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Pages 16-17

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M: 022 1299 496
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E: claire.inkson@theguardian.co.nz
Advertising
Call: 022 472 4100
Email Kim Gavin at:
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FARMING WHEN THE WORLD IS BURNING

There's a strange sense of déjà vu creeping in.

Fuel alerts. Government briefings. Talk of supply chains, disruption, and uncertainty. A country bracing for what might come next.

It's hard not to think back to COVID.

Back then, New Zealand moved through clearly defined alert levels. The rules were visible. The messaging was simple. Stay home. Save lives. Be kind.

And for the most part, it worked.

But more than that, something shifted in how the country saw farming.

Food insecurity became front-page news. Supermarket shelves were stripped bare. Suddenly, the question wasn't what people wanted to eat, but whether they could get it at all.

And in that moment, farmers became the heroes.

While cities slowed, farms didn't. Cows still needed milking. Crops still needed harvesting. The system kept moving because it had to. There was a renewed respect for the people producing food, and a quiet understanding of just how fragile that system can be.

People talked about self-sufficiency. Communities shared. There was a sense, however brief, that we were all connected to the same chain.

It didn't last long.

And this time feels different.

The Government's proposed fuel alert levels might mirror COVID on paper, but the reality on the ground is far more complicated. There is no "business as usual" when diesel is under pressure.

And here's the risk.

This time, farmers could easily be cast as the villains.

Not because they've done anything wrong, but because rising food prices are visible, immediate, and personal. When grocery bills climb, people look for someone to blame. And the nuance of fuel costs, freight pressures, and supply chain constraints can get lost very quickly.

Farmers are hit twice.

They're paying more to produce food, while being blamed for the price of it.

Because farmers are price takers, not price makers. And that's something urban New Zealand still doesn't fully understand.

And David Birkett, arable chair of Federated Farmers of New Zealand, is right.

This isn't just a fuel crisis.

It's a cost-of-farming crisis.

Diesel is the backbone of farming. Strip that back, even slightly, and the effects are immediate. Tractors don't run. Harvest windows get missed. Transport slows. Costs climb.

And every one of those costs flows through the system.

We're already seeing signs of strain.

Yes, dairy and red meat have been performing well. On paper, parts of the sector look strong.

But fuel has a way of cutting across everything.

This is where the narrative matters.

Because the reality hasn't changed. Farmers are still doing what they've always done, keeping food moving in the background. The difference is how that story is told, and whether people understand what sits behind the price tag at the checkout.

During COVID, the connection was obvious. This time, it's easier to miss.

We've forgotten, very quickly, what it means to rely on the land. To rely on each other. To understand that food doesn't just appear on shelves, and that resilience isn't built overnight.

By the time this lands in your mailbox, things may look different again.

That's the nature of it. It's a moving feast.

Farming didn't stop during COVID.

But a fuel shortage doesn't care about resilience.

Be part of our growing rural community — follow @ruralguardian on Instagram and Facebook for more real-life stories, farm inspiration, lifestyle features and what's coming up in the next issue.

Without diesel, the system doesn't bend. It breaks.

If you talk to older farmers, they'll tell you this isn't the first time things have felt tight. The Muldoon era wasn't easy. Nor were the years that followed. Farming has always operated close to the edge.

And yet, it endures.

Not because it's easy, but because farmers adapt. They find a way through. They always have.

Maybe this time, part of that resilience is also about telling the story better. Helping people understand what's really driving the price of food. Having those conversations beyond the farm gate.

Because this isn't just a rural issue.

And the more people who understand that, the better we'll all get through it.

New Zealand Merino enters new era as Zentera

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

After three decades building global demand for New Zealand's finest wool, the New Zealand Merino Company is preparing for its next chapter.

From March 17 the company will operate under a new name — Zentera Wool Company — a move CEO Angus Street says reflects both the changing global market for natural fibres and the company's broader international role.

Street describes the shift as an evolution rather than a reinvention.

"It's just really an evolution of NZM," he says. "We're able to do that because we're building on the legacy of the last 30 years and those early New Zealand merino growers who realised that creating demand and adding value to their wool was going to be the differentiator that allowed them to stay in their farming enterprises for generations to come."

The new name signals the company's ambition to position itself as a global leader in wool, while also reflecting the fact that its grower base now extends beyond New Zealand.

"We've been sourcing wool from Australia since 2010 and South Africa since 2018," Street says. "We've also been selling strong wool for about the last decade. Having a global name aligns with our global aspirations, but it also removes confusion in the marketplace."

Zentera currently supplies wool from more than 600 growers across New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.

Certifi d wool demand rising

Central to the company's strategy is the continued development of its ZQ and ZQ+ certification programmes, which verify wool produced under environmental, animal welfare and social responsibility standards.

Street says global demand for certified wool is increasing rapidly, driven both by consumer expectations and tightening international regulations.

"We've got increasing demand from brands for certified wool, and specifically demand for ZQ and ZQ+," he says. "That's driven by the regulatory environment, but also by consumer expectations."

Brands supplying into Europe in particular are facing growing requirements around supply chain transparency and environmental claims.

"We are seeing strong demand for verified natural fibres with clear environmental performance and transparent supply chains," Street says.

While certification can sometimes be viewed by farmers as another layer of paperwork, Street says the goal is to ensure growers capture long-term value for their wool.

"There absolutely is a premium for certified wool," he says. "You can see it right now in the wool market. There is a premium for RWS-certified (Responsible Wool Standard) wool above non-certified wool, and then on top of that there is a premium for ZQ."

In addition to price premiums, Zentera also works with brands to establish long-term contracts that can provide growers with greater certainty in a volatile market.

"Growers who work with us are able to supply into long-term contracts guaranteeing them a price over a longer period of time," he says.

Addressing compliance fatigue

The push toward certification comes at a time when farmers across multiple sectors are already dealing with increasing regulatory and reporting requirements.

Street acknowledges concerns around compliance fatigue and duplication of data.

"There absolutely is frustration around audit burden and duplication of data collection," he says.

Zentera is now working with other industry partners and technology providers to explore ways to streamline data collection and reduce duplication across the supply chain.

"We know certification will increasingly become a requirement to access the markets that are willing to pay a premium," Street says. "Our role is to simplify, streamline and remove some of that burden, while at the same time building demand and recognition for growers' wool."

Rather than acting as a regulator, he says the company sees itself as a partner working alongside growers.

"If we positioned ourselves as a regulator, compliance becomes a zero-sum game," Street says. "We see ourselves as a partner with growers to help access the opportunities that the textile sector is demanding."

Strong wool momentum

The company's expanded focus also includes strong wool, which has historically struggled to capture consistent premiums.

However, Street says demand for certified strong wool is strengthening, particularly in Asian markets.

"Strong wool certainly has had its ups and downs, but we are seeing genuine demand coming through," he says.

That renewed demand has already been reflected in recent auction results.

Earlier this year the New Zealand Merino Company recorded its first ever certified crossbred offering at the Melbourne wool auctions, where crossbred hogget fleece broke the $9/kg barrier for the first time. Prices ranged from $7.80/kg to a top of $9.24/kg clean for a line of 30-micron hoggets from James and Sharron Scott of Otago.

Another strong result came from Traquair Station growers Charles, Pip and William Reid, whose 31-micron hogget fleece reached $8.55/kg clean.

Adult wool in the 34–36 micron range sold between $7.08 and $7.35/kg — levels that industry veteran Keith Ovens, NZM general manager of commercial, described as unprecedented.

"I'm not sure I've ever seen crossbred wool sell at these levels in my 48 years of marketing wool," he said.

The results followed several years of work by NZM to build global demand for certified crossbred wool, particularly in Asian manufacturing markets. The company says careful management of supply is critical to maintaining premiums as demand grows.

"That demand is coming out of China and India, which are huge markets for strong wool," Street says. "But it is demand for certified strong wool, not commodity wool."

For growers willing to invest in certification and quality presentation, he says the additional effort is beginning to deliver results.

"The additional effort is certainly paying dividends."

A global wool story

Street believes the rebrand positions growers to be part of a larger international narrative around natural fibres.

"There is a moment in the world where consumers are shifting back to what is natural, real and authentic," he says.

"Wool has been a fibre for hundreds of generations. This evolution allows New Zealand growers to be part of a bigger global story, and that recognition ultimately leads to better returns."

While he acknowledges that any change can take time for growers to embrace, Street believes the company's core values will remain unchanged.

"A brand is not just a logo or a name," he says. "It's the people, the relationships and the trust that has been built over decades. None of that changes."

Zentera Wool Company (formerly NZ Merino) chief executive Angus Street says the rename removes confusion in the market place. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

Cassidy Grey, Commercial Operations Specialist Zentera, and Omarama Station owner and Zentera board director Richard Subtil.

Richard Subtil (owner) – Omarama Station , Cassidy Grey (Zentera) on Omarama Station.

Fresh focus for Diesel Tech Fernside

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

A new chapter is underway at Diesel Tech's Fernside branch, with Alastair Malcolm stepping into the role of branch manager earlier this year.

Malcolm officially took up the position on January 5, bringing with him nearly a decade of experience in machinery and equipment sales, including eight years with Clark Equipment working with the Bobcat product range.

While much of that time was spent in the construction and material handling sector, Malcolm says it was his growing involvement with agricultural customers that ultimately drew him toward the rural industry.

"In the last couple of years, I started working more closely with agricultural businesses and I really enjoyed it," he said.

"I liked the pace of the industry and the people involved in it. It just suited me."

Through that work Malcolm began interacting with Diesel Tech and its founder, Chris Barnes, who started the company in Methven, after working as an agricultural mechanic.

Barnes built the business initially around servicing and repairs before expanding into machinery and equipment sales.

"He grew the business from servicing and repairs, built a team of mechanics and then started looking at how he could offer farmers something a bit different."

Today Diesel Tech is supplying European equipment brands such as Elho, Mascar, Mandam and others that specialise in specific jobs such as mowing, baling and cultivation.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, Malcolm says the company focuses on matching equipment to the needs of individual farms.

"A lot of the products we bring in are from smaller European manufacturers who are willing to work with us and make adjustments for New Zealand conditions," he said.

"It means the equipment can be more specific to how farmers here actually work."

Alongside equipment sales, the Fernside branch provides a full servicing and repair operation, including mobile technicians working across North Canterbury.

The team currently includes four mobile technicians and an apprentice, with fully equipped service vehicles carrying tools and common parts for on-farm breakdowns.

"We're out on farm every day," Malcolm said.

"Our technicians have fully set up utes so they can respond to breakdowns quickly and keep farmers moving."

The workshop also handles hydraulic hoses, generators and air-conditioning repairs, giving farmers access to a wide range of services through a single provider.

Malcolm says the goal is to combine the professionalism of a large dealership with the responsiveness and relationships of a local business.

"Chris has always wanted Diesel Tech to sit in the middle," he said.

"You've got the big dealerships with global brands and very professional systems, and then you've got smaller local workshops with great relationships but not always the same reach.

"Our goal is to offer both : dealer-level professionalism with local support."

That approach is backed by a team Malcolm describes as experienced and highly skilled, with several technicians bringing years of industry experience, including backgrounds running their own businesses or working within large corporate machinery companies.

"Fresh faces are coming into the business, but they're people who know the industry and know how to look after customers," he said.

For Malcolm, strong communication and trust remain at the heart of working with farmers.

"Farmers value relationships," he said.

"They're loyal to businesses they trust. The most important thing we can do is communicate clearly, do quality work and charge fairly.

"When someone brings a machine to you, they need to know the job will be done properly and that they're paying a fair price for it."

Alastair Malcolm stepped into the role of branch manager at Diesel Tech Fernside earlier this year, bringing nearly a decade of machinery industry experience and a strong focus on supporting North Canterbury farmers with reliable service and specialised equipment.
PHOTO SUPPLIED

Looking ahead, Malcolm says the focus is on continuing to strengthen the team and building the branch's reputation across the region.

"Our goal is to be known as a trusted and professional service provider for the local farming community," he said.

"If farmers finish dealing with us feeling like they've been looked after properly, then we've done our job."

Methane tech meets muddy boots in Oxford

A Canterbury farm hosted a global delegation last week as Synlait and Nestlé showcased EcoPond — a New Zealand-developed system reducing methane emissions from effluent ponds by more than 90 percent.

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

A busload of visitors pulled into Cam Henderson's Oxford dairy farm on March 18, carrying a mix of Synlait staff and international guests — for many, their first time not just in New Zealand, but on a working dairy farm.

They had come to see what is being positioned as one of the first practical, on-farm methane solutions ready for real-world use.

At the centre of the visit was EcoPond, a Canterbury-developed system that reduces methane emissions from effluent ponds by changing the biology, stopping methane before it forms, rather than capturing it after the fact.

The demonstration was simple. A mobile unit pulls alongside the pond, doses it, and leaves, with methane suppression lasting for weeks.

That simplicity is a long way from where the technology started.

EcoPond general manager Elliot Mercer said the system has evolved significantly from its early days, when the focus was on recycling wash-down water from dairy sheds.

"It was good technology, but commercially it was quite challenging," he said.

It was only during testing that the team realised methane emissions were also being reduced, opening the door to a new direction.

Early versions involved installing equipment on farm, but that proved costly and complex.

The breakthrough came through further research with Lincoln University, which showed methane suppression could last for six to eight weeks -and in some cases longer — after treatment.

