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Pages 16-17

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Our stories don't stop at the last page.

The Rural Guardian website is now live at [www.ruralguardian.com](http://www.ruralguardian.com), bringing digital editions, rural news and features together in one place, anytime you feel like a read.

## A Year of Stories, Connection and Rural Pride

Storytelling has been in my bones for as long as I can remember. Ever since I was seven, I've wanted to write.

When I was 15, my father bought me my first proper camera - a second-hand Olympus 35mm that I treasured and still have today.

I'd wander around our farm taking photos, jotting down every camera setting in a notebook so I could figure out what worked and what didn't.

Agriculture has always been my anchor.

I have the deepest respect for the people who work the land and for the contribution they make to our economy, our communities and our country.

To now work as editor of the Rural Guardian means I get to bring together my three lifelong passions: writing, photography and agriculture. It's a privilege, and I'm genuinely grateful to the farmers and producers who trust me with their stories.

As we step into a new year, I've found myself thinking about just how far the Rural Guardian has come.

What began as a small, determined regional paper has grown into something that genuinely reflects the energy, grit and heart of rural life across the South Island.

Over the past year we've shared more stories than ever — features that celebrate the people who keep our communities ticking, practical pieces that support farmers through the tough patches, and those great moments of rural pride that deserve to be shouted far beyond the farm gate.

Every edition reminds me that

our region thrives on connection, resilience and a willingness to back each other.

It matters more than ever that we keep telling our farming stories — not just to profile the incredible people who rise before dawn and work through every season, but to inspire and encourage the next generation coming through.

That's why our FMG Young Country segment remains so important. These stories show young Kiwis that there is a future in agriculture worth stepping into.

Our readership continues to grow, and with it, the opportunities to evolve.

One of the biggest steps this year has been the development of our dedicated Rural Guardian website.

Watching it take shape has been exciting — a modern, professional platform where we can showcase stories more dynamically, support advertisers more effectively, and reach rural readers well beyond our print footprint.

To our advertisers — thank you. Your support allows us to keep producing authentic rural journalism and shining a light on the people who make this industry what it is. In backing us, you're backing rural New Zealand.

As 2026 gets underway, I'm excited for what's ahead — more great features, more community stories, and an even stronger Rural Guardian presence both in print and online.

Thank you for being part of the journey so far, and for continuing to welcome us into your homes, businesses and paddocks.



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.

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## A Warm and Welcoming Christmas at ACL

**As the festive season rolls around, there's no missing the Christmas spirit at ACL especially when you walk through the front doors and are greeted by the smiling, cheerful faces of Kathy and Emma.**

As the first point of contact for many clients, the admin team takes pride in creating an atmosphere that's both welcoming and fun. And in December, that fun reaches a whole new level.

Every day of the month, the front office embraces full Christmas dress-up mode from colourful t-shirts and headbands to tutus, earrings, and anything else they've

collected over the years. "We wear whatever we can find," they laugh, and it's clear their enthusiasm sets the tone for the whole building.

Culture is something ACL is proud of, and as the year draws to a close, it becomes even more evident. Staff across different departments often talk about how supported they feel, and how much they value being part of a company that genuinely cares about its people.

In the lead-up to Christmas, the admin team enjoys Secret Santa, shared morning teas, and plenty of laughs. Meanwhile, the entire

staff looks forward to ACL's annual workshop gathering — the one time each year that everyone from across the company comes together. Matching outfits are a must, and the event includes a barbecue, beverages, a team raffle, and a few words from Gary reflecting on the year that's been and the year ahead.

For Kathy and Emma, who spend most of their time in the office, it's also a chance to meet many of the field staff they otherwise only know through paperwork or payroll. "It's great to finally put faces to names," they say.



# First Farm Award opens soon as NZDIA season kicks off



**Claire Inkson**  
RURAL EDITOR

With main entries for the 2026 New Zealand Dairy Industry Awards now closed, attention shifts to one of the most exciting opportunities ahead for emerging dairy farmers: the Fonterra and ASB First Farm Award.

Recognised as a major stepping stone toward farm ownership, the award opens for entries on 9 January and closes 9 March 2026.

The First Farm Award is designed to support progressive farmers making the transition from contract or sharemilking into owning their first farm.

The prize package includes up to \$1million of ASB Business Term Lending fixed at 1 percent per annum for three years, \$20,000 of Farm Source account credit to invest in their first farm, and a tailored package from Fonterra to support their ownership transition.

This includes mentoring, enhanced support and special offers designed to help set up a sustainable first farming business.

NZDIA General Manager Robin Congdon says the award aligns strongly with the programme's purpose of fostering progression.

"The First Farm Award is to help people get into their first farm. It is to help the right people; the progressive people get into farm ownership for the sustainability of dairy farming in the future."

The award is open to former Share Farmer entrants who plan to purchase their first farm within two years.

## Alumni Award focuses on past entrants

Running alongside the First Farm Award is the ASB Alumni of the Year Award, which recognises former NZDIA entrants who have made a significant contribution to the awards programme or the dairy industry.

"The newer awards were



NZDIA General Manager Robin Congdon says the First Farm Award aligns strongly with the programme's purpose of fostering progression. PHOTO SUPPLIED

introduced to re-engage people who have been through the programme before," Congdon says.

The Alumni Award offers the same financial support package as the First Farm Award for those who have progressed to farm ownership or hold more than 50 percent equity in a farm business.

The generosity of the awards sponsors contributes to a prize pool valued at over 1 million dollars across regional and national categories.

Prizes include cash, equipment, genetics packages, training, mentorship, professional development support and a major machinery prize.

## Power Farming joins as National sponsor

One of the standout additions this season is Power Farming joining as a national sponsor and contributing a significant machinery prize.

"It's fantastic to have such a strong company like Power Farming on board now," Congdon says. "We are totally funded by sponsorship, so it is great to have that support from a company with very similar values, wanting to promote and do the best for the rural communities that they work in."

Power Farming is providing the use of a Kioti HX 130 to 140 hp

tractor for one year to the National Share Farmer of the Year runner-up.

## Supporting growth in the dairy sector

Congdon says the awards continue to be one of the most important development pathways for New Zealand dairy farmers at all stages of their careers.

"The awards are all about celebrating excellence and supporting development in the sector. It is not just about winning really. It is also about professional development and growth, building networks and recognising people who are progressing, learning and demonstrating strong business and

leadership capabilities."

The benefits are clear in the stories that come through each year.

"One story that sticks in my mind from last year was our dairy trainee winner from the West Coast Top of the South, Ros McCann. She had never left the South Island and came up to nationals and just had an absolute ball. The awards managed to open up their horizons and networks."

He says watching entrants progress through the categories is a highlight.

"You might see someone the first time in dairy trainee and then they progress. The talented ones are able to move into serious roles very quickly and further on into leadership roles."

## Driven by Volunteers and community

The NZDIA programme is built on collaboration, with hundreds of volunteers, judges and rural professionals involved across eleven regions.

"It is totally run by volunteers. It is them that make this possible. There is so much collaboration. People want to share best practice, how to cope with issues and challenges."

Congdon says collaboration within the sector has been key to the awards success.

"There has been sector wide support from our sponsors and industry organizations like DairyNZ and Fonterra and of course the local communities that we operate out of. Those eleven regional communities, all get behind the awards and help each other out. It's pretty phenomenal."

## Looking ahead to Nationals

The national finals will take place in Rotorua in May 2026, bringing together the best of the best from across the country.

"We are really excited to be going there," Congdon says. "It is a great place for us to celebrate."

## Find Out More

**FIRST FARM AWARD**  
Entries open 9 January to 9 March 2026  
See full details at:  
[www.dairyindustryawards.co.nz](http://www.dairyindustryawards.co.nz)

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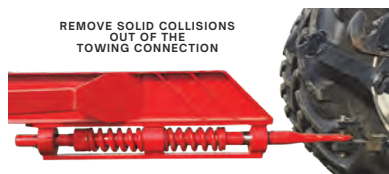
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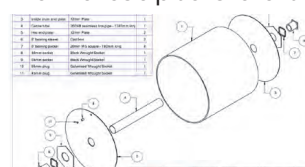


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# Plugged In, Still Pulling Hard: Ranger Stormtrak PHEV



## DUNCAN HUMM

It had been a long time coming for me to finally get behind the wheel of a Ford Ranger Stormtrak PHEV. Back in September 2023, I attended a media briefing ahead of Ford publicly announcing that it would be bringing an electrified version of the new-generation Ranger to market.

At the time, this was a big deal. There were no electric options in the ute segment, let alone a plug-in hybrid that promised versatility without sacrificing the qualities that make a ute useful — namely power, payload and towing capability.

Fast forward to 2025 and the Stormtrak has arrived, offering a compelling option for those who see their ute as more than just a vehicle, but something that integrates into daily life.

