and even artwork for corporate spaces.

In the last year, the Ford and I have been to soil festivals in North Canterbury, photographed wild horses in the Kaimanawa Ranges near Waiouru, dined on blue cod in Bluff and sat quietly with deer grazing on the Hauraki Plains in the Waikato.

WHAT YEAR, MAKE, AND MODEL IS YOUR TRUSTY UTE?

2024 white Ford Ranger XLT.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE FEATURE (OR QUIRK) ABOUT YOUR UTE?

She's not pristine, and I love that about her. There's always a dusting of Central Otago caught around her gills and a thick cover of pastry flakes across the upholstery. She's a travelling memoir of where we've been. Less a vehicle and more an accomplice. She knows how many sunsets we've chased across Canterbury, how many times I've pulled over just because the light was doing something holy over beefies grazing by Southland's Waiau River, and how many coffees I've spilled while driving.

WHAT SONG IS ALWAYS ON YOUR PLAYLIST WHEN YOU'RE BEHIND THE WHEEL?

It depends on the landscape, but something cinematic and yearning. Think 'Where the Wild Things Are' by Luke Combs or 'Power Over Me' by Dermot Kennedy. Big skies require big soundtracks.

My anthem right now is 'The View Between Villages' by Noah Kahan. I love the line "...it's just me and the curve of the valley". It's a haunting echo of the rhythm of this unconventional life — that constant balance between the goodbyes I've had to say when leaving remarkable farmers, and the quiet optimism of whatever might reveal itself behind the next farm gate.

WHAT'S YOUR ULTIMATE ROADTRIP SNACK WHEN YOU'RE OUT ON THE FARM OR HEADING TO TOWN?

"Who ate all the pies?" Me. This guy, Cristy. I ate them all. It was me. My favs: Harris Farms pies, Tamar Beef pies and Sanga's pies.

WHAT'S ALWAYS ROLLING AROUND IN THE BACK SEAT OR TRAY?

My West Highland White Terriers, Mr Cherub and Mr Truffles. Although it's less "rolling around in the back seat" and more regally snoozing in dog beds fit for kings.

I love looking out at my side mirror and seeing Truffle's head out the window sniffing and taking it all in. He's 14, blind and deaf, so to see him absorbing the surroundings in his own way — building a mind map of where livestock are grazing, where packs of Huntaways are working, and where the contractors' farm machinery we pass on the road has been busy — feels like a quiet kind of magic.

If it works there, it'll work anywhere

Ironmax Pro® takes on slugs and one of our most challenging climates

Chris and Stacey Hatfield have a 100 ha dairy farm and milk 180 cows in Murchison. Their system is mostly grass, though they have recently introduced some maize.

The Hatfields Tasman property has around 2,020 mm of rain annually and, mostly, enjoys a temperate climate. Unfortunately, so do slugs.

Chris has a long-term vision for their business and is focused on setting up a foundation for whatever the next generation of his family wants to achieve. He also believes in an investment and result, rather than just a cost approach.

And, it pays off.

"The more yield and quality you produce, the cheaper the crop becomes. Every mouthful the cows take, you see the benefit in the vat. When you're spending money, you want to see the best return." He says that also shows in cow health and welfare.

However, it comes with a challenge. New, high density, high performing pastures give slugs more places to hide and more enticing feed prospects — this within an environment and climate, which is perfect for them.

Chris' approach, he says, is aggressive. He goes in hard with a 7 kg/ha application of Ironmax Pro to take out not only the adults existing in the pasture but also the next generation. "It catches all the waves of populations. If you go hard from the get go, that way every plant gets a crack. Otherwise, it's like the equivalent of slugs going from one McDonalds to the next!"

Slug population explosions are common, as the pests can produce 300-500 eggs over their 13 month lifespan.

Chris has also established "buffer zones"



Chris Hatfield uses Ironmax Pro slug bait for his pasture and recently planted maize to take out adult slugs and the next generation.

around drilled paddocks to avoid the risk of running crops over or compacting soil when reapplying bait.

With pets and kids on the farm, he says the safety aspect of low toxicity Ironmax Pro is also important.

Mark Prosser, Technical Field Representative for PGG Wrightson, says dairying, in general, is scientific and measurable but Chris sets the bar high, with elevated pasture sowing rates to suppress weed pressure, and meticulous all-around management.

He echoes Chris' comments about the density of swards of new grasses and the unintended consequence of the positive environments they create for slugs. But says for the right response — it's worth it. He says dairy cows, especially, need the good grass and it's important to protect it. "Even a 1%

improvement in DM can be massive — and, if they're not controlled, slugs will always eat the good stuff."

Mark says, in his experience, Ironmax Pro actually draws slugs away from grass or maize. He says he trusts the product, even after multiple rain falls where other slug baits would break down. "I've confidence that it'll do the job. It's got endurance in the field and our climate and it's safe."

Alex Easton, UPL NZ Regional Manager Upper South Island, says he's so confident in Ironmax Pro's performance and safety that he uses it in his home garden, even though there are small children around. He says slug pressure can be high because of surrounding paddocks. "The e's nothing slugs like better than brassicas in nice, straight rows!"

Travelling up to 13 metres in one night, slugs are phenomenal feeders — capable

of consuming more than 50% of their own body weight. Unprotected, damage to plants — especially seedlings — can happen surprisingly quickly. Infestations can appear seemingly out of nowhere.

Alex says Ironmax Pro has significant advantages over old-school coated baits. "Coated baits only have a lick of the active on the outside. Ironmax Pro is manufactured with the finest durum wheat using a unique wet manufacturing process ensuring the active ingredient is mixed all the way through. Not a bite is wasted.

"Looking for dead slugs is not the best way to assess a bait's efficacy. Instead check for crop damage. No damage indicates an effective bait programme."

His colleague, Pieter Van Der Westhuizen, UPL NZ Ltd Regional Manager Upper North Island, says slugs will always ingest a lethal dose of Ironmax Pro, even juveniles. "I had a field representative say to me that they'd seen slugs still in the field after Ironmax Pro had been applied. I suggested a simple test — squeeze the slug. If there's visible blue residue, it means they've eaten the bait and won't be eating anything else."

Apart from efficacy, there are other benefits with Ironmax Pro.

The optimised pellet size and consistency ensure even distribution and a widespread width. Every pellet has the same size and weight, which equals excellent ballistics. Every load is the same as the one before. This eliminates any fiddling around with the setup of spreaders.

For more information on Ironmax Pro, talk to your local technical merchant or contact Alex Easton, UPL NZ Regional Manager Upper South Island, at 027 578 0016.



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Greenstreet into its Groove



A community gathering in the Greenstreet Hall to talk about the Ashburton River, hosted by Greenstreet Catchment Group. PHOTO SUPPLIED



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HENRY MILLAR

Across Mid Canterbury, catchment groups are getting on with the job of improving their natural environment, building resilience and strengthening community connections. One group in particular – the Greenstreet Catchment Group – has found its groove over the past year, demonstrating what is possible when local leadership is backed by consistent support from Ministry for the Environment (MfE) and Mid Canterbury Catchment Collective (MCCC) funding.

Since forming, the Greenstreet Catchment Group has evolved from a motivated committee into a confident, well-organised community network. With the help of facilitator Harry Millar from Rural Consulting, the group has been able to begin developing ideas into action and ensure local voices are heard in regional decision-making.