"That completely changed the business model," Mercer said.

"Now we can show up with a mobile truck, dose the pond, and the farmer doesn't need to have any infrastructure on farm. It becomes a service."

That shift has been key to early adoption.

Around 30 Synlait farms have now been treated, with the number continuing to grow. Synlait chief revenue officer Hamish Yates said uptake among farmers had been strong.

"It's a bit of a no-brainer on farm," he said.

"When you can take out around 90 percent of the methane from an effluent pond and do it in a way that's relatively easy to implement, it has a meaningful impact."

So far, the technology has resulted in emissions reductions of 2500 tonnes of CO2-e in less than a year — about the same as taking 1200 cars off the road.

Yates said support from Nestlé — Synlait's major customer and the world's largest food company — had been critical in accelerating that adoption.

"That money flows directly through to the farm," he said.

"Incentive payments over and above the farmgate milk price are a core part of driving uptake."

But he acknowledged the commercial reality is still evolving.

While there are financial incentives for farmers, long-term premiums are less certain.

"There won't necessarily be a price premium at shelf," Yates said.

"But this becomes part of what's required to stay in the game."

That tension sits in the background of much of the current sustainability conversation on farm - alongside what many describe as regulation fatigue, with farmers navigating ongoing change and uncertainty.

For Nestlé, however, the focus is on practical, scalable solutions.

Global head of sustainability nutrition Katja Seidenschnur said EcoPond stood out for its ease of use and immediate impact.

"It's easy for farmers, and it delivers a huge reduction quickly," she said.

"Usually these changes take years and require a lot of effort. This is different."

She said while consumers are increasingly aware of sustainability, they are not necessarily willing to pay more.

"They expect this to happen," she said.

Which puts the pressure back on the supply chain — and partnerships like this one.

For Mercer, that support has been essential in getting EcoPond to this point.

"Bridging the gap between a good idea and getting it into farmers' hands is the hard part," he said.

"Having partners like Synlait and Nestlé helps drive that early adoption and allows us to scale, learn and reduce costs over time."

But the day was also about something more visible.

Alongside the EcoPond demonstration, the first of up to 90,000 native trees and plants to be established through the next phase of the Nestlé-Synlait partnership was marked with the planting of a kōwhai on Henderson's property — a small ceremony that signalled the wider environmental ambitions sitting behind the programme.

As well as supporting EcoPond, the next phase includes deeper use of digital tools to help farmers model profitability, productivity and emissions, alongside a significant commitment to biodiversity through native planting.

That wider scope was reflected in the kōwhai planted on Henderson's farm, the first symbolic planting in a programme that is expected to see up to 18,500 native trees and plants established each year for the next five years.

Back at the pond, the EcoPond technology itself is almost underwhelming in its delivery with no major infrastructure needed.

For farmers, that may be exactly the point.

"It's very light touch," Mercer said.

"They don't have to change their system. It just slots in."

As the sector looks for ways to reduce emissions without compromising productivity, solutions like EcoPond may become increasingly important — not as a single answer, but as part of a broader shift toward practical, on-farm change.

EcoPond being applied on Cam Henderson's Oxford farm — a simple system targeting methane at the pond level. PHOTOS CLAIRE INKSON

Planting a kōwhai marked the start of a wider native planting programme across Synlait farms.

Visitors on farm for the EcoPond demonstration, many experiencing a New Zealand dairy operation for the first time.

EcoPond general manager Elliot Mercer talks through the evolution of the technology.

Cam Henderson hosted the demonstration on his Oxford farm.

Butter Rights

Eva Harris

I'm not sure you noticed, but a large grocery retailer recently announced they will start supplying US butter for $6.99. This is not good news for NZ dairy. In an election year, New Zealanders will be wondering why we can import butter cheaper than we can make it ourselves, and the questions won't stop there. That $10 Kiwi butter sits on the shelf right alongside news of the dairy industry windfall courtesy of Fonterra's capital payout.

Meanwhile, Kiwis will cast their votes with affordability front of mind with environmental limits likely to be a hot election topic. This year marks one of the most significant overhauls of our resource management system in decades and could be a turning point on how we manage land to improve water quality. When a teacher or nurse needs to think twice about buying a basic staple like butter, they probably won't be too sympathetic about the cost of environmental regulation for a dairy farmer.

We all know the rough story behind our free-market, unsubsidised food prices, but the reality bites hardest when basics are priced out of reach. Dairy products are at the centre of so many "Kiwi as" foods: cheese scones in the community hall, Christmas trifle, a scoop of ice cream on a stinking hot day, or a batch of Edmond's buttery yoyos for smoko. These aren't just snacks, they're a recipe for our national identity and a memory of our pioneering ancestors, too.

And it's not just dairy: $20 fish and chips and $360 beachside campsites mean the classic Kiwi lifestyle is drifting out to sea. No wonder there's a national grump on — everything we love about living here is slowly being priced out of reach for the next generation.

Over the past decade, butter prices have tripled while our water quality has deteriorated. Many New Zealanders are beginning to question whether the economic benefits of dairy farming truly reach everyone, especially as both prices and environmental pressures increase.

Farmers are often heard saying, "we need to be in the black before we can be green," and the sector is currently performing well financially. The critical question is whether these profits will lead to meaningful environmental improvements, such as reducing nitrogen runoff, restoring vulnerable land, and improving water quality. Or will the gains be used elsewhere, leaving the broader community to deal with the social and environmental consequences?

It's important to recognise that the conversation goes beyond politics or ideology, it's about the social contract and how we share the benefits and responsibilities of our food system.

Ultimately, the choices we make today will shape not only the price of butter, but also the wellbeing of our communities and the land. We know we can address these challenges in a way that ensures future generations of Kiwis continue to enjoy the foods and natural spaces that define our national identity, the question is — will we?

Eva Harris is Principal Environmental Advisor, Enviro Collective

Hanging up handpiece after one last world title

Rowland Smith took out the individual machine shearing title at the Golden Shears World Shearing and Woolhandling Championships in Masterton, held March 4 to 7, winning on quality in a tightly contested final. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Rowland Smith has claimed a second World Shearing Championship title, more than a decade after his first, cementing his place among the best shearers New Zealand has produced.

The Hawke's Bay shearer took out the individual machine shearing title at the Golden Shears World Shearing and Woolhandling Championships in Masterton, held March 4 to 7, winning on quality in a tightly contested final.

For Smith, it was about finally finishing something he started years ago.

"I'd been close a couple of times and never managed to back it up, so it was pretty satisfying to get it done," he said.

His first world title came in 2014 in Ireland, part of a list of goals he had set himself early on.

"I had goals to win the Golden Shears, the New Zealand Shears, the circuit and the world champs," he said.

"So, ticking that off the first time was huge. But to come back and do it again, after everything, including hip surgery, that was just as satisfying in a different way."

This time, there was a bit more riding on it.

"It was do or die because I was retiring anyway," he said.

A pathway into something bigger

For Smith, shearing was never just about winning titles.

"It was never my dream to shear forever," he said.

"It was a pathway into ag."

That pathway has taken him all over the world, shearing in the UK, Europe, the United States and Australia, before returning home to farm in Maraekakaho with his wife Ingrid.

The couple now farm around 750 hectares, finishing lambs and cattle, while also running a contracting business, Smith Ag, specialising in direct drilling and cultivation.

Smith still sees shearing as one of the best ways into agriculture.

"It's a very well-paid career, and if you look after your body you can go a long way with it," he said.

He is also realistic about the challenges, particularly getting young people into the industry.

"We were almost shamed when I left school for going into ag," he said.

"But there are so many pathways there. Not everyone gets shown that."

A shift in the way shearers work

Over the course of his career, Smith has seen a change in how shearers approach the job.

"I think the professionalism has come up," he said.

"We look after our bodies, our nutrition, our fitness. We're always asking how we can get more out of ourselves."

That shift came partly out of necessity.

In his early twenties, Smith was told he may need spinal surgery. Instead, he focused on strength, conditioning and rehab, something that has helped him stay at the top of the sport for more than two decades.

"When people see it working, they naturally want to give it a go," he said.

It is a noticeable change from the old days, when the job was treated more as a trade than something closer to high performance.

Depth still there

New Zealand's performance at the championships reflected the strength still in the system.

"There were 120 open shearers at the Golden Shears," Smith said.

"The depth there is pretty cool."

While sheep numbers and shearer numbers have both declined over time, he believes there are still positives.

Training systems are improving, and there is a strong group of young shearers coming through.

"I think we're in a good place at the moment," he said.

Just getting on with it

Despite the results, Smith does not see himself any differently.

"I don't see myself as anything other than just me," he said.

"I just turn up like everybody else and have a go."

It is a simple approach, but one that has carried him through a long career at the top of the sport.

Now, with a second world title secured, he steps back from competition and into the next phase, focused on farming, contracting and family life.

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Young Farmers are the future of New Zealand agriculture, so each issue we shine a spotlight on a Young Farmers Club member. Today we chat with Sam Smithers from West Coast Young Farmers.

1 What is the name of your club, and how long have you been a member?
West Coast Young Farmer — I've been a member for nearly a year this time, previously being a member of Dunsandel while I was living over there, but prior to that I was an original member of the West Coast club when it was established in 2021.

2 What has been the highlight for you of joining Young Farmers? What are the benefits a d experiences that you feel have helped you most?
Probably the competition and all the learning that I've done through that. Back when I first competed it I was just stabbing in the dark as far as what skills and knowledge I needed. Over the years I've learnt where I need to spend my time and energy to get the best result, and it's certainly broadened my knowledge base regarding agriculture beyond just dairy farming.

3 How did you become involved in agriculture?
I sort of grew up around farming, so when I wanted to take a break from uni I thought I'd do a gap year dairy farming, which turned out to last five years, and in that time I had decided to make it my career, so when I went back to finish the degree, it was solely just as a backup career option and I went straight back to farming.

4 What is your job now?
My wife, Rachel, and I are contract milking on a 700-cow farm for Alan and Zana Berry in the Grey Valley on the west coast. It is a self-contained grass-based system spread across 430ha. This is our first season here, and we have plans of working our way up into farm ownership over the next 10 years.

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?
I think agriculture will continue its centuries-long trend of becoming more and more efficient. There will be pain and downturns along the way, but so long as the amount we produce from our land and labour continues to increase we will remain the cheapest place in the world to produce dairy, so there will always be opportunity for good people who want to get stuck in to keep the industry moving forward.

6 What are your future plans?
I aim to spend a few years working contract milking before moving onto either small herd owning or lower order sharemilking, and then maybe some sort of equity partnership or larger 50/50 operation, which will hopefully lead to farm ownership.

7 Who has been your biggest inspiration in agriculture, and why?
Probably Rachel's parents, Stu and Debbie Bland. They've come through the industry from workers through contract milking and 50/50 to get to owning their own farm. If we can replicate and build on their success i think we could say we've had a good career.

Nomination —
Sam is nominated as Member of the Month in recognition of the outstanding commitment and dedication he has shown across multiple areas. From managing the farm and taking on the role of club secretary, to reaching a major personal milestone by getting married, and achieving success by making it through to the FMG Tasman regional finals, Sam has consistently gone above and beyond. He puts in an enormous amount of time and effort day in and day out, and we would like to acknowledge that his hard work and contributions have not gone unnoticed.

Regional Toyota dealerships take top national honour — again

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Consistency might not sound glamorous, but for South Canterbury and Ashburton Toyota it's proving to be a winning formula.

The dealerships have just taken out Toyota New Zealand's prestigious President's Trophy for the second year running - and for a record fifth time overall.

For CEO Mark Patterson, the achievement reflects years of steady work behind the scenes.

"Consistency and loyalty from both our customers and our team," he said.

"That's what it really comes down to."

The President's Trophy is one of Toyota New Zealand's highest honours, recognising performance across customer satisfaction, sales, service, facilities and long-term customer relationships.

Measured across eight different criteria, the award includes factors such as Net Promoter Score, customer retention, community involvement, data accuracy and how dealerships resolve customer issues.

While the metrics may be complex, Patterson believes the foundations are straightforward.

"We don't settle for anything less than good service," he said.

"And when something does go wrong - which can happen in any business - we make sure we put things right quickly and aim for the best outcome for the customer."

For rural dealerships, he says the relationship with customers often goes deeper than a simple transaction.

"We're fortunate to have long-serving staff, particularly within our management team, and that helps us train younger staff and pass on the understanding that rural communities expect something a little different."

That difference often comes down to personal service.

"We try to remember customers' names where possible and anticipate what they might need," Patterson said.

"We also understand that for many of our customers it can be a couple of hours' drive just to get their vehicle serviced, so it's important we get the job done properly the first time."

Compared with large metropolitan dealerships, where volume can drive the pace of business, Patterson says regional branches operate differently.

"For us it's about shaking someone's hand, looking them in the eye and knowing we've done a good job."

Convenience is another key part of the service model, particularly for customers juggling farm work or busy rural businesses.

South Canterbury and Ashburton Toyota both offer pick-up and delivery options for servicing, helping minimise disruption.

"Servicing isn't something people wake up excited to do in the morning," Patterson said.

"Buying a new car is exciting, but servicing isn't. So, our job is to make that process as easy and stress-free as possible."

While the dealerships are focused on customer relationships today, Patterson says the wider automotive industry is entering a period of significant change.