The first question people usually ask is this: if there's little compromise in performance and capability compared to a diesel ute, what's the electric range, and how did Ford decide on battery size?

Ford began by analysing real-world data from existing Ranger owners, collected between services across global markets, particularly Australia and New Zealand. The average daily driving distance was around 40km. From there, engineers set about fitting the battery and electric hardware into the current Ranger platform.

Looking underneath the ute, how they've achieved this is quite remarkable. Unless you look closely, it's difficult to tell the Stormtrak apart from a diesel version. There are no obvious or annoying compromises — not to handling, not to deck space. The spare wheel still sits where it should, unlike another PHEV ute currently on the market, where a larger battery has come at the expense of spare-wheel placement and even tow-bar fitment. Ford has clearly nailed the practicality aspect.

This spring has been a timely reminder of the importance of resilience — whether it's extreme weather or disruptions to power and roading networks. I'm sure

many people would have been very pleased to have a PHEV in their driveway when it became clear that storm damage meant power wouldn't be restored for days.

Enter the generator and battery storage on wheels.

Most of the time, the idea behind a PHEV is to charge at home and use that stored energy to reduce or eliminate fuel use on short daily trips. But flip that on its head and the Ranger can power your home. When the generator system is active, it can deliver up to 6.9kW, with a 2.3kW cabin socket and two outlets in the deck, each capable of 3.45kW. That's enough to run an entire household for days — or a job site or workshop.

While I had the Stormtrak, we were right in the peak of our velvet season, which provided a perfect test. I plugged it into our velvet freezer to chill down a morning's harvest, and it handled the task easily.

My day-to-day ute use fits the ideal PHEV use case: generally 40–50km of road driving, with shorter trips around the farm. With regular charging at home or in the yard, we wouldn't be buying much petrol at all. As we're also planning to add solar to the house soon, that would further reduce energy costs and help speed up the payback on that investment. The added resilience from both would be a significant win.

Thanks to the team at Gluyas Motor Group for the opportunity to spend time with the Stormtrak and experience it first-hand.

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# From Waipara to the World Stage



Kim Schofield's long-term plan is to transform the vineyard's old winery shed into an art and tasting space. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Working with Jordan and winemakers Matt Connell and Dom Maxwell, Schofield developed a Rosé programme built on premium fruit, hand-harvesting and a level of precision more typically associated with wines created in Provence.

PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON



The shift from investor to full-time wine producer began during the Covid lockdowns, when Schofield started selling wine directly to friends. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON



**How one small vineyard and a relentless owner rewrote New Zealand's Rosé story**



**Claire Inkson**

RURAL EDITOR

**W**hen Kim Schofield bought an ageing Waipara vineyard in 2017, she freely admits the decision was not part of a grand winemaking strategy.

"People secretly romanticise the idea of owning a vineyard," she says. "The original idea was that it was an investment, but yes, there was a bit of romance in there too."

What Schofield did not know then was that the property held some of New Zealand's oldest living dry-grown, ungrafted Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines.

Nor could she have imagined that the small, slightly tired vineyard would be restored to life and celebrated internationally for both Rosé and Chardonnay.

## A Pandemic Pivot

The shift from investor to full-time wine producer began during the Covid lockdowns, when

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Schofield started selling wine directly to friends.

"I would deliver wine to the doorstep and stand out on the street yelling a conversation. I did not realise how much people loved talking about wine," she says. "Their excitement fuelled mine."

Demand grew quickly. What started as a small favour for friends became a rapidly expanding business.

Behind the scenes, the vineyard needed urgent attention. Rising demand, restoration work and limited capacity created pressure the small operation was struggling to handle.

A friend urged Schofield to meet acclaimed viticulturist Dr David Jordan. She resisted at first.

"We were a little business. I said we couldn't afford someone like that," she says. "He told me we couldn't afford not to."

Their meeting proved to be the turning point. Jordan immediately recognised the significance of the vines and the seriousness of their decline.

"He told us we had the oldest living dry-grown, ungrafted Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines in the country. We had no idea," she says. "Without him, the vineyard was heading towards death."

Working alongside Jordan, vine health improved, frost management was strengthened, and the foundations for a new wine programme began.

### The Rosé Revelation

Schofield originally intended to focus on Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but as the team worked with the fruit, something unexpected emerged.

"We realised we were growing an incredible variety for Rosé. David

understood it immediately," she says. "And I wanted to make Rosé because my friends drank it. It is fun and joyful."

Working with Jordan and winemakers Matt Connell and Dom Maxwell, Schofield developed a Rosé programme built on premium fruit, hand-harvesting and a level of precision more typically associated with wines created in Provence.

Their first, Georgie Rosé, sold out in three weeks.

In early 2025, world-leading wine writer Dr Jamie Goode visited. As he was preparing to leave, Schofield finally mentioned her ambition.

"I said, I have a dream. I want to make the best Rosé in New Zealand," she says.

Goode tasted the wines, heard about the viticulture and told her she should take them to the world.

Soon afterwards, Dancing Water entered the International Wine and Spirit Challenge for the first time.

The results astonished Schofield. Dancing Water achieved a Gold Medal for the Blanc de Noir 2024, a Silver Medal for the Central Otago Pinot Noir Rosé 2024 and a Bronze Medal for the Georgie Rosé Diamante 2024.

Dancing Water became the first New Zealand winery to win three Rosé medals in a single year. The only other gold still Rosé in the category came from a French label retailing at more than \$US100.

The winery was then shortlisted for the IWSC Rosé Producer Trophy, one of the most respected honours in the wine world.

"For a tiny vineyard in Waipara to be among the top producers internationally was surreal," Schofield says. "It taught me to dream big."

In late November, Dancing Water's 2023 Artist Series Chardonnay received a Gold Medal at the Chance Voight Aotearoa Regional Wine Awards, reinforcing that the vineyard's excellence extends beyond Rosé.

### Rural Roots and Direct Sales

Unlike most award-winning wineries, Dancing Water is not found on supermarket shelves. Schofield has deliberately adopted a direct-to-consumer online sales model.

"We sell direct," she says. "It lets us keep the price accessible."

With most bottles selling for around \$25 to \$30, her aim is to make premium wine an "everyday luxury" rather than a special-occasion purchase.

The model has also proved a strong fit for rural customers.

"It suits people who live outside the cities. They do not have to rely on what a supermarket stocks. They can order direct from us, know exactly where the wine comes from, and it arrives at their door."

For many customers across the South Island, the convenience, connection and affordability have become key drawcards.

A distinctive part of the Dancing Water brand is its partnership with artists.

Labels feature work from Michelle Reid, Hye Rim Lee and Chloe Summerhayes.

"I wanted the wine to look beautiful as well as taste beautiful. And I wanted to support artists in a way that lifted everyone," Schofield says.

Her long-term plan is to transform the vineyard's old



Dancing Water became the first New Zealand winery to win three Rosé medals in a single year. PHOTO SUPPLIED

winery shed into an art and tasting space.

Schofield credits her corporate background for helping her navigate the complexities of business growth. While she acknowledges the wine world can feel traditional, she has found her place within it.

"I realised I could be myself. It did not matter if I was different. Behind the scenes we are as technical as anyone," she says.

Her advice for anyone chasing a dream is simple.

"Create space in your mind. Take a few minutes before your day starts. If you clear your head, you begin to see the green lights in front of you. The ideas, the people

who want to help, the direction. It is all already there."

### A Small Vineyard with a Global Voice

From a venture that began as a purely financial investment and evolved into a genuine passion, Dancing Water has become one of New Zealand's most compelling boutique wine stories.

With award-winning Rosé, a gold-medal Chardonnay and a loyal direct-to-consumer community, Schofield's once-quiet vineyard now stands confidently on both national and global stages.

"What we are doing is special," she says. "And now the world knows it."

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# Gunning it: Nicola Johns and the world of gundog trialling



Nicola Johns with her impressive haul of trophies at the recent New Zealand Gundog Championships. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



Nicola Johns and Fern at their first New Zealand win in 2021.

## CLAIRE INKSON

Gundog trialling isn't a sport that draws crowds or headlines, but it demands the same precision, teamwork and grit as any top-tier competition.

To Hurunui's Nicola Johns, it's an obsession spanning generations, a sport that has taken her from muddy fields to national titles.

Johns, who works as Animal

Health Sales Team Leader at North Canterbury Vets, is secretary of the Working Retriever Club and a committee member of the Canterbury Gundog Club. Her weekends are spent training, travelling and trialling with her black Labrador Fern, one of the country's top working retrievers.

## A test of instinct and teamwork

"There are three disciplines in gundog trialling," Johns explains. "We have retriever events, which include pigeon trials, walk-ups and live game. Then pointers and setters, and spaniels. They're all simulated hunting tests, with the live game aspect of the sport continuing to grow."

Training begins when a puppy comes home, with simple obedience and fun retrieves that

build confidence, drive and the bond between handler and dog.