A key focus over the past 12 months has been water quality and river management. Through a series of well-attended community meetings, local landholders have gained a clearer understanding of flood resilience planning, stopbank maintenance and long-term river works. These discussions have not always been simple, but having a catchment group in place has allowed concerns to be raised constructively and technical information to be translated into plain language that the wider community can engage with.

Water quality drop-in sessions attracted strong community interest, with over 40 samples brought in for testing and results providing reassurance around nitrate levels in the catchment. Members have also been supported with eDNA sampling to develop a greater understanding of the freshwater ecology in local streams.

More recently, the group has turned its attention to coordinated pest management and riparian planning. With improved funding certainty, the Greenstreet

Catchment Group has committed to establishing a community trap library, enabling landholders to borrow live-capture traps as part of a catchment-wide approach to pest control. Plans are also underway to undertake a drone survey of waterways and riparian margins, which will inform a long-term riparian management plan, demonstrating the community's commitment to enhancing the health of surrounding waterbodies.

Communication and transparency have been another important focus. The group is preparing to release its first newsletter to members in the coming weeks. This newsletter will outline what the group has achieved over the past year and what is planned for 2026, including upcoming water sampling opportunities, the rollout of coordinated pest management initiatives, and ongoing updates relating to river protection and flood resilience work in the area. The newsletter is intended to keep members informed, celebrate progress and encourage wider participation across the catchment.

None of this work happens in isolation. Ongoing support from Mid Canterbury Catchment Collectives has been critical in providing facilitation and the steady momentum needed to keep volunteers engaged. This support allows local catchment groups to focus on outcomes rather than administration, while also ensuring strong connections with councils and other stakeholders.

The Greenstreet story reflects a wider picture across Mid Canterbury, where catchment groups are stepping up to lead environmental improvement from the ground up. They are creating spaces for collaboration, building trust between neighbours, and showing that farmer-led, community-driven action can deliver real benefits for environmental and community resilience.

Harry Millar is the facilitator for Greenstreet Catchment group.

Chips set to fly at Amuri as world champion lines up



Jack Jordan in action, driving the axe into the block as chips fly. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

CLAIRE INKSON

World champion axeman Jack Jordan will be one of the headline acts at this year's Amuri A&P Show on March 7, bringing international-level woodchopping back to a grassroots country stage.

Jordan, who farms sheep and beef in the King Country, said balancing life on farm with competing at the top level of the sport was part of the job.

"Farming certainly helps being reasonably fit, but when you are training, you're still doing two or three hours some nights," he said.

The 29-year-old won his first world title at just 17.

Since then, he has gone on to claim multiple titles, including three Stihl Timbersports World Trophies, an individual world championship and a team world championship, alongside a string of traditional woodchopping titles.

"I suppose at the moment I'm in my prime," he said.

Jordan said his pathway into the sport was typical of many rural New Zealand athletes, starting through family and local shows.

"My older brother Shane got into it when he was at high school," he said.

"There was an old guy who would train young guys. They'd get off the school bus and go and train once or twice a week. I just followed Shane around the A&P shows and got into it."

Despite competing internationally, he said the A&P circuit remained central.

"A&P shows are a big part of our season. They're real good preparation for the bigger events," he said.

"It certainly gets you geared up."

Jordan said New Zealand's strength in woodchopping was tied to its rural history.

"It's a bit of a dying sport now here in New Zealand, but it's a heritage sport," he said.

"Our grandfathers probably cleared a lot of the land by hand, so maybe it traces back to that."

At Amuri, Jordan will compete across multiple events including underhand, standing block, springboard and sawing disciplines.

"Underhand has always been my favourite," he said.

"I've usually been better at the underhand, so I've naturally liked that one more."

With a strong Australian contingent also set to compete, he said spectators could expect a high level of competition.

"There's a pretty good crowd coming from Australia as well, so you'll get the best in the

world there basically," he said.

Amuri Show woodchopping convenor and North Canterbury Axemen's Club president Kelly Earl said the event had grown into a major drawcard.

"It's a three-test series with the Australians," he said.

"The test will be a seven-man relay, so they do an underhand, a standing chop, then a single saw, double saw, then back to underhand and standing again."

Alongside the test series, around 60 axemen will compete across the three days, with two world titles up for grabs in the underhand and standing block events.

"There's tree climbing, there's sawing, so there's a bit of everything going," Earl said.

"If you had the top 20 guys in the world, 15 of them are going to be at Amuri."

Earl said the event relied heavily on local support.

"We've been incredibly lucky to get sponsors out of the area," he said.

"ITM are our main sponsor, along with Craigmere Farming and Allied Petroleum. Then we've got all the local contractors and businesses that get in behind it every year."

"We even have farmers sponsoring logs," he said.

"It's a real show of how good this community is. I don't think many communities could run an event like this."

The woodchopping runs Friday through Sunday, starting around 9am each day. Saturday falls within the Amuri A&P Show, with your show ticket giving access to the action.

Jordan said one of the strengths of the sport was the people within it.

"It's a pretty cool sport like that," he said.

"The friendships I've made over the years have been incredible."

"You see everyone just about every weekend through the summer. A lot of them are just like your family."

He said the mental side of the sport was as important as the physical.

"A lot of it is mental, but it depends if you let it get on top of you," he said.

"Especially when you're training on your own, it's just you and your own head."

He said one of the biggest challenges was returning from injury.

"You feel good and you feel like you should be going good, but your timing's not there," he said.

"When people start beating you, they are probably the harder times."

Despite competing on the world stage, Jordan said he still enjoyed the grassroots events.

"Love it," he said.



Jack Jordan on the springboard, one of the sport's most technical disciplines.

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A century of community — and pigs on the run

Mayfield A&P Show celebrates 100 years



Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

There aren't many events that can claim a century of crowds, competitions, and community spirit. But on March 14, the Mayfield A&P Show will do just that, celebrating its 100th show with a day that promises to be as lively and family-friendly as ever.

From livestock judging to trade stalls, tractor pulls and the famous pig racing, the Mayfield Show has built a reputation as one of Canterbury's most relaxed and entertaining country days out.

Show president James Murdoch says the event has evolved over time, but the heart of it has stayed the same.

"I guess its current format was probably established with the downturn in farm subsidies in the eighties," he said.

"It went from the traditional A&P show — and it still has those traditional features — to more of a fun day out for the family."

The pigs that stole the show

For many, the first thing that comes to mind when the Mayfield Show is mentioned is the pig racing.

It's been running for more than three decades and has become the show's unofficial trademark.

"Pig racing's been going for about 32 years," Murdoch said.

"It's been the flagship of the Mayfield Show really."

While companies sponsor the pigs, it's not quite the science some might expect.

"They bet on a number more than the pig, because the pigs all look the same. The numbers get changed, so it's a real luck of the draw. But it's fun. They're quirky creatures and people just love it."

And that's exactly the point.

"It just makes people smile," Murdoch said.

New twists and old favourites

Alongside the pig racing, the ever-popular tractor pull will return, along with a full programme of traditional livestock and equestrian events, trade stalls, food, shearing, vintage machinery and family entertainment.

There's also the return of a piano demolition contest.

The challenge? Rugby teams will compete to break a piano down into pieces small enough to fit through a seat.

"Some people would say they're just smashing a piano," Murdoch said.

"But it's just a bit of fun."