"I think this will be the biggest shake-up the industry has seen since the wheel," he said.

Electrification, hybrid technology and changing consumer expectations are already reshaping the market.

Hybrid vehicles provide one example of how quickly attitudes can change.

"Back in 2010 the Prius was really the only hybrid option and people were unsure about the technology," Patterson said.

"Fast forward to today and the RAV4 was the number one selling vehicle in New Zealand last year, and every one of those sold was a hybrid."

As electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles become more common, Patterson says electricity providers are also beginning to adapt.

"Power companies are starting to come on board as well," he said.

South Canterbury Toyota and Ashburton Toyota CEO Mark Patterson (centre) accepts the President's Trophy alongside Toyota New Zealand CEO Tatsuya Ishikawa (left) and Toyota East Asia & Oceania Division general manager Shimizu Takuji at the Toyota & Lexus Business Excellence Awards.. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

"Some offer free weekend or overnight charging plans, which means if people charge their vehicles at the right time, it can cost very little - sometimes nothing."

For many drivers, plug-in hybrids may provide a practical stepping stone.

"They allow people to drive short distances on battery power during the week but still have the option to fill up and travel longer distances when they need to."

Even as technology moves quickly, Patterson believes one thing will remain constant.

"Technology is moving fast, but there will always be a place for dealerships and people behind the counter," he said.

"At the end of the day, it still comes down to trust and relationships."

The team at South Canterbury Toyota celebrate the dealership's fifth President's Trophy win, a national record for Toyota stores in New Zealand.

Fuel spike bites from farm gate to freight yard

Farmers and transport operators say rising fuel prices are already reshaping decisions on the ground, with pressure building across the entire rural supply chain.

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Uncertainty is the word coming through loudest from rural New Zealand as fuel prices climb sharply off the back of the Iran conflict.

Mid Canterbury farmer and Federated Farmers arable chairperson David Birkett says the impact is immediate - and far-reaching.

"The vibe is uncertainty -everyone knows that fuel affects the cost of everything."

From fertiliser and freight through to processing and distribution, he says rising fuel costs are expected to push up nearly every input farmers rely on.

"All of our inputs are probably going to go up. The question is by how much, and how do we recuperate those costs?"

For arable farmers in particular, the pressure is acute. Unlike other sectors, many are locked into fixed contracts with no ability to adjust pricing mid-season.

"At the moment we don't have any mechanism of recuperating that costs, it just all sits on the farmer."

That imbalance is now coming to a head, with discussions underway about introducing fairer systems to share rising costs across the value chain.

Logistics under strain

Further down the chain, transport operators are already dealing with the practical realities of a volatile fuel market.

Mark Wareing, director of Philip Wareing Ltd, says what was once routine has become a daily exercise in planning and risk management.

"We used to be able to go anywhere in New Zealand and fuel up. Now we have to make sure where we're heading actually has diesel before we send a truck there."

With a fleet of around 270 trucks on the road, that means constant communication with suppliers and real-time coordination across the business.

"It would be hopeless arriving somewhere and finding out there's no fuel for 24 hours."

While fuel supply remains available, Wareing says panic buying and demand spikes are creating gaps and driving up prices at pace.

"The issue isn't so much supply, it's what the price is going to be in a month's time. It's going to keep going up."

That presents a major cashflow challenge for transport operators.

"Transport runs on low margins, high turnover. If fuel jumps dramatically, you've got to pass that on pretty quickly."

While alternative technology is often talked about as part of the long-term solution, Wareing says it's not yet a realistic replacement for diesel in heavy transport. His business has trialled an electric truck, but says the limitations are clear.

"It's got a range of about 120 kilometres, then it needs to be charged for nine hours and that's only carting a couple of tonne," he says.

"We'd run New Zealand dry of power if we ran our whole fleet on electricity."

For now, he says, diesel remains the only viable option for moving freight at scale, leaving the sector exposed to exactly the kind of fuel shocks now playing out.

A shared pressure - for now

Despite the strain, both farmers and transport operators say there is a strong level of understanding across the sector.

"They've been very good," Wareing says of farmer clients.

"They understand we didn't push the button to start the war, and we've got to survive."

Birkett agrees, saying relationships between farmers and contractors remain constructive- but warns the system itself is under pressure.

"Farmers should be able to pass those costs up the value chain as well, that's been the biggest challenge over the years."

Ripple eff cts building

Industry groups say the current fuel spike is likely just the beginning.

Rural Contractors NZ says some members are already seeing fuel costs rise by as much as $5,000 a day, warning those increases will need to be passed on.

At the same time, transport leaders are signalling broader supply chain risks.

National Road Carriers chief executive Justin Tighe-Umbers says the sector has no choice but to pass on fuel increases, while urging government to prioritise visibility and confidence in fuel supply.

Diesel prices have already risen sharply, climbing by more than $1 a litre this month alone, creating what he describes as "severe cashflow pain" for operators.

Consumer disconnect

Both Birkett and Wareing say the biggest disconnect remains between the farm gate and the supermarket shelf.

"The consumer doesn't understand what the farmer's costs are," Wareing says.

"By the time it ends up in the supermarket, it's 10 or 20 times greater than what the farmer got paid."

Birkett agrees, saying farmers are often wrongly blamed when prices rise.

"When you see supermarket prices go up, people think the farmer is making extra money. The reality is it's very rare that that increase comes anywhere near the farmer."

Both warn that higher fuel costs will inevitably flow through to consumers in the coming months.

"The consumer's going to get this in two months' time," Wareing says.

"The cost of food is going to increase dramatically."

What farmers can do

For now, the message from Federated Farmers is simple: plan early and communicate often.

"Communication is the key," Birkett says.

That includes talking to fuel suppliers about upcoming demand, closely monitoring on-farm fuel levels, and planning ahead for fertiliser requirements heading into spring.

"If you know you're going to run out of fuel in three days, get on the phone early - they'll do their best to make sure you can keep operating."

Looking ahead

While fuel supply remains stable for now, uncertainty continues to dominate.

"This is bigger than COVID," Wareing says.

"It's a steeper spike and we still don't know where the peak is."

For Birkett, the concern is not just fuel, but the broader cost environment facing farmers.

"While New Zealand's got a cost of living crisis, farmers are probably at a cost of farming crisis."

And with no clear end in sight, the pressure is likely to keep building — from the freight yard to the farm gate, and ultimately, to the supermarket shelf.

Mark Wareing with one of Philip Wareing Transport's electric trucks at this year's Methven A&P Show. While the technology shows promise, he says it's "not even close" to replacing diesel for heavy freight, with limited range and long charge times still major constraints. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON

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

Chris has also established "buffer zones" 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. "There'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 access 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.

Fernbank: five years to a label

Matt and Helen Barbour with their Labrador, Ali, inside the historic wool shed at Fernbank Wines in North Canterbury. PHOTOS CLAIRE INKSON

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

A long-held dream

Some dreams sit quietly in the background for years.

Not because they are small, but because they require time, money, patience, and a certain amount of stubborn belief.

For Matt and Helen Barbour, owning their own vineyard was one of those dreams.

Matt has been in the wine industry most of his adult life.

He studied viticulture and oenology at Lincoln University in the mid-2000s and has worked in wine since.

Having a vineyard was never guaranteed, but it was always the goal.

"I wouldn't say having a vineyard was inevitable, but it's always a dream, I guess," he says. "Like that's sort of what you want to do, own your own vineyard and maybe have your own label."

In 2020, the opportunity finally came up. They had been looking around the Waipara Valley for a site that could become more than a job.

What they found was a limestone hillside that Matt admits he never expected they would be able to buy.

"Purely and simply just because of its location," he says. "For Pinot Noir and Chardonnay the soils up here are pretty much perfect. Limestone laced."

That site is now Fernbank Wines. A dream built on a very specific patch of North Canterbury ground.

Finding Fernbank

Fernbank spans 8.3 hectares. Around 5.5 hectares are planted in Pinot Noir, two hectares in Chardonnay, and a smaller block in Viognier.

The name itself came from the place.

"When you search our location for the weather it says Fernbank," Helen says. "And I was like, oh… it's more than just a name."

Neighbours later confirmed the hills were historically known as Fernbank before the land was subdivided. The property also carries pieces of older history.

A wool shed on the vineyard dates back to 1914, built by the Harris family and finished just before one of the farmers left for war.

"Fernbank" is stamped on its door.

"They basically built it and finished it before going away," Matt says. "We've got a photo of them sitting on the steps in front of it. And then he went away to war and he never came home."

When the Barbours took over, the shed was filled with old vineyard gear.

They cleared it out and turned it into a working space. It is not fancy. It does not need to be — but with a chandelier made of antlers found by Matt on a nearby vineyard, and a taxidermy stag affectionately known as Stan on the wall — it has a quirky rustic charm.

It reflects what Fernbank is right now: a vineyard being built slowly and deliberately.

From yachts to vines

Helen's path into wine has been anything but conventional.

Originally from England, she met Matt while the two were working on private yachts in Florida. They spent two and a half years working together on the same boat, living in the same small cabin.

That was where the vineyard dream first came up.

When they eventually moved to New Zealand, Helen worked in public health. Her role later shifted into alcohol licensing, and during COVID she found herself in the middle of the public health response.

The contrast between that work and time spent in the vineyard became stark.

"Two days here it was like coming up for air and therapy," she says. "Just like, this is wonderful."

Eventually she decided to make the leap.

A horseshoe on the timber door of Fernbank's historic wool shed, which dates back to 1914.

Fernbank's wine labels draw directly from the vineyard itself, with colours inspired by the clay soils, limestone and surrounding landscape.

She took a job at Pegasus Bay for a season, learning quickly under experienced vineyard staff.

The learning curve was steep, and it helped shape how Fernbank operates today.

Building it the hard way

For the first few years the Barbours were juggling full-time jobs alongside the vineyard. Evenings and weekends were spent pruning, spraying, tying vines and trying to keep up with the season.

Eventually something had to give.

Today they still run the vineyard largely themselves as a mostly full-time gig.

When asked how many staff they employ, Matt answers simply.

"None."

Contractors help with harvesting at times. Family members pitch in when they visit. They also host WWOOFers through the warmer months.

From October through April, travellers stay with them and exchange a few hours of help in the vineyard each day for food and accommodation. Along the way, the Barbours share what goes into running an organic vineyard and the realities of growing wine.

"It's not necessarily hard work," Helen says. "It just needs someone to go and do it."

For two people who met while travelling the world, the arrangement also brings a little bit of that world back into their lives.

"You sit around the dinner table hearing their stories," she says. "It kind of feels like the travel comes to us."

A vineyard-first philosophy

As well as overseeing every aspect of the growing process alongside Helen, Matt is also the wine maker — something that makes the label unique.

Very few winemakers are involved in every touch point from vine to bottle.

The wine is made at nearby Crater Rim Winery.

Fernbank is now BioGro certified organic in the vineyard, something the Barbours see as essential to how they want to farm.

"We are organic now, so we're BioGro certified in the vineyard," Matt says.

The next step is ensuring the winemaking process is also certified organic, which depends on the winery being certified too.

Crater Rim is currently working through that process.

Their winemaking style follows the same philosophy. Minimal intervention, traditional methods, and a focus on letting the season show through.

"The pinot noir is non-filtered," Matt says. "So it's pretty much the product of that season's growing conditions… in a bottle."

One unusual part of the process is that the Pinot Noir is fermented on site at the vineyard before being taken to Crater Rim for pressing and ageing.

"By keeping the fruit here in the vineyard and the fermentation here in the vineyard, you're getting the natural yeast from the site," he says.

It is more work during harvest. But they believe it preserves the identity of the place.

Designing the story

The Fernbank label also reflects the vineyard itself.

Christchurch designer Daniel te Kaat from You Are Here worked with the Barbours to create branding drawn directly from the site.

He literally dug into the vineyard soil to build the colour palette.

The clay tones on the Pinot Noir label come from Fernbank soil.

Limestone tones shape the Chardonnay label, while greens reflect the trees that frame the vineyard.

Each label carries a piece of the place.

Helen says even the Rosé label tells a story.

The wine itself started as something simple: a bottle to drink at the end of the day on the back of the vineyard ute, watching the sun set over the valley — a favourite way for the couple to end the working week.

"It was important to actually enjoy what we have here," she says.

A label come to life

After five years of building the vineyard and refining the wines, Fernbank is no longer just a project in progress. The label is officially up and running.

Fernbank wines were publicly launched at the North Canterbury Wine and Food Festival in March, marking the first major outing for the label.

"It's been five years of work sitting right there in the bottle," Helen says.

The wines are currently sold directly through the Fernbank website, with Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Rosé now available to customers.

For now, the focus is on growing the brand steadily.

The Barbours hope to expand into restaurants and local wine lists over time, something that requires building relationships and gradually introducing the label to the market.

Looking ahead

Longer term, the vision for Fernbank includes opening the vineyard more fully to visitors.

The historic wool shed that sits on the property could one day become a tasting room and cellar door, creating a place where people can experience the wines where they are grown.

"It would be pretty cool to have the cellar door in here," Matt says.