From there, dogs progress through novice and limit classes to advanced retriever stakes involving multiple birds, water work, blinds, thick cover and terrain. "Everything is designed to simulate what they'd do in a real hunting situation," she says.

## Championship success

In October, the Working Retriever Club hosted the New Zealand Championships in Twizel, following the South Island Champs run by the Canterbury Gundog Club the week before.

"We had about 80 people at prizegiving, and over 190 dog entries and a lot of them were running multiple dogs."

Johns and Fern took first place in the New Zealand Retriever



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Championship — a highlight in a season full of them.

Six challenge points earn the title Field Trial Champion (FTCh), twenty points Grand Field Trial Champion (GFTCh).

"We won the New Zealand back in 2021 as well," she says. "That gives you NTL in front of your name, meaning national. Fern's now on 34 challenge points — our next goal is 50"

With those accolades, Fern is officially known as NTL GFTCh First Lady of Icepeak — Icepeak being the kennel name Johns established when she bred from her black Labrador Ice six years ago.

This year she and Fern also claimed All Breeds of the Year, tied for Retriever of the Year with close friend and fellow competitor Sonya Tamlyn and her dog Vitesse Chimes High, known as Chime, and won Gundog of the Year.

"This year has probably been my biggest and proudest year," Johns says.

### A family legacy

Labradors run deep in the Johns family.

"Labradors have pretty much been in my life since the day I was born," she says. "Dad gundog trialled with my dog's grandfather — Grand Field Trial Champion Peacehaven Candyman, known as King."

She bred Fern's mother, Ice, now nearly fifteen.

"Ice had one black female pup in the litter. I've always loved my black Labs, so that's who I kept — and that's Fern."

Shortly after her first national win, Fern collapsed the night before commencing the Tasman Championship trial and required emergency surgery for pyometra —

a life-threatening uterine infection.

"I almost lost her. It was the worst day of my life," Johns says.

Fern recovered, but couldn't be bred from.

Johns' plans to continue the line using stored semen from King with her young bitch Vitesse Eyes On Me - known as Flirt - who has returned excellent health results.

### Building champions

"The most important thing right from the beginning is health testing," she says. "These dogs need to be fit and agile — they run hills, swim, stop and turn quickly. Keeping them lean and strong is key."

Her own days are equally disciplined.

"I'm up at 5.30, toileting and feeding the dogs, giving them a good walk before work. After work I train them again. It's full-on, but I love it."

She trains mainly on the North Canterbury farm where she lives, with an accommodating landowner who even allows a walk-up trial to be held there each March.

Ask what makes Fern special and her answer is immediate.

"She's nice and calm, works with me incredibly naturally. We work as one — we're so in sync with each other now. She knows what I expect of her."

That connection, Johns says, is the heart of the sport.

"Your dog needs to want to do what it's doing. You're working as a team."

### Women leading the way

Traditionally, gundog trialling has been a male domain, but that's changing fast.

"It used to be very male-



Fern poses with an array of trophies won at the recent championships in Twizel. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

Nicola, Fern and Flirt after a successful morning duck shooting.



Nicola and Fern out for a hunt during the roar for her birthday.

dominant," Johns says. "Now Sonya and I are at the top. The females are starting to dominate a bit more — which is awesome."

She and Tamblin travel and train together, sharing success and support. "We call ourselves Team SONIC — Sonya and Nic," Johns laughs. "We're both incredibly competitive as well as

always proud of one another's achievements and wins."

### Looking ahead

Johns is passionate about encouraging newcomers.

"First of all, get yourself a well-bred dog — good health scores and a line that suits what you want.

Then make small goals. Win a few novices, move up, learn as you go. If you put in the time and energy, you'll get there."

For Johns, her focus is on keeping the winning momentum.

"I want to keep achieving with Fern, however Flirt, my young dog, is coming through the ranks now, so I'll be focusing on her goals too."

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# Feral Cats Added to Predator Free 2050 Strategy

Geraldine DOC senior ranger biodiversity Ian Fraser with a skink. PHOTO SUPPLIED



DOC senior ranger biodiversity Archie MacFarlane in the South Branch of the Hurunui, North Canterbury.



CLAIRE INKSON

Not the cute, cuddly feline friends we call pets—feral cats are stealthy predators having a severe impact on New Zealand's native wildlife. The Department of Conservation (DOC) is fighting an uphill battle to control these pests throughout the Canterbury region.

In Mid Canterbury, birdlife along braided rivers is under increasing threat as wild cats run rampant, says Geraldine DOC senior biodiversity ranger Ian Fraser.

"Cats are an enormous problem, and we are trying to protect braided river birds," Fraser says.

"Feral cats are such versatile predators, and they are devastating the braided river, dryland and tussock ecosystems we have in the Ashburton basin."

Fraser believes feral cats may be even more prevalent in the Ashburton Basin than in forested areas.

"They seem to be more dominant out here."

"We don't have so many rats and possums as they do in the forests, but the cat population is out of this world."

Endangered species such as the black stilt, wrybill, and black-fronted tern are particularly vulnerable to predation by feral

cats in South Island braided riverbeds.

Cats were first introduced to New Zealand aboard ships from early European settlers, brought to control rats during the voyage. Over time, they spread across the country. Larger and more adept hunters than their domestic counterparts, feral cats are also known to spread diseases such as toxoplasmosis—dangerous to humans and stock.

Stealthy by nature and capable of travelling long distances, feral cats are difficult to count and monitor. Fraser says DOC is turning to technology for help: trail cameras driven by artificial intelligence are in development, as manually counting cats in camera footage is too labour-intensive.

"They are hard to count, they are pretty cryptic."

Currently, most population estimates come from trap data—and the numbers are staggering.

"In the last three years in the traps in the Upper Rangitata and Stour Valley we have removed 1,346 cats."

Although black-fronted tern survival rates appear to have improved since the trapping programme began, Fraser says the issue remains overwhelming.

"The cats just keep pouring back in."

An orange fronted parakeet (kākārīki karaka) in the Hurunui South Branch.



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DOC is working closely with farmers and catchment groups to reduce the problem.

"Farmers give us access to their properties, so sometimes our traps are on farmland.

"We also do some rabbit control, because that's often a cat's prey base.

"They might snack on birds, but their day-to-day diet is rabbits—if they are around.

"So, keeping rabbits under control helps keep the feral cat population down," Fraser said.

### A single cat can wipe out an entire colony

The scale of the problem was starkly illustrated last year on the Waiau Toa/Clarence River, where a lone tom cat managed to destroy almost an entire black-fronted tern/tarapirohe colony. The animal reached an island nesting site in December 2024, killing adults, chicks, and eggs, and causing nearly all 95 nests to be abandoned.

This season, DOC contractors Shannon and Jasen Mears carried out a targeted trapping operation to prevent a repeat disaster. Over several days the pair tracked and eventually caught the same large, trap-shy tom cat—identified by its distinctive prints—along with ten other feral cats.

The job was far from straightforward. Shannon says it took multiple nights, complex lures, and the help of their dog before the cat was finally secured.

"It was a relief to finally catch it and a win for the black-fronted terns, which will be a lot safer this breeding season," she says.

DOC South Marlborough Principal Ranger Pat Crowe says

the removal of the cat was a significant victory after last year's devastation.

"It was sad to see the impact a single cat had on an entire colony of these special birds when everyone was working so hard to protect them. So, it's gratifying it has now been removed along with ten other feral cats."

The Waiau Toa/Clarence River supports at least a dozen tern colonies, and early monitoring this season has shown strong nesting numbers with no recorded predation inside the control network.

### Feral cats officially added to Predator Free 2050

The nationwide response to feral cats has also shifted. The Government recently confirmed that feral cats are now formally recognised within the Predator Free 2050 Strategy—a move strongly supported by the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA).

The NZVA says the decision brings national consistency to work already happening across DOC, councils, and conservation groups, while reinforcing the need for responsible pet ownership through desexing, microchipping, and containment.

While acknowledging the sentence of cats, NZVA emphasises their significant ecological and disease impacts, particularly toxoplasmosis. The group is calling for humane, science-led control methods and continued refinement of tools used in the field.

The NZVA also highlights how fluid the boundaries are between owned, stray, and feral cats,

stressing that success will depend on coordinated action across communities.

Dr Natalie Lloyd, Immediate Past President of the Companion Animal Veterinarian Branch, says discussions around cats must balance emotion with evidence.

"We recognise the deeply important roles that companion cats play in the lives of many people. Forty percent of New Zealand households contain a companion cat. We understand that this is a subject about which people feel very passionately. However, it is important to also acknowledge that feral cats hunt in order to survive, not out of malice."

She says collaboration and objectivity will be essential to protect wildlife while maintaining New Zealand's strong culture of pet ownership.