Other attractions include a digger driver competition, Pedalmania bicycles for the

kids, and a fire brigade rescue demonstration.

"It's just a good day out," he said. "The usual things — food, trade sites, and plenty to see."

A show built to lift spirits

While the 2026 show marks a major milestone, its community-first approach has deep roots.

Murdoch recalls that when farm subsidies were removed in the 1980s, the show committee at the time made a simple decision.

"Farming took a big hit. I believe that year they didn't charge anybody at the gate. They just wanted people to come."

That focus on affordability and community still shapes the show today.

Centennial project leaves a legacy

To mark the 100-year milestone, the show committee formed a special centennial subcommittee to come up with a lasting project.

"We wanted something more than just planting a tree," Murdoch said.

The result was a full refurbishment of the historic produce shed - a building with its own wartime history.

"During the Second World War it was used as a rifle range and stored blankets and children's clothing in case people needed to be evacuated out of Christchurch."

The building has now been completely upgraded, with new cladding, lining, shelving, wiring, and lighting.

"It's turned an old building into a modern one. It's now bird and vermin proof, which will make the show set-up much easier. It's got a really cool feel to it."

What began as a pipe dream became a \$110,000 project, funded through grants and community fundraising.

"We've actually got surplus funds left over to put the finishing touches on it."

The renovation has also earned the produce shed Royal Show status, a significant recognition.

"We made an application to the Royal Agricultural Society and got royal status for the produce shed as an event, which is very fitting."

Generations of connection

Murdoch himself is a fourth-generation farmer in the district and has been involved with the show since the 1980s.

"I think I was selling back numbers for horses back then," he said.

For him, the show's value is simple.

"It's a great place for people to get together — through working bees, projects, and the show day itself. Historically it's been where farmers exhibit their skills, but it's also just about community."

And the best part?

"Seeing kids being able to run around. Seeing families enjoying themselves."

For many, the first thing that comes to mind when the Mayfield Show is mentioned is the pig racing. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



The renovation of the produce shed has earned the building Royal Show status, a significant recognition.



2026 Mayfield Show President James Murdoch says the shows focus on community and a family day out has remained through the 100 years of the event.

SHOW DAY INFO BOX

Event: 100th Mayfield A&P Show

Date: Saturday, March 14, 2026

Tickets: Adults \$20, children free.

Venue: Mayfield Showgrounds, Mid Canterbury

Info: www.mayfieldshow.com

Show Highlights:

- Iconic pig racing (running for 30+ years)
- Tractor pull
- Piano demolition contest
- Digger driver competition
- Livestock and equestrian events
- Produce and home industries
- Fire brigade rescue demonstration
- Trade stalls and food vendors
- Family entertainment all day

Wānaka A&P Show 2026: Celebrating rural

Two Raw Sisters will give live cooking demonstrations at the Life & Leisure Local Larder, celebrating fresh, seasonal produce at the Wānaka A&P Show. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



Young spectators gather at the main stage, soaking up live music and entertainment, part of the show's expanded programme for 2026.



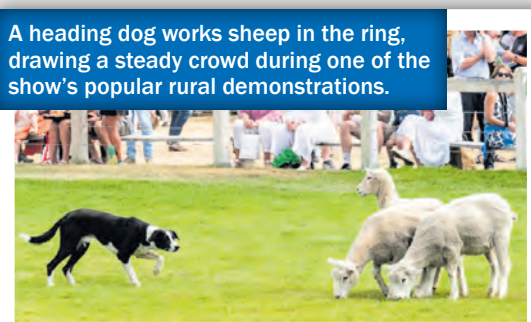
Jack Russell handlers line up ahead of the much-loved Jack Russell races — always a crowd favourite.



Creativity on display in the Home Industry Pavilion, where entrants showcase produce, baking and imaginative fruit and vegetable creations.



Jack Russells sprint for the finish line as spectators cheer from the fence during one of the show's most energetic events.



A heading dog works sheep in the ring, drawing a steady crowd during one of the show's popular rural demonstrations.



A Merino ram is assessed during livestock judging, highlighting the strong agricultural focus at the heart of the Wānaka A&P Show.

Friends catch up over a drink at the show bar, with live entertainment extending into the evening for the first time this year.



CLAIRE INKSON

The Wānaka A&P Show has grown into one of the South Island's biggest rural gatherings — but at its heart, it remains exactly what an A&P show should be: a celebration of farming, families and community. Running over two days in mid-March, the show draws farmers from across the lower South Island, many of whom lock it into their calendars months out. It's a chance to reconnect, compare notes, showcase livestock, and bring the kids along for a proper country day out. Marketing coordinator Annabel Roy says while Wānaka has a reputation as a destination town, the show itself is firmly rooted in agriculture. "This is first and foremost a rural show. The livestock competitions are strong, the cattle classes are big, and there's real pride in the farming skills on display - fencing, farriery, fleece, equestrian. It's built for rural people." The Wānaka Show is run by the Upper Clutha A&P Society - and what makes it truly distinctive is

what happens after the gates close. Proceeds from the show help fund the work of the Upper Clutha A&P Foundation, which reinvests back into the district through grants supporting leadership, agriculture, sustainability and rural wellbeing. The foundation offers two key grants:

- Capability Development Grants, helping individuals grow skills in leadership, agriculture and future thinking.
- Rural Development and Well-being Grants, supporting community groups working in environmental protection, sustainable practices, infrastructure and local economic resilience.

Previous funding has backed initiatives including the Women's Health Bus and local catchment groups — practical, grassroots support that flows directly back into rural communities. "It's not just about running a show," Roy says. "The funds raised go back into the Upper Clutha. That's something we're really proud of."

What's new for 2026

While tradition remains central, this year brings several new additions. For the first time, live music will run into the evening, giving visitors the option to stay on site and make a full weekend of it. Food also takes a bigger role this year, with demonstrations continuing to be a popular drawcard. Personalities like Two Raw Sisters — a well-known New Zealand food duo — are confirmed to be doing live kitchen demos in the Life & Leisure Local Larder area, celebrating regional produce and simple seasonal fare. There's also a new Strongest Man and Strongest Woman competition, plus the return of the Agri Exchange hub, showcasing innovation and new ideas across the agricultural sector. A standout addition is the All Breeds Beef Youth Round Up — a hands-on initiative aimed at getting young people involved in cattle showing. Participants learn from experienced mentors before stepping into the cattle ring on

show day, helping grow the next generation of rural competitors. **Still proudly old-school** Despite the expanded entertainment, Roy is clear that the soul of the show hasn't shifted. "Celebrate Rural is really our guiding principle," she says. "We love the retail and the shopping, but that's almost a by-product. The agricultural and pastoral side always comes first." That's evident in the packed livestock schedule, the bustling Home Industry Pavilion — filled with baking, preserves, fibre crafts and produce — and the much-loved Jack Russell races. For families, there's plenty on offer, including free kids' activities and a new Silk & Circus performance group made up of young Upper Clutha acrobats. It remains one of the most accessible and affordable ways to introduce children to rural life. Roy's personal favourite? The Home Industry Pavilion. "It's a celebration of timeless skills — preserving, gardening, natural fibres. It's inspiring."

More than a show With hundreds of trade sites, strong livestock entries and crowds that rival the country's biggest A&P events, the Wānaka Show has become a fixture for rural South Islanders. But its impact stretches well beyond two days in March. "It's about connection," Roy says. "People catching up, families spending time together, and celebrating both our agricultural heritage and our future." For first-timers, her advice is simple: "You really have to see it to believe it."