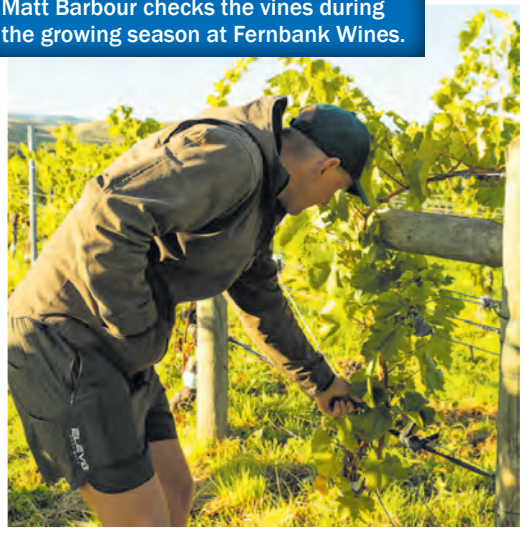
For now though, the focus remains firmly on the vineyard itself. On growing the fruit well, learning with each season, and slowly building a label that reflects the land it comes from.

"Patience is the name of this whole game," Matt says.

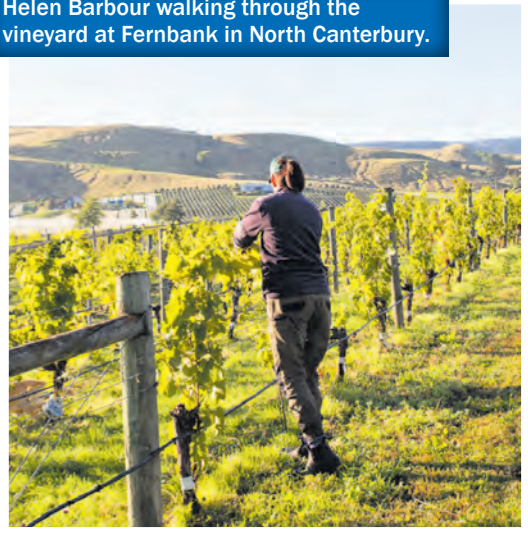
And for the Barbours, Fernbank is proof that sometimes the dreams that take the longest to build are the ones that mean the most when they finally arrive.

The historic wool shed at Fernbank Wines, originally built in 1914 by the Harris family.

Matt and Helen Barbour walk through the Fernbank vineyard in Waipara, North Canterbury.



Matt Barbour checks the vines during the growing season at Fernbank Wines.



Helen Barbour walking through the vineyard at Fernbank in North Canterbury.

Matt and Helen Barbour outside the wool shed at Fernbank Wines, alongside their dog Ali.

Castle Ridge Station crowned Canterbury's top environmental farming business

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Castle Ridge Station's Kerry Harmer says she and her family were "blown away" to be named the Canterbury Regional Supreme Winners at the Ballance Farm Environment Awards on March 5.

"We were pretty overwhelmed," she says. "We don't really think we're doing anything amazing. We just do what we think is right for us and for the place. So, to be recognised like that was pretty amazing."

Harmer says the strength of the other finalists made the result even more surprising.

"The calibre of the other finalists was awesome. I can't take anything away from anybody else — the things all those other finalists are doing on farm are fantastic. We certainly didn't expect to be at the top of the order because everyone was doing incredible stuff."

One of the highlights of the night was the chance to connect with farmers from different sectors and systems.

"It was a really good opportunity to meet people you wouldn't normally cross paths with.

"That's one of the really cool parts of this competition — the connections and networks you build."

Castle Ridge will now represent Canterbury at the National Showcase later this year, something Harmer admits comes with a few nerves.

"To be honest, we're a little nervous," she says with a laugh. "We're not really limelight-type people. The field day we can handle, but the next step is a bit daunting.

"But we're excited to represent Canterbury and hopefully shed some positive light on what's going on in the back of the hills — the things people don't necessarily see."

Harmer believes the awards play an important role in telling farming's story beyond the farm gate.

"It's about getting the story out there about the things that are happening on farms. "When you look at all the finalists, the variety of technology and approaches they're using to deal with environmental challenges is incredible.

"But the common thread is that every single one of them is passionate about looking after what they have."

She says the judging process was also a valuable experience.

"The judging panels were amazing. They were genuinely interested in your business, and they made you feel very at ease.

"Afterwards we got a really detailed feedback sheet. It wasn't just what they liked about the property, it also gave ideas about things we could look at going forward. That outside perspective is really valuable."

For Harmer, the awards highlight the shared values across very different farming systems.

"The businesses are all so different, but the values are the same. Everyone cares about their people, their teams and the resources they manage. Everyone is thinking about the future and their place in the world.

"At the end of the day it comes back to stewardship — looking after the resources that make up your business."

Castle Ridge Station also took out four category awards on the night: the Beef + Lamb New Zealand Livestock Farm Award, the Ministry for the Environment Biodiversity Award, the Environment Canterbury Water Quality Award and the WaterForce Safe Water Recognition Award.

Other category winners included:

- Mike Arnold, LeaderBrand South Island Ltd — Ballance Agri-Nutrients Soil Management Award, Bayleys People in Primary Sector Award, Hill Labs Agri-Science Award and the Norwood Farming Efficiency Award.
- Ben and Wendy Croft, Windale Dairy Ltd — DairyNZ Sustainability and Stewardship Award.
- Baden and Campbell Sommerville, Somerview Farm — Norwood Farming Efficiency Award and Rabobank Agri-Business Management Award.
- Andrew and Amy Darling, Adar Farming Ltd — FMG Award.
- Stuart and Sara Russell, Ngatimaru Farming Company — Innovation Award.

The evening also recognised the Mid Canterbury Catchment Collective, which won the Catchment Group Showcase.

Formed in 2021, the collective now connects more than 200 members across 10 catchment groups spanning from the Southern Alps to the coast between the Rakaia and Rangitata rivers.

The collective is working to improve freshwater outcomes through initiatives such as GIS mapping, stream health assessments and environmental DNA testing, alongside practical projects including planting and pest control.

The initiative highlights how farmer-led collaboration at a catchment level can deliver measurable environmental improvements while supporting a productive farming region.

Canterbury Ballance Farm Environment Awards Supreme Winners Paul and Kerry Harmer, Castle Ridge Station, pictured with last year's winners Stuart and Tracey Neill. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

Mid Canterbury Catchment Collective representatives Garry Brown, Angela Cushnie and Guy Polson (Tavendale and Partners) after the group won the Catchment Group Showcase.

Castle Ridge Station's Paul and Kerry Harmer after being named Canterbury Regional Supreme Winners at the Ballance Farm Environment Awards.

Castle Ridge Station receiving the Ministry for the Environment Biodiversity Award. From left: Kate Campbell, Ben Harmer, Garth Dixon , Paul Harmer, Kerry Harmer and Samantha Harmer.

Answering the Call: Felicity Lang Steps Up in Waipara

After 17 years as a volunteer firefighter, Felicity Lang is stepping into the role of first female officer for the Waipara Volunteer Fire Brigade.

CLAIRE INKSON

Felicity Lang has been fighting fires for nearly two decades.

Now the Waipara volunteer firefighter is stepping into an officer role at the brigade, becoming the first woman to do so - although it's not something she makes much of.

To her, it is simply the next step.

"I'm just one of the guys," she says. "That's how I look at it."

Lang has been a volunteer firefighter since 2009.

She started in Hanmer Springs, where she grew up, before moving to Waipara to farm with her husband Michael. She joining the Waipara brigade in January 2011.

Like for many people raised in small rural communities, the idea of volunteering was never unusual.

"Growing up in a small community, I always thought about giving back," she says.

Her father was involved in search and rescue, and when someone suggested she give the fire brigade a try, she decided to go along and see what it was about.

She stayed.

Over the years, Lang has worked her way through the ranks.

Each step comes with its own training. Recruit courses, firefighter courses, senior firefighter training, officer training. Each one means days away on courses, more study, and more responsibility.

"It's a lot of courses, a lot of learning to get to here," she says.

And like most volunteer brigades, everyone doing that training is also juggling the rest of their lives.

Many have full time jobs. Families. Farms. Kids.

"It's a lot that people do," she says. "It's a massive sacrifice. But we all do it because we enjoy it."

When Lang first joined the Waipara brigade she was one of only a few women. For a long time, she was the only one.

But she says it never felt like something she needed to dwell on.

"I didn't see anything different. I was just like; this is what I want to do."

She says the brigade treated her the same as anyone else, although occasionally people tried to step in and do things for her.

"You get some guys that want to do everything for you because you're a female," she says. "And you're like, no, I can actually do this myself."

Firefighting is physical work. Full breathing apparatus gear can weigh close to 20 kilograms. Forestry packs are heavy. Hoses are heavy.

But Lang says it comes down to working as a team.

"You just make it work for yourself. And if you struggle doing something, you work with your team and someone else does that job and you do another."

Today the brigade has around two dozen members, including several women.

Lang says the group is tight knit. That matters when you are relying on each other at two in the morning on a callout.

Her first call in Waipara was a grass and scrub fire near Scargill.

"It was in the middle of the night, and I had no idea where I was," she laughs. "I'd only been here a few months."

"But you just do what you've got to do."

The job is not just fires. Volunteer brigades are often the first people on scene at medical calls and car accidents, especially in rural areas where emergency services can take time to arrive.

"Sometimes we go to a call and we're waiting twenty minutes, half an hour for an ambulance," she says.

"That's where we come in."

Over the years there have been plenty of callouts, but Lang says what stays with her most is simply knowing the brigade can help.

"When you go to a medical and you can actually put that person on the ambulance," she says. "Or someone walks away from a crash and goes home. That's a good day."

Stepping into an officer role brings a new challenge.

For Lang, the hardest part is not the physical side of the job. It is the leadership.

"It's having the confidence to go right, this is what we need to do," she says.

Volunteer firefighter Felicity Lang has spent 17 years answering the pager. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON

Training nights help. The brigade trains every Monday night, and she has spent time practising the officer role during exercises.

"It's taken time to realise that actually; I can do this."

At home, life is busy too.

Lang and her husband have two children, Adele, 11, and George, 9. The pager going off is part of normal life for them.

"If I'm outside mowing the lawns or doing something, they come running with the phone going 'you've got to go, you've got to go,'" she says.

But family always comes first.

"If the family's not right, then you don't go," she says.

"You have to have your head in the game when you're at a job."

That support matters, because volunteering is a big commitment.

And without it, rural communities would look very different.

"That's the backbone of your community," Lang says.

"If people don't volunteer, you don't have that sort of community spirit."

For anyone thinking about joining, her advice is simple.

"If you're interested, come along and have a go," she says.

"You're never going to find out whether it's right for you if you don't try."

Deep fault line discovered from a magnitude seven or eight earthquake

PHIL EVEREST

Gathering science/facts has been an ongoing focus for the Ōtūwharekai Ashburton Lakes Catchment Group, we then use these facts to drive catchment-wide and on-farm management decisions to minimise our farming footprint.

Our monthly water testing results of waterways travelling through our properties from several different sites show samples taken from the DoC estate (above where our stock graze), continue to show average nitrate tests of 0.2 ppmN. This result is above the targets Environment Canterbury (ECan) has set for the lakes (at 0.16 ppmN) and only a fraction of the national drinking water standards which are set at 11.3 ppm N.

How can the lake target be less than the water coming from ungrazed pasture from the DoC estate? This appears to be an aspirational target set in an office that has not been based on science and the water samples at source from the hills.

Riparian fencing and planting continue to be a focus on farms with a further 7800 plants going into these projects this autumn by the Ōtūwharekai Ashburton Lakes Catchment Group, spread over several properties.

Kerry and Paul Harmer continue with riparian planting 560 carex secta plants within the Ashburton Lakes catchment on Sunday 22 March. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

Despite the scientific benefits of constructed wetlands, which show a reduction of sediment, nitrate and phosphate to further enhance water quality, we continue to be frustrated by ECans' consenting policy.

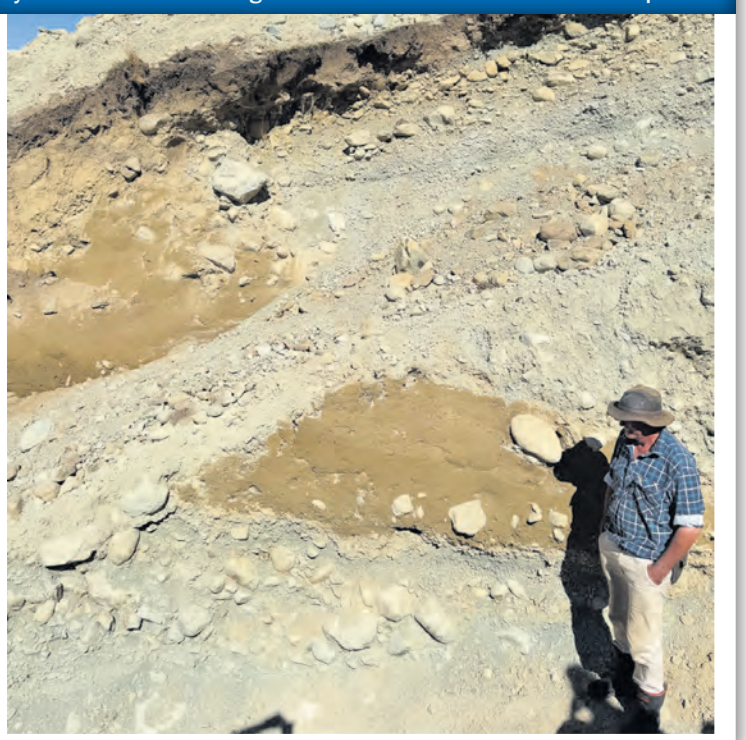
The Catchment Group wants to construct a small wetland covering 2242m2 (the size of 2.8 house sections in Ashburton) to test the effectiveness of a constructed wetland in the Ashburton lakes. This has been an ongoing project for almost two years.