### New aerial bait could transform control efforts

Trapping and euthanising remain the primary methods of control, but they have limitations. However, a new meat-based bait developed for aerial application is showing promise and may become a game-changer in the effort to make New Zealand predator-free by 2050.

As part of the Predator Free 2050 initiative, DOC—working with pest control company Orillion—is developing a meat-based sausage bait specifically for feral cats. Early field trials have produced encouraging results.

In a 5,000-hectare aerial trial in North Canterbury's St James Conservation Area, one 18g sausage bait was dropped per hectare. GPS-collared tracking showed that 9 out of 10 monitored

Orange fronted parakeets are vulnerable to feral cats. PHOTO SUPPLIED



A trapped feral cat in St James Conservation Park.

cats consumed the bait and died. Motion-activated cameras recorded a sharp drop in cat activity, falling from 63 detections to just one.

A second trial at Macraes Flat in Otago, recently completed, has shown similar results with 100 per cent (11 out of 11) of monitored cats dying.

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Each issue we ask a farmer five quick questions about agriculture, and what farming means to them. Today we chat to Sefton farmer and owner of The Good Cow, Tammy Acton-Adams.

## 1 What did your journey into farming look like?

I grew up on a small farm on the other side of Sefton that was very diverse. Between leaving school and when my secretary course started, I joined a shearing gang for the summer. Oh, how I wanted to stay doing that! But was told I had to do the course. That lead me into the corporate world of advertising for nine years including sales and management. The skills that I learned during that time have been invaluable and I have drawn on that experience every day since returning to farming 20 years ago.

## 2 Tell us a little bit about your farming operation

We farm in North Canterbury and have a small home block as well as several lease blocks. To be sustainable we have created a lot of diversity — dairy farming, beef fattening, calf rearing, agricultural contracting, hay harvesting, cropping, transport, and whatever else comes up.

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

Perhaps the biggest challenge we face is the urban sprawl. It has taken away a lot of the quality land around us that was utilised for cropping or harvesting hay. On the home farm we have taken advantage of being on State Highway One and converted some of the land to a miniature dairy farm to sell raw milk to the local growing population.

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

If you had asked me ten years ago, I would have said something completely different, but now I think it is the cowshed and the cows. We have got some amazing new pedigree Friesian cows with great genetics and the potential for their offspring is exciting.

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

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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 talk to Abbey White from Clinton Young Farmers Club**

**1 What is the name of your club, and how long have you been a member?**

I am apart of Clinton Young Farmers, and I joined back in 2019.

**2 What has been the highlight for you of joining Young Farmers? What are the benefits and experiences that you feel have helped you most?**

The highlight of my Young Farmers journey has been the friendships and connections with people who share the same passion and energy. I'm truly grateful for the challenges and opportunities it has provided, building both farming knowledge and essential life skills — from public speaking to leadership and problem solving.

**3 How did you become involved in agriculture?**

I grew up in Christchurch and don't come from a farming background. At the end of my final year of high school (Year 13), my careers advisor asked what I wanted to do the following year. At that stage I wasn't sure, but I knew I learned best by doing something hands on. That led me to attend a Telford taster camp. In 2016 I completed a Certificate in Equine, but by the end of the year I realised I preferred to keep horses as a hobby rather than pursue them as a career. What Telford showed me was that you don't need to come from a farming family to be part of the industry. In 2017 I returned to Telford to complete my Certificate in Agriculture.

**4 What is your job now?**

My farming journey has been incredibly rewarding so far. I've been fortunate to work with employers who not only taught me valuable skills but also offered support beyond the workplace — something I've appreciated deeply, especially with my family based in Canterbury. At present, I'm working on a 960 hectare sheep and beef farm in Clydevale, South Otago, where we run 6,300 ewes and 300 cattle.



**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 am unsure exactly what the future of farming will look like as it is changing very quickly, especially as technology advances. But farming will forever be the backbone of New Zealand in my opinion.

I believe farming should be seen as a career path for everyone, not just those raised on farms. I'd like to see more initiatives that inspire and support people from urban backgrounds to step into agriculture, bringing fresh perspectives and energy to the sector.

**6 What are your future plans?**

My future plans include travelling to Europe, where I'm looking forward to experiencing new cultures, history, and festivals. It's a chance to broaden my horizons, take in fresh perspectives, and enjoy some adventure before continuing to grow my career in agriculture.

**7 Who has been your biggest inspiration in agriculture, and why?**

My biggest inspiration has been a combination of

my own journey and the incredible mentors I've had along the way. Coming from an urban background, I've proved to myself that with determination and support, it's possible to thrive in farming. At the same time, the employers and mentors I've worked with have inspired me through their knowledge, encouragement, and belief in me.

*Abbey's club describes her as the kind of leader who quietly lifts the whole team. As Chair, she's often the first to turn up, the last to leave, and the one making sure everyone feels part of the action. Her willingness to pitch in, encourage others, and keep the club moving forward has made a noticeable impact in both her own club and the wider district.*

*Those who work alongside her say her enthusiasm is contagious, and her commitment to growing the club reflects the best of the Young Farmers spirit — community-minded, hands-on, and always ready to support others.*

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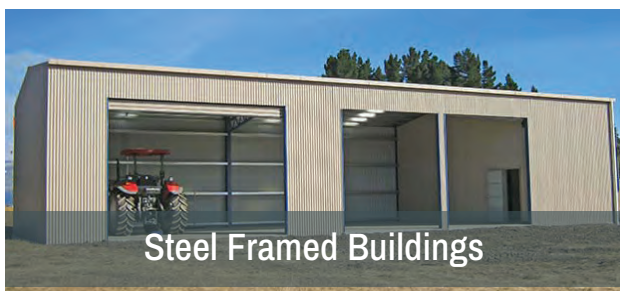
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## Nicola Johns

### WHERE ABOUTS ARE YOU BASED?

North Canterbury, South of Cheviot in a prime spot right on the Hurunui river.

### WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT JOB?

I work for North Canterbury Vets as Animal Health Sales Rep Team Leader. I'm very privileged to have such a great bunch of S&B farming clients within our region. At the end of the day, you can't really call it a job when you are so passionate about what you do and get to deal with such a great community at the end of the day.

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

Well I'm very fortunate to have two of these to drive around in, One being my work ute which I use during the week — 2023 Mazda BT-50.

However during my own time driving the country side with my dogs I drive a 2014 Black Toyota Hilux.

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

During the summer months def the AC & in winter the fact it cranks up to HOT in seconds after being in the sheep yards on a cold frosty morning.

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

Bit of R.E.M., Big Jet Plane, or mostly just good ol' country!!

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

Love a good bliss ball to keep me going when trying to smash through a good day's work.

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

Work Ute — A heap of FEC (Faecal Egg Count Packs), Personal Ute — Hmm well if it ain't for the odd empty shotgun shell or .22 bullet, it'd be a bag of dog treats and a bottle of bubbles as most weekends are worth celebrating!



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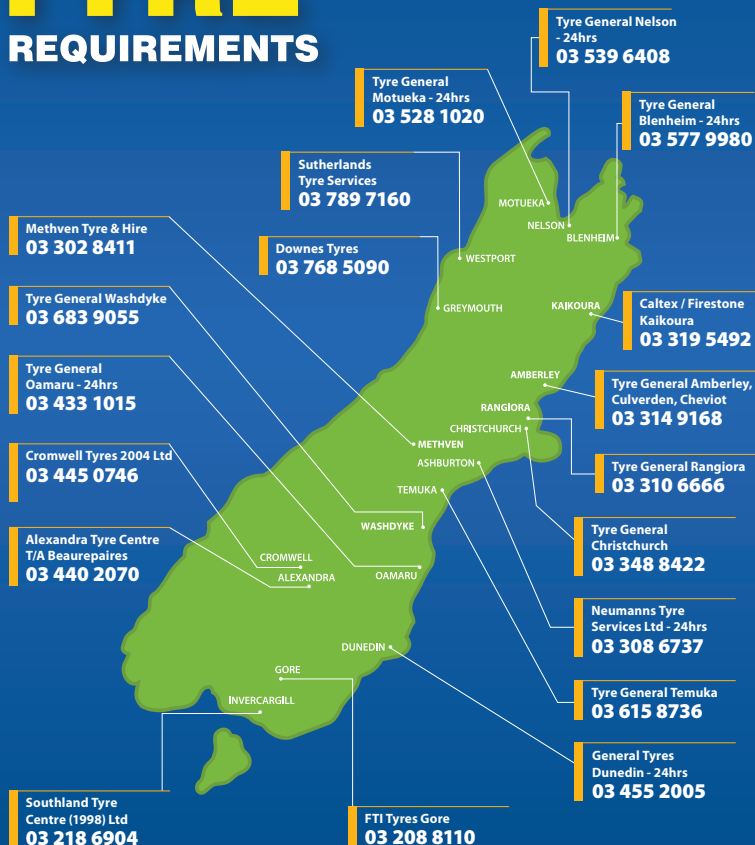
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# Southland farmer's edible bale net wins global attention



Prince William, who toured the Kiwi Econet stand at the Groundswell event in the UK and expressed interest in using Kiwi Econet on the royal farm. PHOTO SUPPLIED



**Claire Inkson**

RURAL EDITOR

A Southland deer farmer who once hand-knitted his first 50 metres of bale netting is now preparing to take his invention to agricultural events across Europe — and has caught the attention of Prince William along the way.