WĀNAKA A&P SHOW 2026

When: Friday 13 & Saturday 14 March | 8.30am-5pm
Where: Wānaka Showgrounds & Pembroke Park, 15 McDougall St
Tickets: Online or at gate

110 years strong: Amuri A&P Show set for big day out



2026 Amuri Show president Guy Blomfield and wife Marie. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



One of the standout features of the show will be woodchopping, which will see a New Zealand versus Australia test series held as part of a three-day timber sports programme.

CLAIRE INKSON

There will be the crack of axes, the rumble of jet boats, the thud of hooves and the smell of hot pies in the air. For one day, Rotherham will come alive as the Amuri A&P Show marks 110 years, bringing together everything that makes a country show what it is - livestock, competition, community and a good dose of entertainment.

Held on the first Saturday in March, the show has long been a highlight of the North Canterbury calendar, blending tradition with a few fresh additions to keep things interesting.

Show president Guy Blomfield says while the show has evolved over the years, the heart of it remains the same.

"It's a really strong show. We're lucky to have a good community behind us," he says.

"It's about getting people together, farmers, families, locals, and just having a good day out."

This year's programme offers plenty to draw a crowd, with traditional elements sitting alongside some new attractions.

One of the standout features is the woodchopping, which will see a New Zealand versus Australia test series held as part of a three-day timber sports programme.

For a rural show of this size, attracting international competitors is no small feat.

"It's pretty special," Blomfield says.

"To have world champion axemen coming over from Australia, and the best in New Zealand here as well, that's huge for us."

The event has grown steadily in recent years, driven by the efforts of passionate organisers working behind the scenes to bring it together.

Also new this year is a large-scale jet boat display, with more than 40 boats expected to attend.

Organised by locals, the display reflects the region itself, with the Hurunui and Waiau rivers on the doorstep and jet boating a big part of local life.

"It's something a bit different, but it fits the area," Blomfield says.

Alongside the headline attractions, the main ring will be busy throughout the day, with horse and pony events running from early morning through to the afternoon.

Sheep shearing will be running from 10am, and Akaroa Salmon staff will be

giving a presentation in the entertainment tent.

The grand parade, young achiever award and ever popular terrier races will all feature, before the action shifts to the rodeo.

Steer riding classes for juniors, novices and experienced riders will be followed by the chance to see some of the country's bigger bucking bulls in action.

"There's always a big crowd for that," Blomfield says.

The show traditions are still strong from the produce shed and trade displays through to a full range of food and stalls.

A pie-eating competition, using Culverden Bakery mince pies, is expected to draw a crowd, with competitors given two and a half minutes to eat as many pies as they can. "We're just going nice and simple, a good old mince pie," Blomfield says.

The event is open to those aged 13 and over, with a \$10 entry fee.

Local singer songwriter Lexi Sandford will perform during the day and again at the community barbecue, which rounds out the event from 5pm.

Run by the local Young Farmers, the barbecue is free for attendees.

An auction of prizes, including a helicopter ride and accommodation packages, help to carry the day into the evening.

For Blomfield, who has been involved in the show for many years, it is that sense of community that matters most.

He and his wife Marie farm at Longbrook Dairy where they are equity partners and contract milk around 970 cows.

Marie's family also has strong ties to the show, with her grandfather serving as president in 1978 and her aunt in 2011.

"It's a full day," Blomfield says.

"There's something for everyone and it's a good chance for people to come together."

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AMURI A&P SHOW: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Where: 15 Heaton Street, Rotherham
When: March 7, gates open 8am
Tickets: \$15 adults | \$5 children | preschoolers free
Payment: Eftpos available at the gate

Methven Show revs up with ute muster and Ranger record attempt

CLAIRE INKSON

The Methven A&P Show is set to return on March 21, with a growing ute muster and a Ford Ranger world record attempt running alongside the day's traditional programme.

The ute-focused events have quickly become one of the show's biggest drawcards, bringing an extra layer of energy and competition to the showgrounds.

"There's been a lot of talk about it. Every time I go out, someone mentions it," show president Mike McKenzie said.

With over \$6000 worth of prizes up for grabs, his message to those thinking about entering is simple.

"People are paying to come into the Show anyway, so just bring your ute. Instead of parking on the street, you might as well park in the paddock and be part of it."

Adding to the ute line-up, Gluyas Motor Group will have the new Ford Ranger Super Duty on display, giving locals a chance to see it in person.

Sales Manager Chris Hart says there has already been strong interest.

"It's exciting for us to be able to showcase the all-new Ranger Super Duty at the Methven Show. There's been a lot of talk about it, especially with people needing a bit more towing and carrying capacity, so it'll be good for locals to see it up close.

"It's really designed for those who are pushing their vehicles every day — whether that's on farm, towing, or carrying heavier loads. There's nothing quite like seeing it in person to get a feel for what it can do.

"The Ranger's a big part of rural life around here, so being involved in the world record attempt is something we're really looking forward to. We're a local business, and supporting events like the Methven Show and the Ute Muster is something that matters to us."

While the utes might grab the headlines, it's the kids who often steal the show.

The Lions Top Team Competition is back, giving primary school children the chance to get stuck in, get competitive and have a bit of fun.

Teams of four take on everything from tyre races and wheelbarrow relays to sack races and three-legged races — equal parts teamwork and good old-fashioned fun.

There is also a strong line-up of activities for younger competitors, including a sheep shearing competition for kids, giving them a chance to have a go and be part of the action.

For McKenzie, who has been involved for around 15 years, it is the community behind the event that keeps it going.

"It's a community show," he said. "There's a lot of different events

that involve the community and a lot of people behind the scenes making it happen."

While around 40 people sit on the committee, more than 200 people are involved on show day itself, helping run everything from the stock yards to the pavilion.

This year, the show is also taking time to recognise a part of the rural workforce that is often behind the scenes, with the theme celebrating the region's immigrant workforce.

"It's about saying thank you really - for what they bring to the productivity and life of our region," McKenzie said.

The theme will be reflected through food stalls, pavilion displays and competitions, including baking entries featuring different national flags.

In its 110th year, the Methven Show still delivers all the traditional elements. Livestock and equestrian events run throughout the day, alongside woodchopping, pavilion competitions and the grand parade at 2pm.

There is also expected to be a strong showing from visiting competitors, including a number of woodchoppers travelling over from the West Coast.

As the afternoon rolls on, the focus shifts to the main arena - and things start to ramp up.

"That's where it all happens from about four o'clock onwards," McKenzie said.

Events like the ute tug of war,



Utes line up at the Methven A&P Show, with the growing Ute Muster quickly becoming one of the day's biggest drawcards. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON



The new Ford Ranger Super Duty will be on display at the show, giving locals a chance to see the heavy-duty workhorse up close. PHOTO SUPPLIED

human tug of war, gumboot throwing and sheaf tossing bring a mix of competition and entertainment, often drawing a strong crowd.

"There's always something going on. It's a lot of fun."

Behind the scenes, the show also plays a role in supporting the wider community, with proceeds going

back into local initiatives, including the Ōpuke Innovation Hub.

For McKenzie, the reason the Methven Show continues to thrive is simple.

"It's about getting people off the farm and together for the day," he said.

"It's a good chance to catch up and be part of the community."