Whoever would have thought a trial to improve water quality, that is already purer than your drinking water bottle, would need five consents costing over $50,000.

There is a glimmer of hope with governance and senior management of ECan trying to help get the trial underway.

In other news from the area, there is currently an Otago University PhD student completing some investigations into a large earthquake fault line heading through the flats from the historic Hakatere homestead towards Lake Heron. Some test pits have been dug to expose material below ground. These test pits have shown evidence of a number of significant earthquakes and are some of the best-preserved examples in Canterbury and Otago.

Paul Harmer of Castle Ridge Station standing in the test pit. The topsoil by his shoulder and rising to the soil surface shows the 8m deep fault.



The fault shows a very large ground shift, over 8m vertical shift, that occurred perhaps 1,000-3,000 years ago. Samples are being gathered from these test pits to determine the age of this fault.

The earthquake from the fault would have done more than rattle the windows or sway the lights, as the researchers think it could have been a magnitude 7-8 or more. More interesting facts being generated in our own little patch of paradise in Mid Canterbury.

Phill Everest is the Ōtūwharekai Ashburton Lakes Catchment Group facilitator.

Wanaka A&P Show

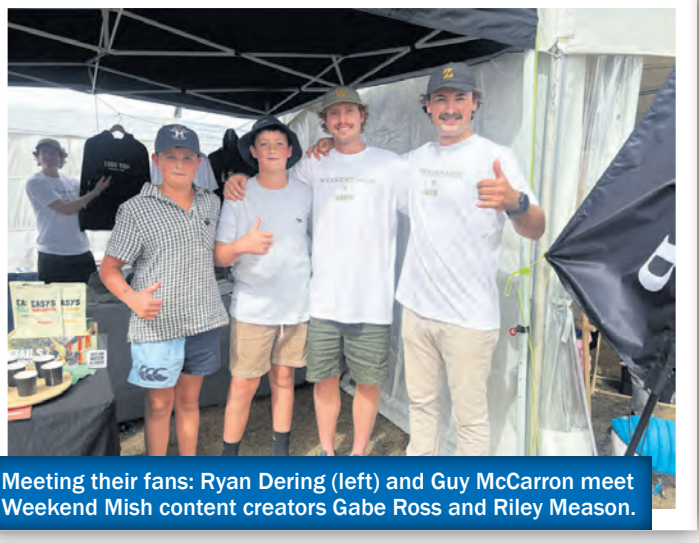
Rayna Jones and Alesha Iousa welcome farmers to the Silver Fern Farms tent. PHOTOS CLAIRE INKSON

Scott (left) and Jan Pascoe from CP Lime with Silver Fern Farms co-chairperson Anna Nelson.

Sunshine and classic high-country atmosphere set the scene for this year's Wanaka A&P Show, held over March 13–14 at the Lake Wānaka Showgrounds. The popular two-day event once again drew strong crowds, with a lively mix of rural competitions, livestock, food stalls and retail exhibitors creating a vibrant showground atmosphere.

Farmers, families and visitors from across the region wandered the grounds, catching up with friends, watching stock judging and browsing the wide range of rural products and artisan goods on offer. From traditional show staples to boutique food, clothing and craft stalls, the Wanaka Show continues to blend its strong agricultural roots with a thriving retail and lifestyle presence.

Rural guardian editor Claire Inkson was there to capture the action, documenting the people, animals and moments that make the Wanaka A&P Show one of the South Island's most iconic rural events.



Meeting their fans: Ryan Dering (left) and Guy McCarron meet Weekend Mish content creators Gabe Ross and Riley Meason.

Crowds watch listen to country music whilst enjoying the sunshine.

Ravensdown chief executive Garry Diack.

Federated Farmers Otago provincial president Luke Kane (left) with Wanaka A&P Show president Mike Elliot.

Ashlie Lockwood and Samantha Crane from the Wanaka and Dunedin branch of Mike Greer homes.

Kristy McGregor from Shepherdess magazine.

Joyleen Goodwright fronts the Hahana Fruit stand.

Associate minister for agriculture Andrew Hoggard at the ACT stand.

Women enjoy breakfast in the president's tent in an event organised by Shepherdess magazine.

Kristy McGregor, from Shepherdess magazine, interviews author Ruth Shaw and Rees Station owner Kate Scott in the president's tent.

Dog trialling was popular with spectators.

Ben Towner (left) and Ben Stewardson at the Thunderdonk site.

There was an impressive display of produce in the Home Industries Pavilion.

Local schools displayed art and Lego creations in the Home Industries Pavillion.

Rural Guardian editor Claire Inkson with Ravensdown chief executive Garry Diack.

Amuri A&P Show

The **Amuri A&P Show** returned on March 7 under clear blue skies, drawing crowds to the Hurunui showgrounds for a classic day of rural competition and entertainment. Alongside the traditional livestock and equestrian events, the programme had plenty of action, with a crowd-pleasing rodeo, an impressive jet boat display, and skilled woodchoppers going head-to-head in the arena. With sunshine, dust, and the buzz of show day in the air, it was a reminder of why A&P shows remain a highlight of the rural calendar.

2026 Amuri A&P Show president Guy Blomfield and wife Marie. PHOTOS CLAIRE INKSON

Jean (left) and Winton Dalley, a former Hurunui District Mayor.

The McAlpines North Canterbury Pipe Band.

There was plenty on offer with food and coffee carts kept busy during the event.

Show vice president Tom Macfarlane and Bill Suckling.

The North Canterbury Hunting Competition ute in the Grand Parade.

Culverden Senior Constable William Flapper with the police Polaris Ranger.

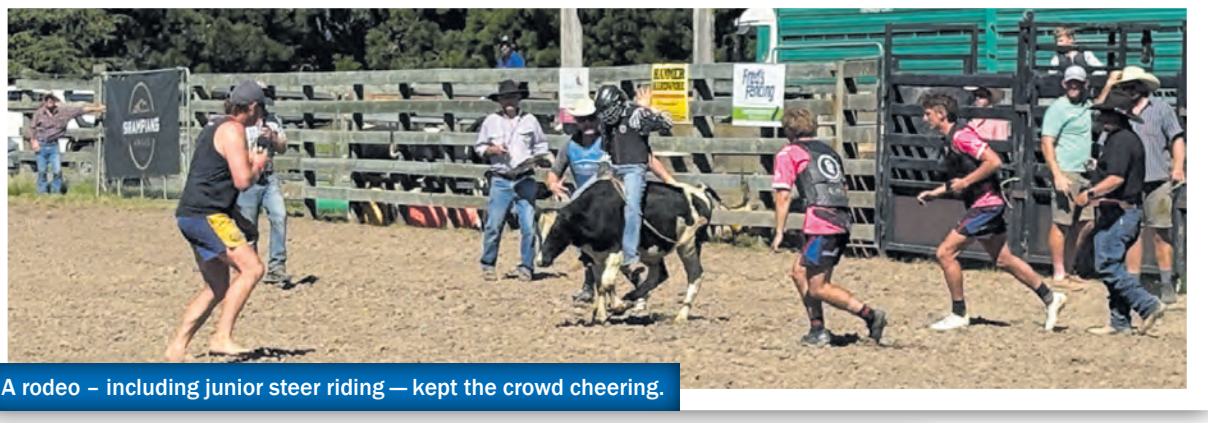
Arthur Burkes' John Veale (left) and Tim McCraken with the new Jac ute.

There was some impressive heavy machinery in the Grand Parade.

Winton Dalley drives his vintage tractor in the Grand Parade.

Over 40 jetboats were on display.

There were plenty of entries in the photography class and some serious talent on display.



A rodeo – including junior steer riding — kept the crowd cheering.

World Champion axeman Jack Jordan.

Junior vice president Anna Armstrong (left) and Jac Wright.

Selling utes in a man's world

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

With fuel prices climbing and global uncertainty starting to filter through to everyday decisions, the conversation around what people drive is shifting again.

Petrol, diesel, hybrid — buyers are weighing it all up.

At Macaulay Motors in Queenstown, Ella Gorton is having those conversations daily.

There is interest in plug-in hybrids, she says, but for many South Island drivers — particularly those clocking up kilometres or working rural — it is not always the straightforward answer people expect.

"If it's more of an around-town car, a plug-in hybrid can definitely be beneficial," she says.

"But if you're doing a lot of open-road driving, it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to have cheaper costs."

It comes down to how people actually use their vehicles.

"At the moment you really need to over-qualify and ask, what does your daily or weekly road trip look like?"

That practical thinking is something Gorton sees consistently, particularly among rural buyers.

"They are more purpose-driven. They want something reliable, something durable, good towing, something that's going to last."

Hybrid conversations are happening, she says, but cautiously.

"I feel like Central Otago, whether rural or farmers, they wouldn't necessarily jump into it, but they're willing to talk about it more.

"I still think deep down south there's not much sway."

And pushing people toward something that does not fit is not how she works.

"You listen to what they have to say and then you offer the options. If they're not interested and they don't like it, you don't push it.

"Every deal, every person's different."

Ella Gorton with the new Ford Ranger Super Duty at the Wanaka A&P Show. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON

Not your typical sales fl or

Walk onto most dealership forecourts and the picture is still pretty familiar — utes lined up, and mostly men selling them.

Gorton is part of a small but growing number of women changing that.

She has been at Macaulay Motors for a year, but in the automotive industry since 2018, working across customer relations, parts, service, marketing and finance before stepping into her current sales and finance role.

It has given her a broad understanding of how the industry works — and how people move through it.

And while things are improving, she says there can still be assumptions.

"Some customers still initially carry an expectation about who they're going to deal with before they even come into the dealership," she says.

"But that's definitely dwindled."

For her, the shift often happens quickly.

"The moment I can show that I know those technical details and answer their questions, that changes.

"They know they're in safe hands."

Earlier in her career, there was more of a sense of needing to prove herself.

"You do have to put the groundwork in. You have to have a backbone to do it.

"But I feel like I'm well and truly at the point now where people know what I'm capable of."

A diffe ent way of selling

Where Gorton does see a difference is in how customers are treated — particularly when couples walk through the door.

"You get a lot of feedback from women saying it's nice to actually be included in the conversation," she says.

"They've had experiences where it's just been directed at the husband, even though they're part of that decision as well."

Her approach is built around that.

"When I think about what I bring to the table, it's personalization and empathy," she says.

"Putting myself in their shoes, remembering names, understanding how they live — it just makes it a better experience."

It is also less about pushing and more about guiding.

"I want people to feel comfortable. I would never say, 'This is the vehicle you need to buy.'

"It's about helping them come to that decision themselves."

That matters in a world where people are constantly being sold to.

"Once you've got that trust, it becomes more than just a transaction," she says.

"They come back, they call you, they send their friends to you. That's what you want."

Why women are buying utes — especially Ford Rangers

That shift in approach is happening alongside a bigger change — who is buying utes, and why.

"They've come a long way," Gorton says.

"Older utes were built more for farming and utility. Now the safety features in the new Ford Rangers are next level, the tech is better, they're smoother to drive."

They are no longer just work vehicles.

"You've got people who need them for practicality, but then you've got people buying them for lifestyle — road trips, towing boats, just everyday use."

And more women are behind those decisions.

"Absolutely. We are definitely seeing more women buying them."

Not all of them are heading off-road.

"I sold a Ranger recently to a lady who had always had Range Rovers. She's not going off-road — she's driving around town and doing trips to Dunedin.

"That's why she bought it."

Comfort, safety and visibility are all part of that.

"A lot of people like being higher up off the ground. And then you've got things like the tech, the safety features : all of that plays a part."

It is a shift away from utes being purely about work.

"It's not just for utility purposes anymore."

Rangers still built for the job

For rural buyers, though, the fundamentals have not changed.

"They are still very practical," she says.

"Towing capacity is a big one. Storage, durability, something that's going to hold up."

That is part of why the Ford Ranger continues to dominate.

"They've set the standard for what a ute should be," she says.

"They've still got that reliability and versatility, but now they drive like cars.

"The old ones drove like tractors. These don't."

Finding your place

For Gorton, the role is about more than selling vehicles.

It is about building something of her own within the industry.

"Yes, I work for Macaulay Motors," she says, "but it's also about me putting my mark on the community and within the dealership."

And for other women considering the industry, her advice is simple.

"Just give it a go. We need more of us in this industry.

"If you're a people person and you can communicate well, you can learn the rest on the job.

"No question is ever a silly question. You just have to be willing to learn and have the confidence to back yourself."

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TIANLI

Show time: Methven

Sunshine, chrome and a whole lot of horsepower : the Methven Show turned it on this year.

Crowds packed in under perfect blue skies on March 21, with everything from steam engines to equestrian rings humming all day. The ute muster was a standout, with a slick line-up of new and vintage vehicles, and plenty of pride on show. The first-ever Hers Not His women's category drew a strong, enthusiastic field — and plenty of attention.

In a show-stopping moment, 306 Ford Rangers lined up for a world record attempt, stretching as far as the eye could see and giving the crowd something to talk about.