Orepuki farmer Grant Lightfoot, inventor of the edible jute bale net Kiwi Econet, has seen remarkable growth since winning the 2024 Southern Field Days Innovation Award at Waimumu.

What began as an experiment in his woolshed has since developed into a fully manufactured product, attracting interest from around the world.

Lightfoot first came up with the idea years ago while working as a commercial diver on offshore oil rigs, spending long periods of time in a decompression chamber.

Long hours and isolation prompted him to think about problems back home, particularly

the environmental impacts and animal health risks associated with plastic bale netting.

"You can't recycle it. Farmers burn it or bury it. And if a cow eats it, that's a \$2,500 animal gone," he says.

## From hand-knitted prototype to Field Days winner

Back on the farm in Orepuki, Lightfoot and his partner Colleen knitted the very first prototype by hand.

Running it through the baler proved the concept worked, and a suggestion from a friend prompted him to enter the Southern Field Days Innovation Award.

"I didn't think much of it, really," he says. "But I won it — hands down."

He donated his prize money to the Westpac Rescue Helicopter Trust, and within minutes of the award announcement, his phone was flooded with messages.

"It was instant. I couldn't keep up."

Since that moment, everything has moved quickly.

Kiwi Econet is now made from jute, grown and manufactured in India.

The netting can be safely eaten by livestock or left to break down

naturally in the paddock, offering both environmental and practical advantages.

"It's just a natural fibre. Any animal can eat it. And if they don't, it just rots away," Lightfoot says.

The benefits extend beyond animal safety.

The product reduces labour and eliminates plastic waste, offering a solution for contractors and farmers dealing with thousands of tonnes of discarded plastic netting each year.

New Zealand alone uses an estimated \$5.3 million worth of plastic bale net annually; Japan spends around \$8.3 million.

"I'm the only one in the world doing this," he says.

## Global momentum and a royal encounter

Lightfoot has recently travelled to Switzerland, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom to promote the product.

Kiwi Econet will begin exporting containers to Europe this year.

A particularly memorable moment came at the Groundswell agricultural show in England, where organisers hinted that a "special guest" would be visiting the Innovation area.

That guest was Prince William, who toured the stand and



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Grant Lightfoot first came up with the Kiwi Econet idea years ago while working as a commercial diver on offshore oil rigs, and spending long periods of time in a decompression chamber. PHOTOS SUPPLIED



expressed interest in using Kiwi Econet on the royal farm.

"Pretty cool," Lightfoot says. "He was just like us — very easy to talk to."

Lightfoot will return to the UK in June next year for a major agricultural showcase hosted at Jeremy Clarkson's Diddly Squat Farm, where Kiwi Econet will be featured.

Following encouragement during his UK trip, Lightfoot entered the 2026 Earthshot Prize, the global environmental award established by Prince William.

Kiwi Econet has been nominated across all five categories. "There's a million pounds per category," he

says. "We won't get all five — but one would be enough."

### A homegrown innovation backed by hard work

Despite the rapid global interest, Lightfoot says he has received no government support in New Zealand.

"No one in New Zealand has helped me," he says. "I even went to the Beehive. Nothing."

To fund the business, he works six jobs, including deer farming, running a logging business, operating a log truck, shooting from a helicopter and grazing dairy

cattle on a lease block.

"All of it goes back into the company. You've got to work hard. That's just life."

Lightfoot will return to the Southern Field Days at Waimumu in February 2026, where Kiwi Econet will again be exhibited in the Innovation area.

He hopes local farmers will stop by, ask questions and consider the long-term benefits of moving away from plastic netting.

"It's available now. It's a time saver. It's safer. And it's better for the environment," he says. "The next couple of years — watch this space."



Kiwi Econet is made from jute instead of the traditional plastic, creating an edible and sustainable alternative.



Following encouragement during his UK trip, Lightfoot entered the 2026 Earthshot Prize, the global environmental award established by Prince William, and has since been nominated across all five categories.



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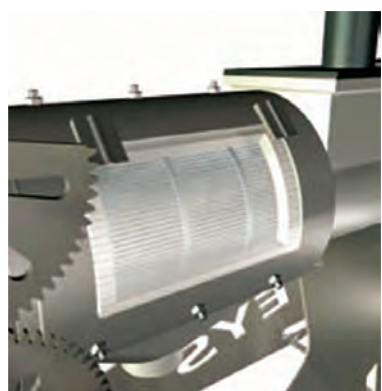
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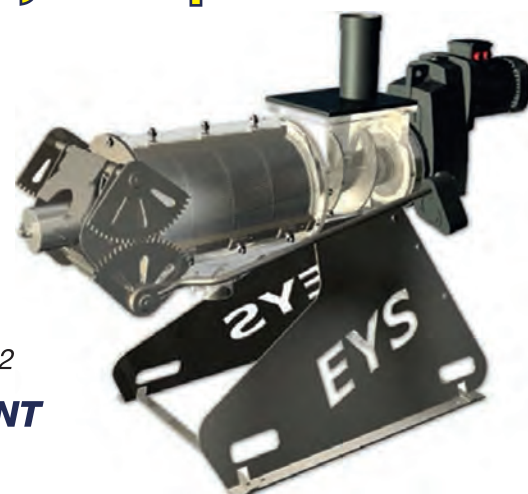
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# Tackling N-Loss Targets

ANGELA CUSHNIE

‘Let’s keep the momentum going’ was the theme for a field day hosted at Pencarrow Farm in early December. Presenters balanced acknowledging current action, which is proven to reduce nitrogen (N) losses, with new and emerging science targeting further reductions.

Collaboration across the sector is evident and remains a critical part of collective action to manage N. Acton Farmers Irrigation, Ashburton Lyndhurst Irrigation, Barhill Chertsey Irrigation, DairyNZ, Enviro Collective, Fonterra, MHV Water, Mid Canterbury Catchment Collective, and Rangitata South Irrigation all had input to ensure the day was both thought provoking and practical.

So, where are we at?

Extensive community-led water monitoring programmes are in place across multiple catchments to collect valuable data, which helps inform catchment-scale decisions. An estimated 30-year lag time reminds everyone this is an intergenerational challenge, and what we do today determines the quality of our waterways for generations to come.

In spite of the ever-changing regulatory landscape and divisive media commentary over the years, farmer ownership of the water quality challenges in Mid Canterbury has helped to develop a solution-focused mindset.



A field day was hosted at Pencarrow Farm in early December. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Farm owner’s Andy and Trish Macfarlane, along with contract milkers Brad and Viana Fallaver, shared information about Pencarrow’s journey over time to increase productivity while reducing N losses. Andy reinforced to the audience that “we can all do something, and collectively we will get a better result when we just get on with it. Plantain research shows a roughly 20% reduction in N losses to groundwater, so is there for the taking.”

Nutrient loss requirements vary between the Ashburton and Hekeao Hinds Plains zone, however the key message for both zones

is to continue improving on farm practices to minimise nutrient losses below the root zone.

DairyNZ shared results to date from the Low N Systems research programme that is investigating how combining various mitigation options can help farmers to significantly reduce N losses, while also meeting their farm business viability goals. This programme is researching 40-60% reductions in N losses across the combined milking platform and support land. It’s seeking practical, economical solutions to support farmers to further lower their N environmental footprint, delivering

additional positive implications for ground and surface water quality.

In conjunction with Fonterra, the programme is developing a bulk milk urea indicator tool. This will provide timely on-farm information to assess the herd’s dietary protein status and indicate potential farm management opportunities to improve N use efficiency and manage N loss risk.

Presenters also covered the latest research from the Plantain Potency and Practice programme. Led by DairyNZ, the programme focuses on using the forage herb plantain (Ecotain™) to significantly reduce N losses to freshwater and

reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Research has shown plantain’s potential as a cost-effective tool for N-loss mitigation. This includes an average 26% reduction in N leaching over three seasons (2022-2024) at Lincoln University Research Dairy Farm, in ryegrass / clover pastures containing an average of 17% plantain.

By working together and embracing proven practices like plantain, farmers can lead the way in mitigating N losses, while keeping their businesses strong.

*Angela Cushnie is the Mid Canterbury Catchment Collective coordinator*

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# Is politics getting in the way of democracy?

EVA HARRIS

A few years ago, I decided to get some chickens to help tidy up the veggie garden over winter. The last thing I wanted was for some of my former colleagues to come knocking on my door, so I spent a few hours digging through district plans knowing the rules can be very different depending on whether you're in Christchurch, Rolleston, or Ashburton.