At its core, The Methven Show is a community event for the whole family. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON



The sheep colouring competition at the Methven A&P Show provides a splash of colour. PHOTO SUPPLIED



Top Team Competition



Methven A & P Show 21st March 2026
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Senior Event
(Yr's 7 & 8)

- Start Time 11 am
- Tyre Race
- Wheelbarrow Race
- Plank Race
- Scarecrow Competition

Junior Event
(Yr's 5 & 6)

- Start time 12 noon
- Sack Race
- Three legged Race
- Tyre Race
- Balloon Race

Venue: Methven A & P grounds
Enter as many teams as you can, no limits.

Convenor: Di Callaghan
Ph: 027 439 9299
Email: calldavid@yahoo.com

METHVEN A&P SHOW

When: March 21 2026

Where: Methven Showgrounds, Canterbury

Methven Ute Muster & Ford Ranger Record Attempt — running alongside Methven A&P Show.

Ute Muster (open to all ute makes and models), Ford Ranger world record attempt, multiple judged categories, ute tug-of-war and the new Hers Not His category.

Register (optional):

Ford Ranger owners are encouraged to register ahead of time to help organisers plan numbers. <https://www.proudtobeafarmernz.com/utemuster>

More information:

Methven A&P Show — <https://www.methvenshow.co.nz>

Follow: Instagram: @methvenutemuster





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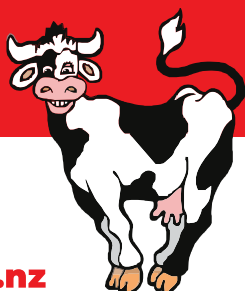
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The Farmers Fast Five: where we ask a farmer five quick questions about farming, and what agriculture means to them. Today we talk to Otaua dairy farmer Delilah Flavell.

1 What did your journey into farming look like?

I grew up in Otaua around dairy farming, so being on a farm has always felt like home. My first jobs as a kid were teat spraying and helping feed the calves and I quickly learned that I loved being outdoors and working with the cows. After finishing college, I went dairy farming full-time for a few years. I then moved into a role as a large animal vet technician while still relief milking over the last couple of years. I always knew I'd return to farming at some point; it was never a matter of if, just when. Now I'm back where I feel I belong, recently returning to dairy farming full-time here in Otaua.

2 Tell us a little bit about your farming operation.

I'm currently involved in a split calving operation, running around 140 autumn calving cows on one farm and approximately 200 spring calving cows on another. Each shed is set up with an in-shed feeding system and we also feed out maize or silage on a feed pad as part of the system. This setup helps us manage feed effectively across the different calving groups and seasons.

3 What challenges have you faced in your farming business, and how have you tackled those challenges?

Like most farming operations, weather and seasonal variability have been some of the biggest challenges. Running a split calving system also requires careful planning to meet the different demands of autumn and spring calving herds at the same time. To manage this, paying close attention to cow health, feed management and day to day observations has been key, along with being willing to adapt and adjust plans as conditions change.

4 What has been a major highlight for you in your farming journey?

Becoming an ambassador for Kaiwaka Clothing is definitely one of the biggest highlights of my farming journey. I've worn their gear since I first started farming, so to now be supported by a brand I genuinely trust and use every day has been incredibly rewarding. Another major highlight has been seeing how far my Instagram has grown. I love sharing photos of the cows and snippets of daily farm life and it's been really special to see how popular it's become and that others genuinely enjoy and connect with that side of farming.

5 What advice would you have for the next generation of farmers?

Don't be afraid to start at the bottom and take every opportunity to learn. Ask questions, listen to those with experience and get hands on wherever you can. Farming isn't always easy, but if you genuinely enjoy the work and care about your animals, that passion will carry you a long way!

Lifestyle

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A RETURN TO RURAL ROOTS

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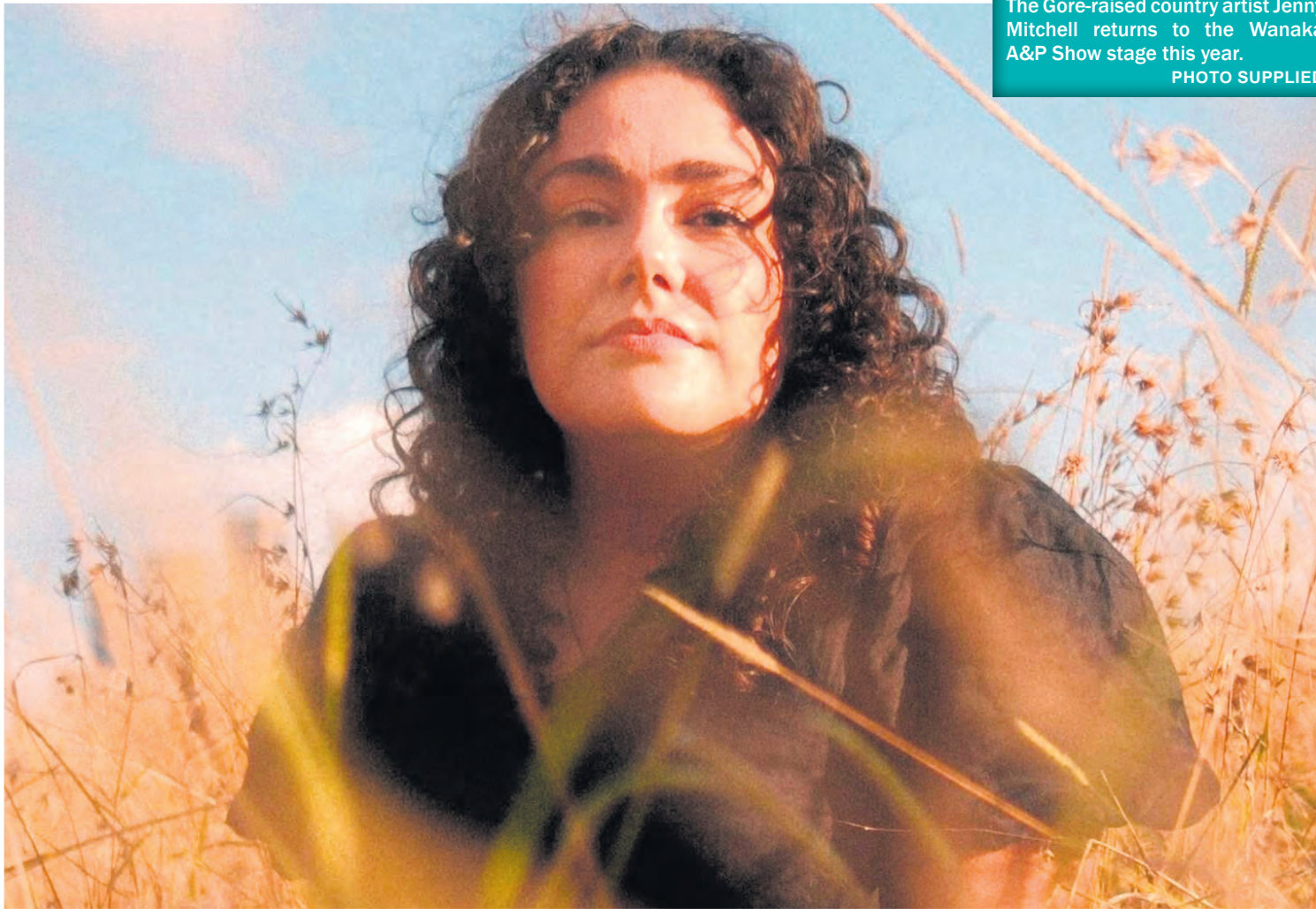
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Jenny Mitchell: Bringing the heart of country to the Wanaka Show



The Gore-raised country artist Jenny Mitchell returns to the Wanaka A&P Show stage this year. PHOTO SUPPLIED



Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Country artist Jenny Mitchell has spent the past year on big stages across Australia and New Zealand, opening for international acts, winning awards and building serious momentum.