Add in busy trade sites, good vibes, and that classic rural show atmosphere, and Methven delivered a day that felt every bit as good as it looked.

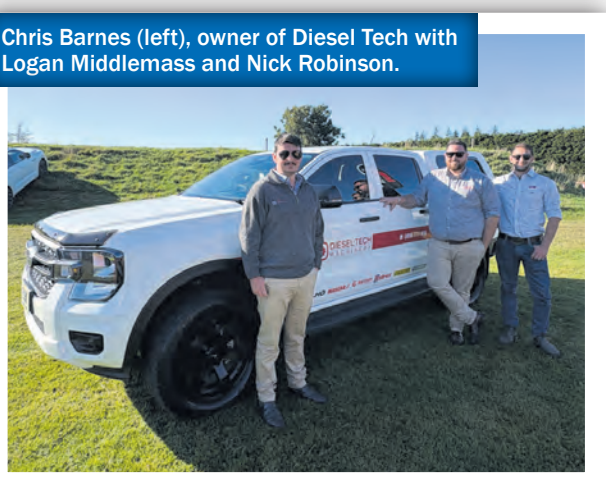
Claire Inkson was there to capture the action.

The RuralCo team jump for joy at their site at the show. (L-R) Kate Smaill, Jelle Hendrickson, Jason McKenzie, Mel Sowden, Andrea Smith, RuralCo chief executive Tony Aitken and Lester Chambers.

Jesse Caldwell (left), Millie Bentley & McKaela Caldwell serve up pies and toasties from the Haer & Soul Kitchen.

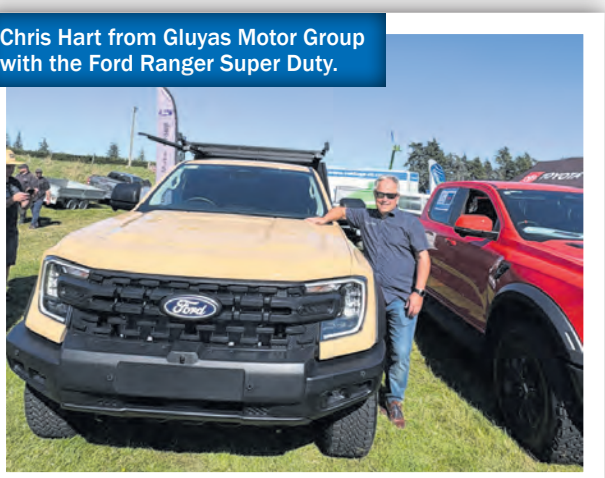
Philip Wareing with the company's electric truck.

Show president Mike McKenzie with wife Anne.



Chris Barnes (left), owner of Diesel Tech with Logan Middlemass and Nick Robinson.

Chewing the fat in the sun is Thames Proudman, Mike Ross, F Hydes, Ian Russell and Molly the dog from Methven Vintage Club.



Chris Hart from Gluyas Motor Group with the Ford Ranger Super Duty.

The ever-popular Ute Muster drew vehicles old and new.

Steam engines are a favourite show staple.

Jasper the Vet Life mascot with Lauren Gliddon and Barney the bearded collie.

Shane Stockdill with the Methven Volunteer Fire Brigade 1950s Series 1 Landrover.

Utes line up for the muster.

Loganne Brown with winner of the Hers not His section in the Methven Ute Muster, Amy Ingram.

Amy Ingram

Amy won the Hers Not His section of the Methven Ute Muster at the 2026 Methven A&P Show

WHERE AND WHAT ARE YOU FARMING?

I farm in Kaikoura down the Inland Road on a sheep and beef farm.

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

My ute is a 2012 px1 Ford Ranger.

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

My favourite feature about my ute is the paint job as it doesn't scratch when I accidentally hit overhanging branches, and also with the fuel prices the way they are I appreciate the fact it's very fuel efficient.

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

I have a very big variety of music I listen to behind the wheel, but I do love listening to some Nickelback.

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

When driving I enjoy having a cold V or a mars bar (really healthy 😂)

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

Rolling around in the back seat of my ute is always wet weather gear and my Manuka stick.

Methven turns back the soil

Colin Maw with a vintage tractor and plough at the Methven A&P Show on March 14, ahead of the 2026 New Zealand Ploughing Championships. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Before GPS, before minimum till, before modern machinery — there was the plough.

This April, that history returns to the paddock in Methven for the first time since 2010.

The 2026 New Zealand Ploughing Championships and Methven Country Fair will bring together some of the country's top ploughmen and women, along with a full weekend of vintage machinery, family entertainment and rural heritage.

For Colin Maw, vice president of the Methven Ploughing Association, the event is both serious competition and something much bigger.

"There's 30 ploughmen for a start," he says. "They've all had to qualify through their districts to get here."

The championships feature multiple classes, including conventional and reversible ploughing, alongside vintage and horse teams.

Winners of the top tractor classes will go on to represent New Zealand at the world championships — with next year's final set to be held in Kenya.

"It's a big deal," Maw says. "The winner of the conventional and the reversible both qualify for the world final."

More than just turning soil

While ploughing might look straightforward from the sidelines, the judging tells a different story.

"Straightness, evenness, weed control, tidiness , the whole plot gets judged on how it looks at the end," Maw says.

"There's about 10 different things they're looking for."

And while modern farming has shifted towards minimum tillage and chemical weed control, Maw believes events like this are a reminder of where it all began — and where it may head again.

"Half the people don't even know what ploughing is now," he says.

"But 150 years ago, that's how we broke in the land. And there's plenty of people saying we might have to go back to it again."

A full weekend of rural life

Alongside the championships, the Country Fair brings a strong community and family focus — something organisers have deliberately built around the competition.

"There'll be about 200 people involved just with the ploughing," Maw says. "But we want families there as well."

That means vintage machinery displays, traction engines, chaff-cutting and threshing demonstrations, plus food stalls, trade sites and plenty for children — from bouncy castles and pony rides to a dinosaur dig and colouring competition.

A highlight will be the working displays of older machinery, including Lanz Bulldog and Field Marshall tractors.

"They're those big old tractors from pre-war days," Maw says. "People love seeing them running."

There will also be rides around the site on vintage tractors and trailers — a practical solution for a paddock stretching up to 800 metres long.

And if the weather plays ball, a tethered hot air balloon will offer visitors a view from above.

Why Methven?

Methven has a long history with ploughing competitions, last hosting the event in 2010 alongside the world championships.

Maw says Mid Canterbury remains one of the strongest regions in the country for the sport.

"I counted eight ploughing committees just in Canterbury," he says. "You don't get that in many other places."

That depth of involvement, combined with a strong rural base, makes the region a natural fit.

Keeping the next generation involved

One of the important parts of the event is bringing new people into the sport.

This year includes a learner class, and practice days leading into the competition give newcomers a chance to develop their skills.

"We've got coaches there helping them — telling them what to adjust and how to improve," Maw says.

It's something he's been closely involved in himself, after years of competing and now judging.

"I used to plough when I left school," he says. "Got close a couple of times but never quite made the final."

Now, he's helping the next generation find their feet — including his own grandson.

Old meets new

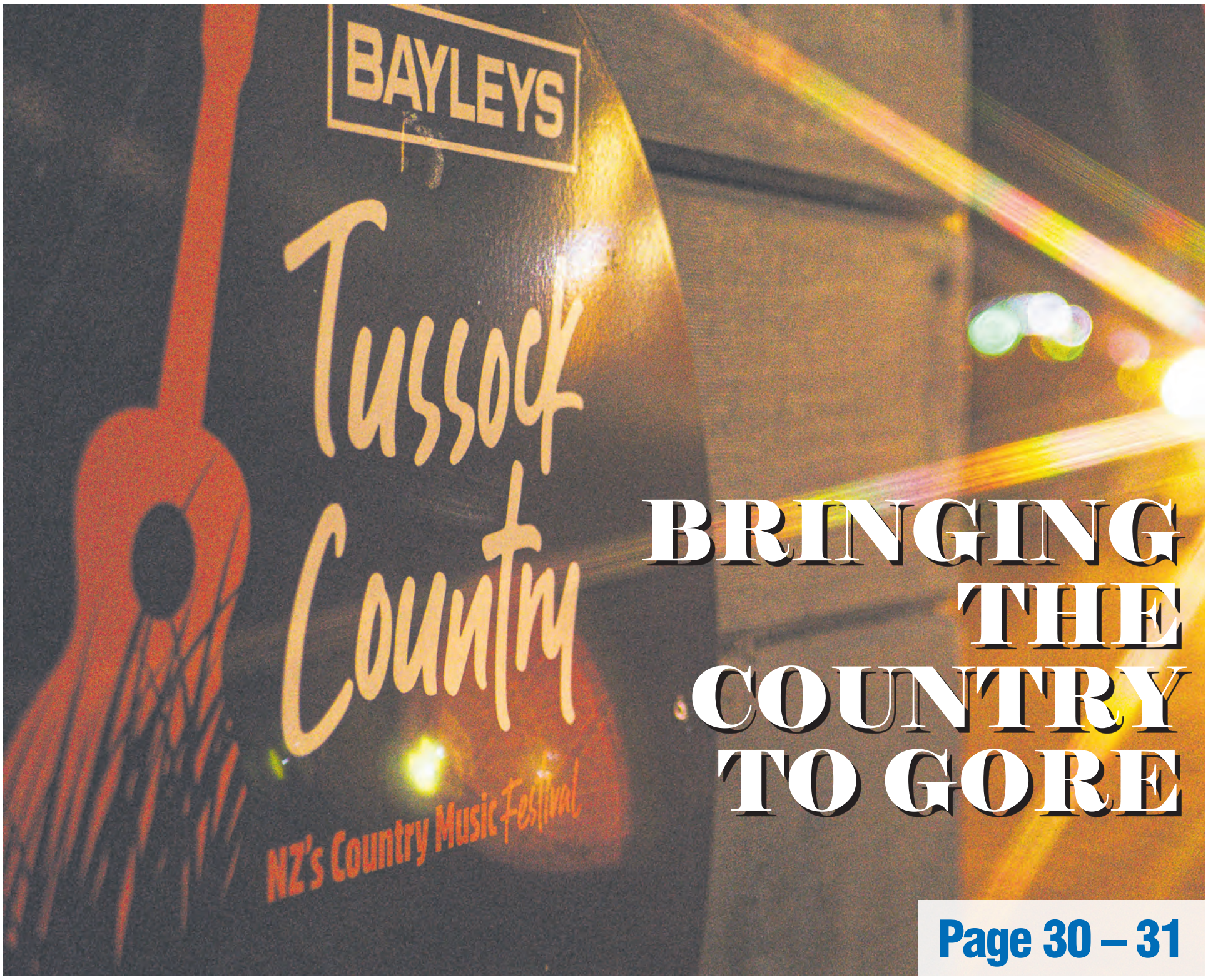
For Maw, the real appeal of the event is seeing the contrast between past and present.

"It would take all day to plough a football field with a horse," he says.

"Now, a kid will tell you he could have it done by morning tea."

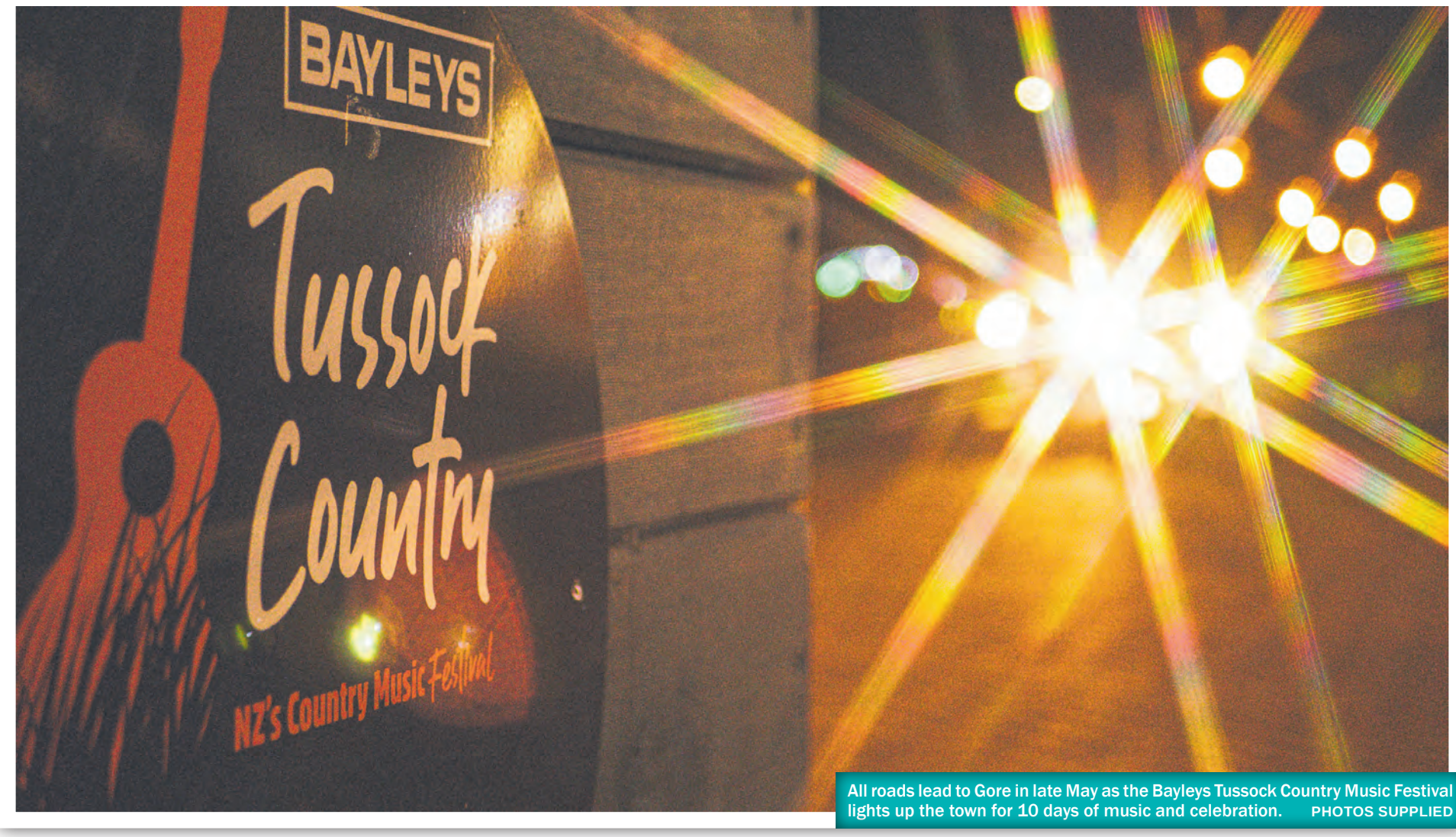
That shift — from horsepower to high-tech — is exactly what the Methven Country Fair and Ploughing Championships put on display.