Simplifying planning makes sense. Provided everyone follows the rules and is considerate. But there's always that ONE person who sets up a large egg business next door to an alektorophobic (someone who's terrified of chickens). Inevitably, a rule is needed to determine how many chickens are allowed. Under the RMA, even a simple question requires public consultations, working groups, and chances to appeal. Multiply the process by all 78 districts and hundreds of zones, and you see how complex it can get.

Recently, the government announced major reforms to the Resource Management Act (RMA), with promises of protecting property rights, simpler planning rules, national directions, and more consistency across districts. On the surface, this all sounds like good news for my urban chickens.

But New Zealanders also like rules.

We are a nation of people who take great pleasure in dobbing in our neighbours, as proven in Covid, as well as raised a generation of kids who feel entitled to be offended by life. Our petty district planning system reflects a passive-aggressive tendency to call in outside help instead of working them out as well as an inherent belief we can do whatever we want, provided our neighbour can not.

National rules could make things clearer. However, there's some uncertainty in what "national direction" means. Broad-scale rules are rarely applicable in all areas and all circumstances. These reforms also provide ministers with an enormous influence on the national rules. For example, what if an alektorophobic minister decided to ban urban chickens everywhere? What about the hundreds of dollars I invested in chicken-care infrastructure? How do I explain to my kids that I need to kill their favourite pet chook, particularly if yet another minister comes along and changes the rules back again?

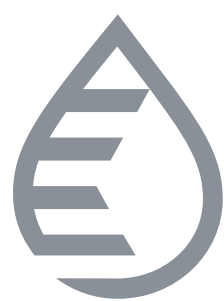
The question becomes even more significant if you swap "chickens" for "cows," "irrigation" or "new electricity generation".

We have seen what happens with "national directives" and "national bottom lines". The RMA has these

provisions and the chaos really got started when Governments started to use them. Since 2011, the National Policy Statement for Freshwater has changed at least four times. Each change led to more amendments in planning documents, making it hard for investors, councils, and community groups to know where they stand. Councils have to re-interpret rules to meet political ideologies, leading to paralysis or "whack-a-mole" consent processes. In this sense, are these reforms going to solve anything or merely enable our politicians to get in the way of our democratic planning processes?

I'm hopeful that the new Natural Environment Act and Spatial Planning Acts will strike a better balance—making the rules straightforward while also providing the certainty people and councils need. If these changes mean I can keep my chickens without endless red tape and councils can make decisions without getting bogged down, then that's a win for all of us. Ultimately, real progress will come when our planning system empowers communities to solve problems together, rather than letting politics get in the way of genuine democracy.

*Eva Harris is  
Principal Environmental  
Advisor at Enviro Collective*



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# Finding Her Way Back: The farming journey of Cheyenne Wilson



Cheyenne Wilson hopes to create a national network for young Māori in food and fibre, especially those who do not see themselves reflected in existing pathways. PHOTO SUPPLIED



**Claire Inkson**

RURAL EDITOR

**S**outhland's Cheyenne Wilson never planned on a career in dairying or agribusiness leadership.

Raised in the small settlement of Ohai, she grew up alongside her father on sheep and beef farms, learning early how to read stock, ride motorbikes, drive tractors, and work hard for what she wanted.

Her parents met in the shearing sheds, and work was simply part of life.

"If we wanted to play sport or go on a school camp, we had to pay for it ourselves," she says.

Her first job was delivering newspapers at twelve.

From there came wool handling, nannying, cooking, bar work, and painting, often four jobs at once.

"We didn't have much, but we knew how to work."

## Accidental beginnings

Wilson's shift into dairying was almost accidental.

She was nannying for a local family who had converted a 1200-cow farm. After seeing her work ethic, they offered her a full-time role.

"I just thought it would be one job instead of four."

At first, she saw it as a paycheck, until Primary ITO training changed her perspective. "Once I understood the why behind what we were doing, it clicked that dairy could actually be a career."

In 2016, she moved to Mid Canterbury for an assistant manager role.

She did not know anyone, but Young Farmers quickly became her anchor.

She was elected secretary at her second meeting and chairperson the following year. Governance was familiar territory, as she had held similar roles back in Southland, but it confirmed a growing interest in leadership.

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Recognition came early.

Wilson was a finalist in the Dairy Industry Awards and, in 2018, a finalist in the Ahuwhenua Young Māori Farmer of the Year.

But a move to a farm manager role in Culverden soon became one of the most difficult periods of her career.

### A defining low point

The Culverden farm was only three years post-conversion and problems were constant. Team dynamics were strained, and resistance to a young female manager made daily work difficult.

"My assistant manager had a problem with reporting to a woman. I was told to tough it out."

Without strong support around her, the isolation and ongoing pressure began to erode her confidence.

What kept her going were the connections she had built, especially through Young Farmers and a nearby farming family she met after the Kaikōura earthquake.

"Having people close by kept me grounded."

Eventually, she knew she needed to reset. Encouraged by a mentor, Wilson stepped back from full-time farming and enrolled at Lincoln University.

### Rebuilding at Lincoln

Wilson moved into a small farm cottage ten minutes from campus and took on a calf-rearing role while studying full-time.

It proved to be exactly what she needed.

"That job honestly saved my life. It brought the light back. My boss trusted me, valued my experience, and rebuilt my confidence."

University was demanding. She failed three papers in her first

semester while juggling study with long hours on-farm, but she persisted.

She completed a Bachelor of Environment and Society, served as chair of the Young Farmers regional committee, and helped deliver regional and grand finals through the COVID disruptions.

After graduating she accepted a fixed-term Māori relationship manager role with DairyNZ.

While she valued supporting Māori farmers, the fit was not right.

"Relationship roles don't work well as fixed-term contracts. It didn't sit well with me, and I struggled with some cultural misunderstandings." She chose not to renew the contract.

Then, just as she set up her own business, Cyclone Gabrielle hit.

### A year in Te Tairāwhiti

Wilson drove to Gisborne as soon as the roads reopened.

What she expected to be a few days of helping out turned into a year of work.

She assisted in warehouses sorting donated goods, helped coordinate stock feed into isolated coastal properties, and supported local efforts wherever she was needed.

"I thought I'd just be shovelling silt. It was nothing like that. It was chaos, but people needed help."

A year later, after an injury forced her to pause, she returned home to Southland to regroup and spend time with family. It became a natural breathing space after several demanding years.

### A growing governance footprint

Despite the challenging period, Wilson continued to expand

her governance experience. She is a trustee for Meet the Need, has served on the Our Land and Water National Science Challenge council, was part of the Food and Fibre Workforce Development Council, and recently joined the WellSouth PHO board.

She also completed the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme, focusing her project on building a food and fibre sector where young Māori can thrive.

Her business now centres on cultural capability, facilitation, project work and supporting organisations across the primary sector.

She is intentional, however, about pacing herself.

"I needed time to get my feet back under me before pushing too hard again."

### Catching herself before the fall

Wilson is known for her openness around mental health and the strategies she uses to stay well.

She journals regularly, sends voice notes to friends when things feel heavy, and relies on a simple wellbeing agreement created with a friend: "If either of us is struggling, we ask, 'Do you have eight minutes?' and we talk."

She also follows the maramataka, the Māori lunar calendar, using moon phases to understand energy patterns and when to slow down.

"It's like a muscle. You build it over time. I've been fortunate to catch myself when I'm slipping into that dark hole."

### Looking forward

A long-held goal is now taking



Raised in the small settlement of Ohai, Cheyenne Wilson grew up alongside her father on sheep and beef farms. PHOTO SUPPLIED

shape: creating a national network for young Māori in food and fibre, especially those who do not see themselves reflected in existing pathways. "I've been thinking about it for years. I don't know exactly what it looks like yet, but that's where I'm heading."

At just 32, Wilson has already

packed significant experience into her journey.

Through challenge, study, leadership and service, she has remained anchored by the values she was raised with: work hard, contribute to your community, know who you are, and back yourself.



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# Synlait showcases Canterbury dairy at world's largest expo



70 Synlait farmers who travelled to Shanghai take the stage at CIIE. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

GEORGE WILSON

Synlait Milk marked one of its biggest occasions of the year at the China International Import Expo (CIIE).

Hosted at Shanghai's National Exhibition and Convention Centre from 5 to 10 November, this is the world's largest import expo, attracting over 400,000 visitors and more than 4,000 exhibitors from 138 countries.

This was Synlait's eight consecutive year at the expo showcasing how, through their advanced manufacturing processes, they are able to produce world-class, milk-based nutritional products.

The China dairy market is currently experiencing a dynamic transformation driven by consumer preference for products with greater nutritional value, leading to higher demand for natural dairy products from producers such as Synlait.