But when she steps onto the Wanaka A&P Show stage on March 13 & 14, it's a kind of homecoming.

Because long before the tours and the awards, there were A&P shows, rural halls and small-town crowds.

"I grew up going to A&P shows and field days," Mitchell says. "There's something special about everyone coming together at the end of the day and having music to gather around."

Now 27 and already one of New Zealand's most recognised country artists, Mitchell returns to a setting that feels familiar.

Raised in Gore, she grew up immersed in country music, performing alongside her father Ron Mitchell — himself a respected country singer — and her twin sisters.



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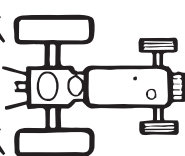
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But her early audiences weren't festival crowds.

"Most of our gigs growing up were in retirement villages," she says. "Dad always believed music is something to be shared. That's how we learned to play for people."

Mitchell will perform at Wanaka with her band — and one of her sisters — delivering songs from her latest album 'Forest House', alongside a few well-loved covers.

The team behind the show has invested in creating a more dedicated music space this year, turning the performance into a true end-of-day gathering point.

And Wanaka feels personal.

"I've got quite a bit of family in the area, so it's always emotional playing there," she says. "It's harder when people you know are in the crowd, but it's also really special."

A Big Year and bigger stages

Mitchell may be young, but her trajectory has been more meteor than rising star.

An Aotearoa Music Award winner for Best Country Artist and a four-time Australian Golden Guitar nominee, she has toured extensively across New Zealand and Australia. In 2025 she opened for global folk-rock band The Lumineers and spent much of the year touring alongside Australian country icon Kasey Chambers.

"That tour was life-changing," she says. "Kasey's albums were part of our household growing up."

Mitchell's latest album, 'Forest House', was recorded in a remote rural house in New Zealand, surrounded by native bush and

open skies.

The record explores what happens "within the four walls of a house" — the often unseen and unspoken joy, tension and the heartbreak.

It's storytelling at its most honest — hauntingly beautiful yet relatable in a world of polished Instagram stories and ai content.

"It's all about that storytelling and a connection with an audience and being able to hopefully tell stories that they relate to."

And perhaps that is why country music feels more mainstream than ever.

In a world of digital noise, algorithms and short attention spans, Mitchell believes audiences are gravitating back to something simpler.

"I think people are craving real storytelling again," she says.

"There are people my age who never would have listened to country at school, and now they're wearing cowboy boots and heading to festivals."

"There's been a real shift."

She points to artists like Kaylee Bell helping bring pop-country to radio audiences, while singer-songwriters such as Tami Neilson and Marlon Williams continue to shape the alternative country space.

"What I love is that there's space for everyone," she says. "You can have Marlon Williams and Kaylee Bell in the same conversation."

Back to the Paddock

While Wanaka will see Mitchell on a formal stage, she is also launching something entirely new in 2026: 'House of High Country' — a concert series that takes live

music directly onto farms around Aotearoa.

It's an idea Mitchell has been thinking about for years.

"The first one in Kingston has a shed where the audience will sit, and the stage will be set up in a paddock. After that, we'll just take each farm as it comes. Some places have big sheds, some don't. I love the challenge of figuring out how to bring the band and the show into different spaces. We'll just go wherever we go."

"I love the thought of stripping it all back. It's about storytelling and connection."

Each farm show will include a fundraiser barbecue supporting a local community group a school, sports club or cause identified by the host farm.

"The Give Back BBQ at each farm show will support a local community group: a school, sports club, whoever needs fundraising. In small towns, everyone knows where support is needed."

Mitchell has already raised funds for Forest & Bird and Women's Refuge through previous tours, generating more than 200 Safe Nights for women and children escaping violence.

"It was one of the most moving things I've ever done," Mitchell says. "So many people in my audience had personal connections to Refuge."

And on show day in Wanaka, when the dust settles and the crowd gathers, it won't be about awards or accolades.

It will be about songs shared at the end of a rural day — just as they always have been.

"Wanaka is such a beautiful place, and there'll be so many familiar faces there. I can't wait."

Award-winning country artist Jenny Mitchell, whose latest album *Forest House* was recorded in a remote rural setting. PHOTO NIKKI PARLANE



To follow Jenny Mitchell's music and upcoming tour dates, or to host a House Of High Country event on your farm visit www.jennymitchell.co.nz

Jenny Mitchell performs alongside her twin sisters. Music has always been a family affair for the Southland singer-songwriter. PHOTO JAMESON PHOTOGRAPHY



Skimming for glory at Lake Hāwea Station

Richie Laming at Lake Hāwea Station, where a childhood pastime has been turned into New Zealand's first national stone skimming championships. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

What could be more kiwi than skimming stones? A flat rock, a stretch of water, a bit of friendly competition — and suddenly everyone's eight years old again.

That simple lakeside pastime is about to get a national stage, with the first-ever Aotearoa Stone Skimming Championships set for May 16 at Lake Hāwea Station.

The idea came from station tourism manager Richie Laming, who was surprised to discover that while Scotland has hosted world championships for decades, New Zealand had never crowned its own national champion.

"It's almost a birthright here," he said. "Anyone with an arm, a stone and a body of water can do it. We're an island nation formed by glaciers, so we've got the perfect rocks and the perfect lakes."

The concept really gained traction after a cheating scandal at last year's world championships in Scotland suddenly put stone skimming back in the spotlight.

Laming saw an opportunity — and posted a video floating the idea to the Station's followers.

"We thought, why don't we just float the idea and say we'll host the inaugural New Zealand championships? The video got about 200,000 views, and then the media started rolling in."

From there, the event quickly took shape.

Organisers contacted the Scottish championships and secured two places at the world event for the New Zealand winners — one in the open men's division and one in the open women's.

But while a national title is on the line, the day is about more than serious competition.

"We'll definitely have some seasoned stone skimmers there," Laming said. "But we love the idea that a dark horse could turn up and take the title. It's that sort of sport

— anyone can have a go."

To keep the day entertaining, organisers are planning a mix of novelty events alongside the main competition, including a "Happy Skim-more" challenge, where competitors can run up and launch their stone as far as possible.

"It's competitive, but it's also just meant to be fun," Laming said.

The championships will take place at a private part of Lake Hāwea Station known as The Hide, offering lake and alpine views in a setting many people won't have visited before.

The event is also raising money for Melanoma New Zealand, with a goal of \$10,000 to support awareness, education and patient services. A mobile skin-check van will be onsite offering free checks.

"We have a world record on offer, but unfortunately we are also a world record holder for melanoma rates: we have one of the highest rates of diagnosis in the world, and also death rates. We associate melanoma with blue skies and beautiful water — the places we spend our summers. Melanoma is an unfortunate byproduct of spending time in New Zealand's pristine environment," Laming said. "So, we thought we could turn that around and create a really positive outcome in the same environment."