"This is where it all started," Maw says. "With a horse and a plough."



BRINGING THE COUNTRY TO GORE

Page 30 – 31



All roads lead to Gore in late May as the Bayleys Tussock Country Music Festival lights up the town for 10 days of music and celebration. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

Tussock Country: 'The Nashville of New Zealand' is growing again

All family members are welcome at the Tussock Country Ute Muster, including four-legged companions riding in style.

Fiddler Michaela Jameson performs during The Celtic Unleashed concert at St James Theatre

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Tussock Country is back in Gore this May with its biggest programme yet, stretching across 10 days and more than 80 events.

Festival promotions and event co-ordinator Annabel Roy says the festival has grown well beyond a single weekend, now spanning two weekends and running through King's Birthday weekend.

"It's a 10-day festival, which in itself is quite unique," Roy said.

"It's always the last week of May, it's cold, so all the venues are cosy. There are fireplaces. There's Hokonui moonshine and whisky. It's a unique festival in that it celebrates country music and all types of Americana, folk, singer-songwriter music - really not just country."

A festival built around the Gold Guitars

Roy says Tussock Country has grown up around Gold Guitar Awards, which remain the heartbeat of Gore's country music reputation.

"The Gold Guitars competition is still New Zealand's biggest talent competition with around 800 entrants every year. It's still growing and growing, and if you win Gold Guitars, you essentially have a pathway to a career in music."

She said five years ago a charitable trust was formed to create an umbrella festival that could support the Gold Guitar Awards and everything happening around them.

"That's really how it's evolved."

From 42 events to 82

The scale has lifted sharply since year one.

"In year one we were 42 events across nine days. Now year five, we are 82 events across 10 days," Roy said.

She said the growth has come from both the organising committee and the town leaning in - creating "micro events" that sit inside the bigger festival.

That community involvement is part of the long game, with Roy openly aspiring to build something like Australia's Tamworth Country Music Festival.

"That's what I aspire for it to be."

New events, big names, and a wider mix

The 2026 festival line-up includes new events and headline names.

Kiwi legends The Warratahs will appear as guest artists at Country Music Honours, with frontman Barry Saunders also set to play an intimate house concert.

"Barry sits in the corner with his guitar and he tells yarns, and you sit on the couch and listen. It's an incredible night."

Comedian Tom Sainsbury also joins the 2026 programme, alongside a growing slate of events for younger audiences - including a book reading, a songwriting workshop for teens, and a kids' Singalongercise concert.

Harmonic Resonators perform during Tussock Country 2025

Crowds get rowdy at Tussock Country Late Night, where cowboy hats, raised glasses and live music carry on well into the evening. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

Sequins, boots and cowboy hats take centre stage as performers bring colour and character to Tussock Country.

The festival's "different" structure is part of the appeal, Roy said. It's not a single gate, single ticket event. Each event is individually run.

"You choose what you want to go to and buy tickets to whatever you want, as opposed to one festival, one gate where you buy one ticket."

Rural life, utes, trucks, and moonshine

Roy said the festival also celebrates Eastern Southland rural life, with events like the Tussock Country Ute Muster adding a local flavour.

"It celebrates the utes, the rural life… it's a really fun Sunday afternoon."

Long-standing favourites return too, including the Freeze Ya Bits Off Busking competition, the Gore Truck Show, and the Old Hokonui whisky and food pairing evening.

"Gore was a prohibition area for many years… so they brewed moonshine in the hills," Roy said.

"There's still the Hokonui Moonshine Museum, and we have a whisky and food match evening where local distilleries come along and local chefs match food with it."

Travel, beds, and removing barriers

Accommodation has been a historic barrier for visitors, but Roy says that is changing.

"We have more beds than we even know what to do with," she said, pointing to the festival's private home and room rental scheme.

The festival is also working on transport solutions, including a shuttle option for people flying into nearby airports and needing a lift into Gore.

Air New Zealand backing, but sponsors still matter

A major boost for the festival is its selection as one of 19 events nationwide to receive "tailored support" from Air New Zealand for three years, including flights and marketing.

"So many people told me don't apply because Gore doesn't have an airport - but of course we applied anyway," Roy said.

While the support is not cash, she said flight assistance makes a real difference for bringing artists south.

"They don't give us any cash, but they do give us flight contra, which helps us get artists from around New Zealand to Southland."

Roy said sponsorship is still crucial.

"We need sponsorship and funding more than ever."

Big economic impact

Tussock Country is already delivering measurable benefits to the district. The festival estimates it injected around $2.5 million into the Eastern Southland economy in 2025, with 2026 expected to push higher again.

TUSSOCK COUNTRY 2026

May 22 to 31, Gore
More than 80 events across 10 days
Tickets via tussockcountry.nz
Full details: tussockcountry.nz

Festivalgoers sample local spirits during the Old Hokonui whisky and food match evening, celebrating Gore's moonshine history.

A life in song: Barry Saunders returns to Tussock Country

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Barry Saunders on stage with The Warratahs, performing songs that have become part of New Zealand's musical landscape. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

There are some songwriters whose music feels woven into the back roads of New Zealand.

Not because they set out to write "rural" songs, but because they have lived that life. They have travelled the country, watched people closely, and learned how to tell a story the way New Zealanders talk. Straightforward, observant, and quietly reflective.

Barry Saunders is one of them.

This May Saunders returns to the Tussock Country Music Festival with The Warratahs, bringing decades of songwriting and touring experience back to a region he says he has always loved.

Alongside the main festival performance, Saunders will also take part in a much smaller and more personal event: a lounge session hosted at musician Jenny Mitchell's family home.

The contrast between those two settings suits him just fine.

"I enjoy them both," he says. "The bigger gigs have that rock and roll energy. But the smaller ones are lovely because people really listen to the songs. It's a great way to communicate."

A life shaped by land

Saunders grew up first in Taranaki, before his family moved south to the Lincoln College farm in Canterbury.

That rural upbringing, he says, has always shaped how he sees the world and, inevitably, how he writes.

"I've always felt connected to the land," he says. "If you live in New Zealand, you see that in a lot of the songwriting. There's a sense of space here. New Zealand has a lot of space, and that finds its way into the music."

While not every song is directly about the physical landscape, Saunders says the connection still runs deep.

"I don't write only about the land. It's tied up with inner landscapes as well. But that's the way I grew up."

His early influences were largely shaped by the music his parents played.

"I heard a lot of Hank Snow, Hank Williams, early Johnny Cash and Elvis," he says. "Then folk music came along, and later I played in pop bands and blues bands. It all mixes together, but it tends to lean toward that country edge."

A sound that belongs to New Zealand

Despite those American influences, Saunders believes musicians inevitably absorb the place they come from.

"When you grow up in the country and you tour around New Zealand, you can't help being influenced by it," he says. "There's something about New Zealand that's hard to define, but it's special."

That sense of place has been part of The Warratahs' sound since the band formed in the 1980s.

Returning to Tussock Country

For Saunders, festivals like Tussock Country are more than just another stop on the tour calendar.

"It's really important," he says. "It's a focal point for a certain type of music, and it's something that's developed over many years. We've had a relationship with it going right back."

The Warratahs' set will span the band's long catalogue.

"We'll play some of the well-known songs, and we'll play some material from our latest album," Saunders says. "It usually includes things from our very first album right through to the most recent one, and sometimes a couple of covers."

The smaller lounge show will have a different feel altogether.

"I'll play songs from my solo albums, some covers, and some songs I've written with other people," he says. "It's a chance to talk about the songs a bit more and make it interesting for people."

The excitement of the early days

Looking back across his career, Saunders still remembers the moment he realised the band had truly found an audience.

"Our first tour was incredibly exciting," he says. "We had 'Hands of My Heart' out, but you have to remember there were no mobile phones then. We had no idea we were getting airplay around the country."

Barry Saunders performing live with guitar in hand, bringing the storytelling style that has defined decades of New Zealand songwriting.

When the band finally hit the road, the response surprised them.

"It was exciting to be accepted like that and to realise how popular the band was."

The Warratahs then spent years touring before eventually reaching a point of exhaustion.

"We toured for about eight years and eventually burnt out," he says. "We ran out of steam and needed to rethink what we were doing."

The band later reformed with new members and new musical textures, including accordion player Alan Norman and, more recently, drummer Caroline Easther.

"She'd played with me in my solo work for years," Saunders says. "When our drummer passed away, I suddenly realised the answer was right in front of me. I asked Caroline to join and she said yes straight away. It's been great."

Sharing a stage with legends

Saunders' long career has also placed him alongside some of music's biggest names, including Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash.

"They were really grounded people," he says. "Johnny Cash had enormous charisma, but he was also a very good conversationalist."

The experience left a lasting impression.

"They were old-school country. Very straightforward and genuine."

The industry today

Like many musicians who started long before the digital era, Saunders has watched the music industry transform.

"It's instant now," he says. "But it's also instantly gone. Music flashes past your eyes these days."

That doesn't mean he has lost faith in the future of New Zealand music. Far from it.

"There's been a huge wave of creativity in the last few years," he says. "People like Jenny Mitchell and Jackie Bristow. A lot of young women are writing incredible songs."

For Saunders, that creative cycle is simply how music evolves.

"The music people hear when they're young stays with them," he says. "Their parents played records, and the kids hear them. That's how it goes."

Old songs, still alive

For an artist whose catalogue stretches back decades, Saunders says he never tires of performing the songs audiences know best.

"They're old friends," he says. "I never get sick of singing songs like 'Hands of My Heart.' They're part of me."

That connection between songwriter and song is what keeps audiences coming back.

And when Saunders takes the stage at Tussock Country, whether it's the festival crowd or a living room full of listeners, it is the same simple idea that keeps him going.

"You just keep doing what you do," he says. "And every now and then the circle comes back your way."

The meat in the sandwich

KATHRYN WRIGHT

There are various stages at every part of life that throw different experiences at us. Some are exhilarating, and some are exhausting — building a career, having young children, financial difficulties, break-ups and make ups. But few are as all-consuming and challenging as having dependent or semi-dependent children, while also caring for ageing parents. This stage and age is known as the Sandwich Generation.

This stage also extends into territory where you may not have either children or elderly parents physically living with you, but you are emotionally responsible for their affairs, be it financial, medical, moral, or anything else that requires your time and energy. And for rural people, this can become a whole lot trickier when the various lenses of rurality are added — succession, isolation, lack of social services and support, and much more.

I speak to this article from experience, as I have been the "meat in the sandwich" for a good few years now. I've learnt a bit along the way, and I will share with you what has worked for me, and some knowledge that has also helped my clients when the going gets tough. If you have found yourself simultaneously organising school accounts/uniforms/camp permission slips while also arranging medical appointments, paying bills online, teaching about scammers and finding a mobile podiatrist for your elderly parent, you've arrived: this one is for you.

Acceptance

This is not about lying down and accepting your fate. This is about understanding what you have no control over, and what you do. Once you have identified these factors, you will regain some sense of control over your situation. While you can control your decisions, reactions, how you care for yourself, and what you prioritise, understand that you cannot control other people's reactions, decisions, government departments and what resources you have at your disposal. Resisting and struggling against what you cannot control is a waste of your energy and your capacity.

Values

How do you want to look back on this time and be proud of how you handled things? Rather than expending energy on things out of your control, think about what is important to you, and use that as your guiding star. Do you want to be able to say that you handled things with kindness, compassion and patience? Or that you confronted conflict and disagreements early and respectfully? Maybe you want to say that you did your absolute best at every turn.