Synlait's Director of On-Farm Excellence, Business Sustainability and Corporate Affairs Charles Fergusson said it's an important date for the Dunsandel-based

processor.

"The expo spans the same area as 70 rugby fields – suffice to say it is on a scale we don't see in New Zealand. This is our chance to show China all that Synlait makes from the high-quality, grass-fed milk our 200 Canterbury farmers supply us," said Fergusson.

Many of those farmers got a first-hand look at Shanghai this year, with more than 70 self-funding a trip that took them to CIIE and a farm and museum showcasing Bright Dairy, Synlait's largest shareholder.

One of those on the tour, Synlait farmer Rachael Rickard said it was eye-opening.

"It's a great time to be in dairying and in China, you can see the future for New Zealand dairy, for Synlait and for Bright Dairy is amazing," said Rickard.

Bright Dairy made sure Synlait farmers felt welcome, rolling out a huge pink carpet that led the farmers to a ship that hosted them for an evening cruise down the Huangpu River. The carpet was so big and bright it was reflected in the surface of the water.

"It was pretty impressive, they

really were great hosts, and I know our farmers appreciated it," said Fergusson.

Hannah Lynch, the company's Head of Milk Supply, Strategy and Corporate Affairs said delegates were equally impressed to see Canterbury farms.

"The images of Synlait supplier farms featuring cows in lush green grass evoked more than one 'wow'. It was a great opportunity for an international audience to learn about how our farmers care for the environment and their animals. Our farmers are leaders in best practice dairy, with support from Synlait through the Lead With Pride programme," said Lynch.

Charles Fergusson says China remains one of Synlait's most important markets.

"Events like CIIE strengthen trade relationships, showcase our commitment to quality and innovation, and create opportunities for rural communities back in Canterbury. The trip left us all confident in our future," said Fergusson.

**George Wilson is communications coordinator for Synlait.**

David Bortolussi, The a2Milk Company CEO (right), and Synlait CEO, Richard Wyeth (left) in a Q&A panel session at CIIE.



The 70 Synlait farmers donned pink and stood out at CIIE.



Synlait's Director of On-Farm Excellence, Business Sustainability and Corporate Affairs Charles Fergusson presenting Synlait's offerings on stage at CIIE.



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With well-spread-out 2 and 3-Bedroom villas, Amberley Country Estate looks more like a residential subdivision than a typical retirement village. A wide range of single-level homes, from 94m<sup>2</sup> to 189m<sup>2</sup>, means each street is unique. Some have shared cul-de-sac-like settings, but, with rural people in mind, many homes have private driveways, double garages and spacious yards. Streets are beautifully landscaped with colourful plantings.

The 350m<sup>2</sup> Clubhouse features a pool table, bar, library, gym, spa pool, pétanque and croquet and a men's shed. A new 1,350m<sup>2</sup> resort-style Resident's Centre, opening in 2026, will be the heart of the village, with a café, bar, pool tables, dance floor, library, gymnasium, indoor pool and spa, movie room, men's shed and bowling green. Residents enjoy a vibrant social life with something new on the calendar every day. Regular happy hours, van excursions and other activities and events allow residents to be as social as they please. For their peace of mind, the village will also have a modern hospital and medical centre with comprehensive care facilities, including memory care.

Amberley's villas have been built with energy efficiency in mind and feature ducted central-heating, deeper walls with thicker insulation, thermally-broken, argon-filled, double-glazed windows and even industry-leading insulated foundations, so the home is comfortable year-round, with power bills that are extra low. Their quality and fit-out is of an exceptionally high standard. Each has its own patio, lawn and garden area (maintained by village staff).

With extra warm homes, villas that are larger than typical, low weekly fees and a layout that features beautiful streetscapes with distinctive yards, Amberley Country Estate is a very special place to live.



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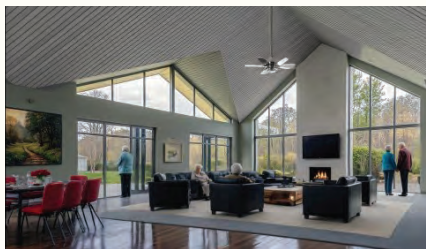


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# Amberley: The heart of Hurunui's past, present and future



Jenni Dobbie opened Ruby Six ten years ago in one of Markham Street's historic buildings. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON



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### CLAIRE INKSON

Amberley is a town with one foot firmly planted in its rural past and the other stepping confidently into a future of boutique shopping, modern cuisine and wine-region tourism.

It is both a service town and a destination, a place where you can pick up fencing gear or stock feed in the morning and enjoy a long lunch, winery tasting or artisan shopping in the afternoon.

Increasingly, it is a town where people come to take their time.

The story began in 1864 when Mrs Carter, one of the region's earliest freehold settlers, subdivided her land and named the new settlement Amberley after her family farm in Oxfordshire.

Sections sold for eight pounds a quarter acre.

A blacksmith, a wheelwright and a carpenter made up the first businesses, and by the arrival of the railway in 1876, Amberley was growing into a thriving service centre for local farmers.

More than 150 years later, that farming backbone remains, but Amberley has evolved into something much richer.

With the renowned Waipara Wine Valley on its doorstep, Amberley has become the gateway to the North Canterbury Wine Region.

Today, the township is known for its bustling café scene, boutique shops and welcoming rural hospitality.

### A historic foundation, a new destination

Few streets display that blend of heritage and modern vibrancy better than Markham Street.

Home to some of Amberley's oldest buildings, it is now dotted with artisan stores, eateries and the character that only a small rural town can deliver.

For Jenni Dobbie, owner of Ruby Six, the charm of Amberley lies in connection.

"For me, it's all about relationships," Dobbie says. "You build connections with the businesses down the road, the regulars, even the people just passing through. They'll say, 'I always pop in when I'm heading past to see what you've got.' That's what I love."

Ruby Six sits inside one of Markham Street's historic buildings, a space that has been everything from a chemist to a dentist to a lavender and wool shop.

"The history is part of the charm," Dobbie says. "People feel like they've discovered something before they even walk in the door."

Markham Street's resurgence has been steady and organic.

*Continued on page 30.*



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Markham Street, the town's oldest street, will pay host to the Markham Street Festival in February. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

*Continued from page 1.*

Stores like The Markham Street Trader, Little Vintage, Brew Moon, Arthur Burke and the ever-busy Amberley Pies have created a cluster of small owner-operated businesses that each bring something different.

"Most of us are owner-operators, and that makes a big difference," Dobbi says. "People comment every day on how beautiful the shop is and how nice it is to see different things. It's the overall feel."

Beyond Markham Street, businesses like Amberley Pharmacy and Sally Macs clothing have been a part of the fabric of the town for decades.

The addition of a Woolworths supermarket in 2014 was a turning point that has seen the town poised for growth.

### A town on the edge of tomorrow

That feel is something the AmberleyNZ Business and Promotion Association is intentionally building on.

Chairperson Vicki Foster from Heartland Homes describes Amberley as being "on the edge of tomorrow".

She sees the town's future in its unique character, local experiences and wine-country connection.

"I call it unique boutique," Foster says. "There are so many great things happening here: new Airbnbs, wineries doing permaculture events or cheese-making workshops, D.O.T.I, Brew Moon - it all contributes to a growing vibrancy. It is not a shopping mall. You can take your time, wander around, enjoy it."

Hurunui, she says, is "humming", but Foster says many Christchurch

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AmberlyNZ chairperson Vicki Foster from Heartland Homes says the town is focusing on drawing visitors from the domestic market.



residents still have no idea what Amberley offers, despite being only 45 minutes away.

"We are really pushing domestic tourism. Bring people here for winery days, team retreats, dinner or a wander through Markham Street. We are the gateway to the wine region, and we need to show that."

Amberley's growth is noticeable.

There are new lifestyle blocks, more accommodation options and ongoing residential development.

Amberley is now home to a significant retiree population, supported by developments such as the retirement village, Amberley Country Estate.

Manager Hamish Lamont describes the village as "the rural person's retirement village". Unlike many high-density retirement complexes, the estate offers standalone villas, double garages and large, north-facing, energy-efficient homes.

"For rural people, this place is ideal," Lamont says. "The town has everything you need, but with space and sunshine."

### Rural roots, modern energy

Young families are well catered for, too, with sports grounds, parks, the popular Amberley Domain, and easy access to rivers, lakes, beaches, and the nearby Mt Grey walkway network.

Cycleway plans and new trails are underway, further connecting Amberley with surrounding wineries and outdoor recreation areas.

Long-time Arthur Burke general manager Craig Schroder says the balance of old and new is one of Amberley's strengths.

"Arthur Burke has been here since 1935," he says. "Amberley has great local businesses that support North Canterbury, great cafés, and of course, the farmers' market on Saturday mornings. The commute to Christchurch is easy, and with new motorway links coming, it will get even easier. The population here has grown a lot in the past few years."