Around 150 competitors and 100 spectators are expected, with entertainment, food, guest appearances and plenty of lakeside action.

And while the organisers are taking the competition seriously — there'll even be a dedicated anti-cheating "Taskforce Skim" to inspect stones — the overall goal is simple.

"We just want to create something fun that brings people together," Laming said.

"It's something almost every Kiwi has done at some point in their life."

MORE INFO

Follow @lakehawealiving
www.lakehaweastation.com
www.melanoma.org.nz



The shores of Lake Hāwea Station will host the inaugural Aotearoa Stone Skimming Championships, with alpine views providing a dramatic backdrop for the event.



A simple kiwi tradition is turning competitive.

Connecting Women, Navigating Change: Emma Higgins on Ag's Next Chapter



Emma Higgins (left) of Rabobank, with Lisa Winchmore, the coordinator for the Winchmore branch of Rural Women New Zealand.. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



Emma Higgins, Senior Agricultural Analyst at Rabobank, says farmers are well used to thinking three steps ahead.



Amy Riach
AUTHOR

New Zealand farmers wear a lot of hats. They are managers, milkers, fencers, accountants, and sometimes all of the above, all at once.

Emma Higgins is no different. Growing up on a sheep and beef farm near Nelson, Higgins is the Senior Agricultural Analyst for Rabobank.

But she never imagined that she

would have a career in advising dairy farmers.

"My story starts on the farm, but I never wanted to be a farmer," she laughed.

In fact, Higgins studied law at University, before she "felt the draw" and fell in love with Canterbury agriculture.

Now, the Tasman local is a leading voice on local and global dairy markets, and she recently spoke to the women of Ashburton at the 100 year anniversary of Rural Women New Zealand.

Higgins is a national member of honour at Rural Women New Zealand, and inspired by the talent of Canterbury's community, she started a group branch of her own in Nelson, called Tasman Rural Women.

"The idea is to connect with

like-minded women. I wanted to create a network for myself, where I wasn't having to rely on my husband, my brothers, or my dad for information," Higgins said.

"That can often be the case in provincial towns. A lot of business is still done by men, and I wanted a community where I could learn from other women as well."

And as kiwi women continue to show up, and make a real impact in New Zealand agriculture, Higgins is looking forward to a very bright year.

But there is real change on the horizon, and Higgins spoke about the "exponential" pace of change in agriculture and New Zealand's agri-driven commodity markets.

"The world right now is moving at such a fast pace, especially in terms of the macro-environment,"

Higgins said.

"We have a situation where the global world order is fragmenting quite quickly, and what's happening half a world away has ripple effects, and ramifications for our New Zealand farmers."

Right now, all that change is having a really positive effect in terms of farmer revenue, Higgins told the Guardian.

"If we think about sheep meat, if we think about beef, we've just seen incredibly strong returns for our farmers, and the dairy price is really improving as well, from what was quite a low point at the end of the year."

"So for farmers, this is a really good season to be thinking forward, about what might this volatility bring [them]," Higgins said.

In the year to come, business as usual is becoming incredibly complicated, Higgins explained.

But kiwi farmers are used to thinking three steps ahead.

That's what kiwi's do best, according to Higgins, who said that managing the 2026 market is exactly like managing a laneway.

"You're trying to control the gate, so to speak, of the central laneway. You're trying to control who comes in, and when, and where, thinking three moves ahead."

Navigating change, expecting the unexpected, is a skill that New Zealand farmers already have at the ready.

For Higgins, the year ahead is going to be a very exciting one. Not only for kiwi farmers, but for all women in agriculture.

The power of the small

KATHRYN WRIGHT

If I asked you to name three or four events that have happened to you over the last few years, what comes to mind? Probably the big stuff. Accidents. Break ups. Graduations. Getting engaged. Someone dying. But notice that I didn't say major events.

Like most people, your mind likely jumped straight to the significant moments — the ones that feel dramatic or life defining — when the truth is that each and every day contains dozens of small events that can offer wonder, comfort, and meaning. Especially if you are on farm. We're wired to scan for the big things, but we live most of our lives in the small ones.

If you want proof, go to your camera roll after reading this. Look at the things you tend to take photos of: sunsets, animals, friends, loved ones, the ocean, your kids, a yummy meal, or something connected to an interest you care about. These are the tiny moments that make up the texture of your life. They're the things you instinctively reach for when something feels beautiful or grounding or worth remembering.

These small events are happening every day, and they're

often the things that give your life meaning. This isn't just about appreciating the small things — it's also about remembering that you don't need grand gestures or expensive purchases to feel good right now. You don't need to wait for a holiday, a milestone, or a big achievement to feel like your life is moving in the right direction. You can start with what's already here.

Some of my favourites:

- Swirly ice on windows
- The smell of cut grass
- Petting an animal
- The first sip of an espresso
- A freshly made bed
- Post exercise glow
- Getting up when the house is quiet

These are tiny, ordinary moments, but they're also the ones that anchor you. They remind you that you're alive, that you're connected to the world around you, and that joy doesn't always need to be loud.

And the same goes for the things you do to look after yourself. Doing stuff that helps you mentally and physically doesn't have to be massive. In fact, if you're constantly aiming for massive gestures, you're going to disappoint yourself pretty quickly. Big changes are great, but they're hard to sustain.

Small actions, on the other hand, are achievable, realistic, and surprisingly powerful.

What if you had a set of really small actions you could weave into your life every day — things that don't require huge motivation or money or time, but still help you feel more grounded, more capable, and more like yourself? The side benefit is that you instantly achieve something. You get a win. And wins stack.

Here are a few ideas:

- **Rest without feeling guilty.** It's human to need rest, and it makes you work (or play) better when you're not running on empty. Particularly if you are physically labouring all day on farm.
- **Give yourself more time to get somewhere.** Leave ten minutes early and avoid the road ragey, anxious rush.
- **Prep a couple of meals or snacks for the week.** Nothing fancy — just things that are good for your body and easy to grab.
- **Use social media a bit less.** If you normally spend an hour scrolling at night, make it 45 minutes and see what that extra 15 minutes makes space for.



- **Learn something new in ten minutes.** Read a page of a non fiction book, talk to your elderly neighbour, watch a short tutorial.
- **Ask someone for a hand if you're struggling.** It's hard, but people often like being asked.
- **Get into nature.** Pull a few weeds, stand barefoot on the grass, or step outside and breathe in the air. It's grounding in a way nothing else is.

None of these things are dramatic. None of them will earn you a certificate or a round of applause. But they're the kinds of actions that help you feel more in control of your day, more connected to yourself, and more able to handle whatever comes

next.

It doesn't take much. Usually it starts with something small — something you do have influence over, something you can win small gains on. And those tiny inroads often lead to bigger shifts. Not because you forced yourself into a huge transformation, but because you built a foundation of small, steady, meaningful actions.

Caring about the little things is underrated. But it's also one of the most reliable ways to feel better, to feel more present, and to feel like your life is full of moments worth noticing. The big events will always come and go. The small ones are what carry you.

Kathryn Wright
Registered Counsellor MNZAC
www.kathrynwright.co.nz



No driving, no worries. Visitors to the North Canterbury Wine & Food Festival can ride the rails to the event this year, on The Mainlander Train.