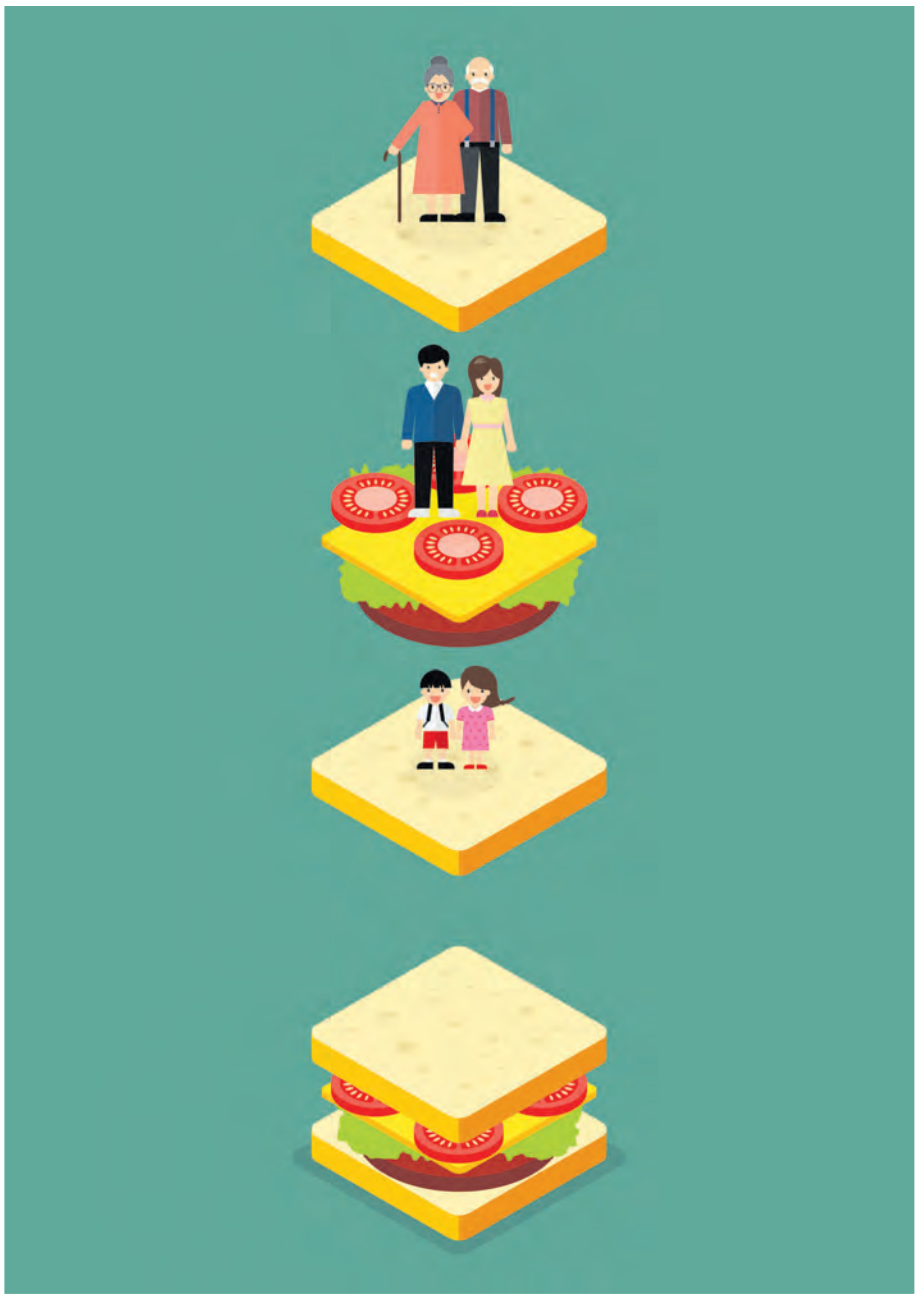
Boundaries

Boundaries are not about controlling other people — they are about deciding what you will and will not tolerate and speaking up or removing yourself from a situation that goes against your boundaries. With the younger generation it might be financial or behavioural boundaries, but this might look a lot different for the older generation — you may limit how many times per week you are willing to run errands for them or fix their computer. It is likely at this age that you also still have a career, whether that is on farm or elsewhere, and you don't have endless time.

Self-compassion

Finally, acknowledge that this is a hard stage of life. Fortunately, it is a stage that will not last forever, even though it may feel like it at the time. You are not alone in this — many of us struggle along with this together. Can you take a moment to acknowledge that this is hard, and you are doing your best. It feels like you're getting pulled in every direction, just trying to keep everyone else happy. What about you? What can you do — besides the suggestions here — to honour yourself? Think back to some of the things you used to enjoy, and literally schedule some of these things into your week. You are worth the investment.

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



A Life of Stories: Ruth Shaw reflects at Wānaka

Shepherdess founder Kirsty McGregor (left), author Ruth Shaw and Rees Valley Station's Kate Scott during the Shepherdess breakfast conversation at the Wānaka A&P Show. PHOTOS CLAIRE INKSON

Rural Guardian editor Claire Inkson with bestselling author Ruth Shaw following the Shepherdess breakfast at the Wānaka A&P Show.

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

The morning sun had barely warmed the Wanaka A&P Showgrounds when Ruth Shaw took her seat on the Shepherdess breakfast couch.

At nearly 80, the Manapouri bookseller and memoirist still radiates the restless energy that has carried her through a life full of adventure, heartbreak and reinvention.

Interviewed by Shepherdess founder Kirsty McGregor, Shaw shared the couch with Kate Scott of Rees Valley Station, speaking candidly about the extraordinary experiences that shaped her bestselling memoir, The Bookseller at the End of the World.

After the breakfast wrapped up, Shaw sat down with Rural Guardian to reflect more quietly on the life behind the stories.

Only recently Shaw handed over the tiny Fiordland bookshops that made her famous.

Her memoir The Bookseller at the End of the World, published in 2022, turned the cluster of small second-hand bookshops beside Lake Manapouri into an unlikely global destination.

Readers from around the world made the pilgrimage to the "wee bookshops", drawn by both the setting and the extraordinary life stories Shaw shared in her writing.

The book struck a chord with readers and was followed by two more titles — Bookshop Dogs in 2023 and Three Wee Bookshops at the End of the World, published in April 2025 — continuing the stories of life, visitors and characters connected to the Manapouri bookshops.

But letting the shops go has not been easy.

"How am I feeling about it?" Shaw said with a small smile. "Very sad. But it's time I handed it on."

Despite writing a memoir that spans decades of adventure and trauma, Shaw says she doesn't really see her life in chapters.

"Things just keep evolving and happening," she said. "It's not a chapter; it's just a continuous thing."

And it has been quite a story.

Before the books and the bookshops, came sailing adventures, travel, relationships, heartbreak and hard-won resilience. Shaw has spoken openly about the darker moments too — experiences of violence, loss and the grief of not raising the children she carried.

Writing the memoir forced her to revisit many of those memories.

"Some mornings it would go beautifully," she said of the writing process. "Other mornings I would just sit there and think — I can't write about this."

But she knew the book had to be honest.

"I said to the publishers if I was going to write it, I was going to write my book."

Shaw had help from an unintended archive — decades of diaries, letters and scraps of paper she had saved without knowing why.

"I'm a hoarder," she laughed. "And suddenly all these little bits of paper became important."

The result was a memoir that resonated deeply with readers around the world. Thousands have written to her about it.

Part of the reason, Shaw believes, is its honesty.

"She talks about stuff other people won't talk about," her husband Lance Shaw said when the two reflected on the book's success.

The pair's relationship is itself part of the story.

They first met when Shaw was just 21, but the relationship ended at the time, shaped in part by the expectations of a strict religious upbringing.

Decades later the two found their way back to each other and reunited in Fiordland.

Today they remain partners in life and in the many ideas Shaw continues to dream up.

When she starts a sentence with "I've got an idea," Lance admitted, he sometimes braces himself.

"Oh no," he joked.

Shaw laughs at the suggestion she might ever retire.

"I'm nearly 80 and I still have dreams," she said. "I know there are still going to be adventures."

Lance, she says, is better at retirement.

"When we sold our business, he said he was going to get a degree in retirement," Shaw said. "And he achieved it quite quickly."

For Shaw, the drive to try new things has never really slowed.

Asked what defines a life well lived, her answer was simple.

"Giving everything the opportunity," she said.

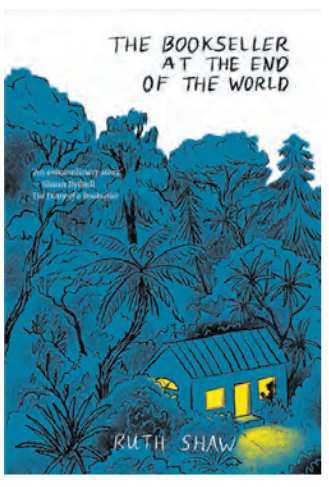
"Having dreams all the time and working towards them. And it doesn't matter if you fail. It doesn't matter if you make the wrong decision. It's through those decisions that we learn."

It's a philosophy shaped by a life that has contained both extraordinary adventure and deep sadness.

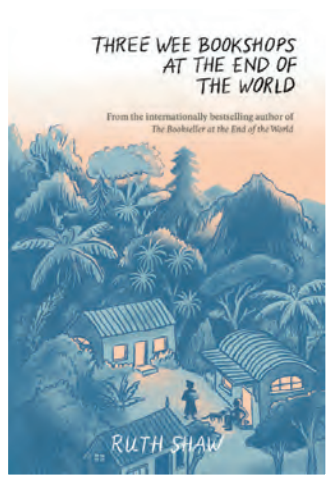
But as the conversation wrapped up, one thing was clear: even at nearly 80, Ruth Shaw is not finished writing new chapters — even if she refuses to call them that.

"I'm not going to stop," she said.

Guests gather inside the Shepherdess breakfast tent at the Wānaka A&P Show, where Ruth Shaw and Kate Scott spoke about rural life, storytelling and adventure.



The Bookseller at the End of the World, Ruth Shaw's bestselling 2022 memoir inspired by her tiny bookshops in Manapouri. PHOTO SUPPLIED



Three Wee Bookshops at the End of the World, Ruth Shaw's latest book published in April 2025, continuing stories from life around the famous Manapouri bookshops. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Small-town laughs heading to Gore

Claire Inkson
RURAL EDITOR

Comedian Tom Sainsbury is used to travelling around the country to perform, but when he takes the stage in Gore during the Tussock Country Music Festival this May, it will feel more like returning a favour.

Sainsbury says it was noticing how many people from Gore were travelling to see his shows elsewhere that prompted the decision.

"Every time I go and do a show down there, people travel far and away more from Gore to come and see me," he said.

"And I feel terrible about it. So, this time I'm coming to you."

During a South Island tour last year, Sainsbury realised just how far some fans were travelling to catch his shows.

"I was asking people where they'd come from and there were always people from Gore," he said.

"I was like, 'Dunedin to Gore is a long drive. Are you getting back tonight?' And they were like, 'Yeah.' I thought, okay, this is too much."

The idea to bring a show to Gore soon followed after a conversation with festival organisers.

Sainsbury said performing in smaller rural towns often feels familiar.

Raised on a farm in Matamata, he says the culture of rural communities still resonates with him.

"The vibe's very similar," he said.

"When I'm in somewhere like Gore, particularly a small rural town, I just feel like culturally we're all very similar. We all kind of get each other."

That rural upbringing also shapes much of the character-based comedy he has become known for online.

From the wine-loving middle-aged reviewer Fiona to the well-meaning but slightly clueless "Boomer Dad", Sainsbury's characters often feel instantly recognisable.

"I love it when people say 'this is just like someone from my childhood," he said.

Fiona, in particular, seems to strike a chord.

"More than any other character, women come up to me and say, 'I am Fiona.' They brazenly own it," he said.

Relatability is at the heart of the humour.

"I think it's that generation of aunties and uncles. They all kind of behave very similarly," he said.

Growing up in a small town also gave him plenty of time to observe people closely.

"With small towns you are there with these people your whole life," he said.

"The postie was the same person we had throughout our life. Our bus driver was the same bus driver throughout my childhood.

"You spend so much time around the same people that you really get to study them."

While audiences in cities and rural towns may react slightly differently, Sainsbury says the material itself tends to land everywhere.

"In smaller towns people can take a little longer to warm up," he said.

"In the city people have more shows to choose from so they kind of know how it works. But once rural crowds warm up, they're great."

Sainsbury's comedy career took off during the 2017 New Zealand election when his political parody videos gained a large online following.

Since then, social media has allowed his audience to grow steadily, something he says would have been unimaginable growing up.

"To tell my 13-year-old self this is what your life would be, he'd be like 'what?'," he said.

Fans also play a role in shaping his material.

"About half the inspiration comes from people's comments underneath the videos," he said.

One character he suspects might feel right at home in Gore is Tayn, a boy racer who enjoys cruising around town.

"Everyone kind of said 'yes, we all know Tayn'," he laughed.

While his comedy pokes fun at familiar Kiwi personalities, Sainsbury says he is mindful about crossing the line.

"If something's funny you should put it out there in the world," he said.

"But sometimes if it hits a sensitive nerve, it's not a big deal to take it down."

Ultimately, the show he brings to Gore will be tailored to the audience.

"The show I'm doing is definitely catered to small town New Zealand," he said.

And for a comedian whose work often celebrates the quirks of everyday Kiwi life, that audience might be the perfect fit.

Comedian Tom Sainsbury, known for his sharp character comedy and viral online sketches, will bring his small-town humour to the stage at the Tussock Country Music Festival in Gore. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

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