PHOTOS SUPPLIED

All aboard: North Canterbury Wine & Food Festival rides the rails into 2026



Around 18 local wineries will be showcased at the event.



Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

There is something satisfying about arriving at a summer festival without the stress of driving, parking, and working out how you are getting home at the end of the day. On Sunday March 8, festivalgoers can do exactly that, with a dedicated passenger train running from Christchurch straight to the gates of the North Canterbury Wine & Food Festival at Glenmark Domain.

For Matt Barbour, Chair of North Canterbury Winegrowers, the train has been a long time coming.

"The train's been on my wishlist for a long time," he says. "Transport can be an issue with people driving or getting home afterwards, so having the train from Christchurch gives us a massive point of difference. You hop on in Christchurch at Addington, it stops at Rangiora, then it literally delivers you to the gates of the festival."

The service is being operated by The Mainlander Train, with a return trip timed around the festival day. The train departs Addington Station at 9.21am, stops in Rangiora, then arrives in Waipara in time for gates opening at 10.30am. At the end of the day, it heads back to Christchurch, offering a simple, social option for people who want to enjoy the region's wine and food without having to worry about who's driving home.

"We've been working away behind the scenes with the Mainline train company who've come down," Barbour says.

"There's been a lot of chat around the festival for the last six to eight months, so to actually get something over the line has been amazing."

This year marks the 32nd edition of the festival — a fixture on the North Canterbury calendar that began in 1992 as the Waipara Wine and Food Celebration. Back then it was a small, relaxed pre-harvest gathering held on the grounds of Glenmark Church, with eight wineries taking part. As the wine industry expanded, the event grew with it. After the Canterbury earthquakes it moved to nearby Glenmark Domain, where the big oaks, open space and classic summer festival atmosphere have become part of its identity.

Today, the festival attracts around 4000 people, gathering under the oaks to celebrate North Canterbury's wines, food and laid-back rural charm.

"The domain is perfect," Barbour says. "You've got the oak trees for shade, open spaces for the two main stages, VIP tents in the middle, and food and wine stalls around. It just works beautifully for a summer festival."

The festival remains proudly regional.

"The North Canterbury Wine and Food Festival is basically our celebration of North Canterbury local wines and food," Barbour says. "There's a big focus on the wineries, but also the food producers."

This year includes around 18 wineries, with a deliberate focus on keeping it local.

"All the wineries are local. We don't have anyone from outside the region," he says. "North Canterbury runs from the Rakaia River to Hurunui, so while Waipara is central, there are wineries involved from outside Waipara too, like Tussock Creek and Mt Beautiful in Cheviot."

The oak trees at the Glenmark Domain make the location the perfect spot for a Summer's Day. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



Food is equally front and centre, with Made North Canterbury curating a tent of locally focused producers. Across the wider site, there are more than 70 stallholders, ranging from street food and casual bites through to premium offerings, plus a Brew Moon Beer Garden for those who prefer a cold pint in the sun.

Entertainment runs across two stages. The Main Stage opens at 10.30am with Henry McIlraith, followed by Simmer, Brad Staley, and a return performance from the New Zealand Army Band to close the day from 3.35pm to 5.00pm. The Jazz Stage offers a more laid-back soundtrack under the trees, with Chris and Frankie, the Army Band again, and After Five Jazz finishing the afternoon.

"Two main stages with mainly local acts," Barbour says. "Our main act this year is the New Zealand Army Band. They were a massive hit two years ago, so we've brought them back."

It is also a genuine family day out, with face painting, games, and a petting zoo.

"Very much a family atmosphere," Barbour says. "Kids are welcome, and we've got an animal area, alpacas and things like that, for them as well."

While the train is the headline, it is not the only transport option. Festival buses run from multiple Christchurch pickup points including Lincoln, Halswell, Cashmere, the CBD, Northwood, Rangiora, Woodend and Amberley. For those staying on, the region's accommodation continues to grow, with vineyard stays, hotels and Airbnbs dotted throughout North Canterbury.

The festival also lands in a milestone year for the region's wine story. Barbour says 2026 marks 40 years since the first harvest in North Canterbury.

"The vines were probably planted around 1982 or 1983, with the first harvest in 1986," he says. "Early plantings were mainly Riesling and aromatics, with some Pinot as well. It's pretty special to be celebrating that milestone."

Asked what makes North Canterbury distinctive, Barbour points to both soil and climate.

"Our soils are a big part of it — clay soils with limestone throughout the valley. We've got this little microclimate where we're protected by the hills, and we get warm days but cool nights from being close to the ocean," Barbour says.

In the end, it is not just a day of tasting. It is a snapshot of a region that backs itself.

"Our region is hugely passionate," Barbour says. "A lot of our wineries are family owned and have been for decades, and the same goes for our small food producers. We're massive champions of our region and just want to promote all the incredible things



It's not all about the wine: the event is also shining a spotlight on the region's food producers.

people are doing and the progress we're making."

Tickets range from standard admission through to a sober driver option, and a limited Loula Lounge VIP experience with stage views and curated tastings. Train packages are expected to be in high demand, and bus transport remains available if rail tickets sell out.

For one Sunday in March, the easiest way to Waipara might just be by rail. And if Barbour gets his wish, it could be the start of something bigger for Hurunui and north of Christchurch, too.

"If we get good uptake, it becomes something to build on for next year," he says. "I'm super excited to see how it progresses."

NORTH CANTERBURY WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL

Sunday 8 March 2026 | Glenmark Domain, Waipara
Gates open 10.30am | Finishes 5pm

- Dedicated Mainlander train from Christchurch (via Rangiora) direct to festival gates
- Around 18 local wineries + 70 food and artisan stallholders
- Live music across two stages, including NZ Army Band
- Brew Moon Beer Garden
- Family-friendly with petting zoo

Tickets: Standard \$50 | Sober driver \$30 | Under 18s free

VIP Loula Lounge and transport packages available

Info: ncwineandfood.co.nz | mainlander.co.nz

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Savoury Scone Loaf

Recipe by NZ Eggs



The Details

- **Difficulty:** Easy
- **Servings:** 10 slices
- **Prep time:** 20 minutes
- **Cooking time:** 45 minutes

Ingredients:

- 250ml milk
- 3 large eggs
- 200ml vegetable oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 tsp fresh rosemary, finely chopped
- 150g feta, crumbled
- 80g pitted olives, chopped (green or black)
- 80g sun-dried tomatoes, chopped

- 3 spring onions, thinly sliced
- 280g plain flour
- 1 tbsp baking powder
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 tbsp mixed seeds (sesame, sunflower, pumpkin), optional

Directions

1. In a large bowl, whisk together the eggs, milk, and oil. Stir in the feta, olives, sun-dried tomatoes, spring onions, and herbs until evenly distributed. Season well with a good grind of black pepper.
2. In a separate bowl, mix the flour, baking powder, and salt. Gently fold the dry ingredients through the wet mixture until just combined — take care not

to overmix.

3. Transfer the batter to the prepared loaf tin, smoothing the top lightly, and sprinkle with the seed mix.
4. Bake for 35-40 minutes, or until golden brown and a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean.
5. Remove from the oven and allow the loaf to cool in the tin for 10 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack. Slice and serve warm or at room temperature.

Notes

- Add a pinch of chili flakes with the herbs for a subtle kick.
- Any slices leftover from the day of baking are fantastic toasted. Delicious with butter, olive oil, or cream cheese.



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