Amberley's past may be rooted in its farming foundations, but its future is being shaped by innovation, hospitality, wine and community connection.

It is a town where you can shop small, eat well, explore widely and feel welcomed every time you return.



Arthur Burke general manager Craig Schroder has been in the job for 13 years — but worked at the iconic Amberley business for 28.



Lucy Milton, owner of Markham Streets newest business, the Markham Street Trader, operating out of what once was a butcher shop.



Sally Macdonald has run her clothing shop, Sally Mac's, in Amberley for 29 years.

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# D.O.T.I: Don't Overthink It – The Amberley restaurant built on friendship, grit and a century-old grain store

CLAIRE INKSON



When Hannah Williamson and Dylan Aymes took over the lease, the stained-glass windows were already in place, but nearly everything else had to be rebuilt. PHOTO CLAIRE INKSON

When Hannah Williamson and Dylan Aymes unlocked the doors to D.O.T.I in June last year, they did it as a leap of faith.

Redundancy had pushed them out of their long-held roles at Waipara Hills, and although they both temporarily picked up jobs elsewhere, they were still searching for what came next.

Then the old Amberley grain store came up for lease.

"It was pretty simple," Aymes says. "We looked at each other and thought, what else are we going to do."

Williamson laughs and adds, "We've talked about having something small for years. But if we'd overthought it, we wouldn't be here."

That became the restaurant's name and ethos: D.O.T.I, Don't Overthink It.

It is a philosophy that runs through everything they do, from the way they approached opening a business to the unfussy menu that has quickly made the restaurant a favourite in Amberley's emerging dining scene.

## A historic building with new life

The building itself is part of the draw.

More than a century old, it once served as PGG Wrightson's grain store, surrounded by the former sale yards.

Photos taken in 1959 by local identity John McCaskey hang on the restaurant walls, a reminder of Amberley's rich rural heritage.

"It's pretty incredible when you see those old photos and realise it's barely changed," Williamson says. "The bones are amazing."

When they took over the space, the stained-glass windows were already in place, but nearly everything else had to be rebuilt.

A fresh kitchen, a new bar, walls opened up, and the deck extended.

All of it came with the realities of council consents, planning requirements, structural engineers and delays that nearly derailed the project more than once.

"It almost stopped us," Aymes says. "But we pushed through."

## Best friends in the kitchen

Williamson and Aymes have worked together on and off since she was sixteen. They are not partners, just best friends, and it is a relationship that has become the backbone of D.O.T.I's success.

In the kitchen, they move with the easy rhythm of people who barely need to speak to communicate.

"We've done this together for so long we just know," Aymes says.

Their roles complement each other. "Dylan's the ideas guy," Williamson says.

"I rein things in and refine. It works."

Together they run the entire kitchen, just

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the two of them, which is rare in hospitality and part of what makes the place feel personal.

Diners see them working behind the scenes, plates flying out with pace and purpose.

"It's part of the charm," Williamson says. "And we love that."

D.O.T.I.'s menu reflects their shared philosophy: keep it simple, understate and over-deliver, and let the flavours speak for themselves.

From the popular D.O.T.I. platter to the scallops, venison and duck dishes they are most proud of, their menu sits comfortably between casual and refined.

They are committed to using local products wherever possible: pork and beef from Harris Farms, venison from Lovat Venison, microgreens from the Amberley farmers' market, North Canterbury goat cheese, and an evolving wine list that champions the region's producers.

"We're so lucky being on the edge of the North Canterbury wine region," Williamson says. "It gives us such a good base to work from."

### A regional win worth celebrating

In December, D.O.T.I. was announced as the winner of The North Course, now in its fourth year celebrating the very best of North Canterbury's food and drink throughout November.

Hosted by Made North Canterbury, the event brings together 18 eateries across Waimakariri and Hurunui, each creating a dish featuring local ingredients, with voting done via QR-coded table talkers.

"We're just super stoked," Williamson says. "We're so small, and some of the other eateries get so much more foot traffic. So, to be this little old place in Amberley that won it — we're blown away. It means a lot."

### Community roots and future ambitions

For Williamson and Amyes, Amberley has always felt like home, but it is also a growing town on the cusp of something bigger.

"People travel from Rangiora and Oxford just to come here for lunch or dinner," Amyes says. "A few years ago, that wasn't happening."

The community has embraced them wholeheartedly.

Locals stop by weekly, some even more often, and their five-star Google rating reflects the strong relationship they have built with the town.

"The locals got us through those first six months," Williamson says. "We wouldn't be here without them."

Like any new business, the learning curve has been steep.

Between the admin, the compliance, the planning and the reality of running a kitchen five days a week, the workload is relentless.

"We're closed Tuesday and Wednesday," Williamson says, "but we're still working those days to keep up with everything else."

They hope to bring in extra help eventually, but for now, diners love seeing both chefs in the kitchen, and the pair are

cautious about changing the dynamic that makes D.O.T.I. special, and also credit their staff to contributing to their success.

"We have an awesome front of house crew. We definitely couldn't do it without them," Williamson says.

Despite the challenges, the highlights outweigh everything: the positive feedback, the regulars and the customers who try D.O.T.I. for the first time and become loyal fans. "One guy came recently for the first time, and now he comes every week," Amyes says. "Stuff like that is pretty cool."

As for the future, Williamson and Amyes say they are happy evolving slowly and naturally.

"We wouldn't want another venue," Williamson says. "We love this building. Its size limits us, but it's also the charm."

They dream of doing more wine nights or collaborative events with local producers one day, but for now, they are focused on mastering the business, staying consistent and keeping D.O.T.I. exactly what it has become: a local favourite, with heart.

"We're still learning, still hustling," Williamson says. "But we're proud of where we are."

Sometimes the best things come from not overthinking it.

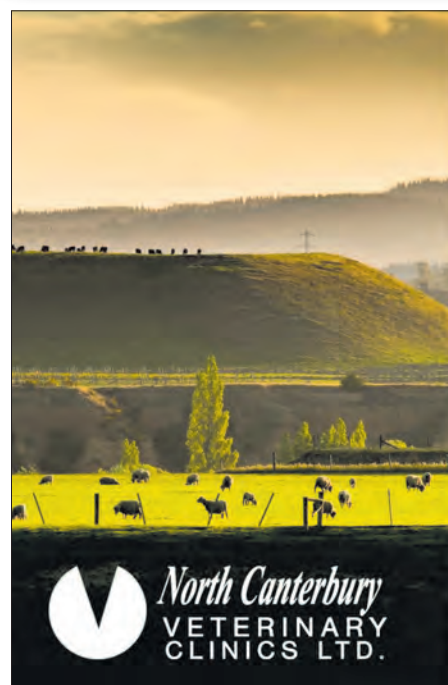


Dylan Aymes (left) and Hannah Williamson have worked in hospitality together for years — and now they are not just good mates, but business partners.

PHOTOS CLAIRE INKSON



Local wine from the neighbouring Waipara Wine Region makes up a wine list the champions local producers.



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# Verity NZ's Projects To Date

Written by Emma Warmerdam, Technician for Verity NZ  
based in Methven.

**A**re you curious about where Verity NZ's native carbon projects are located and how far along they are? Read on to find out!

## Hill and high-country Verra Project

Verity is registering a carbon project with Verra under their VM0047 Afforestation, Reforestation, and Revegetation methodology. Verra is an international carbon registry in the Voluntary Carbon Market. This is a grouped project, enabling more landowners to jump on board as time goes on. This project is suitable for marginal farmland in the hill and high country that can revert to native forest, shrubland or tussock land.

The first project instance is Black Hill Station, a 2,702-hectare high country sheep and beef station nestled above the Rakaia River in the Canterbury high country. The farm extends from 380m to 1,600m above sea level, from high-producing river flats up to very steep hill country. The average rainfall is 879mm/year. Verity NZ is registering 1,203 hectares of the station's marginal land into a natural regeneration carbon project. Fencing, aerial seeding and pest control will be the main project activities.

The fencing programme on Black Hill Station is now complete, and LiDAR has been flown to get a before picture of the area. The next steps will be collecting baseline measurements of vegetation and soil carbon. Then aerial seeding and pest control activities can start.



## Degraded forests Cercarbono Project

Verity is also registering a grouped carbon project with Cercarbono, which is a different international carbon registry. This will use their CM-LU-002 Methodology to Implement GHG Removal Projects Through Reforestation and Forest Restoration. This project is focused on restoring degraded forests. It is suited to areas of your farm that may have remnant patches of bush that are currently under pressure from browsing animals and pests. Verity NZ can install fencing and control pests to restore these areas at no cost to the landowner from seed-to-credit. We are looking for interested landowners to join this project.

## Chatham Islands Verra Project

Verity NZ are establishing a landscape-scale, natural regeneration project with multiple landowners across the Chatham Islands. This project will follow Verra's Climate, Community and Biodiversity (CCB) Standard and use the VM0047

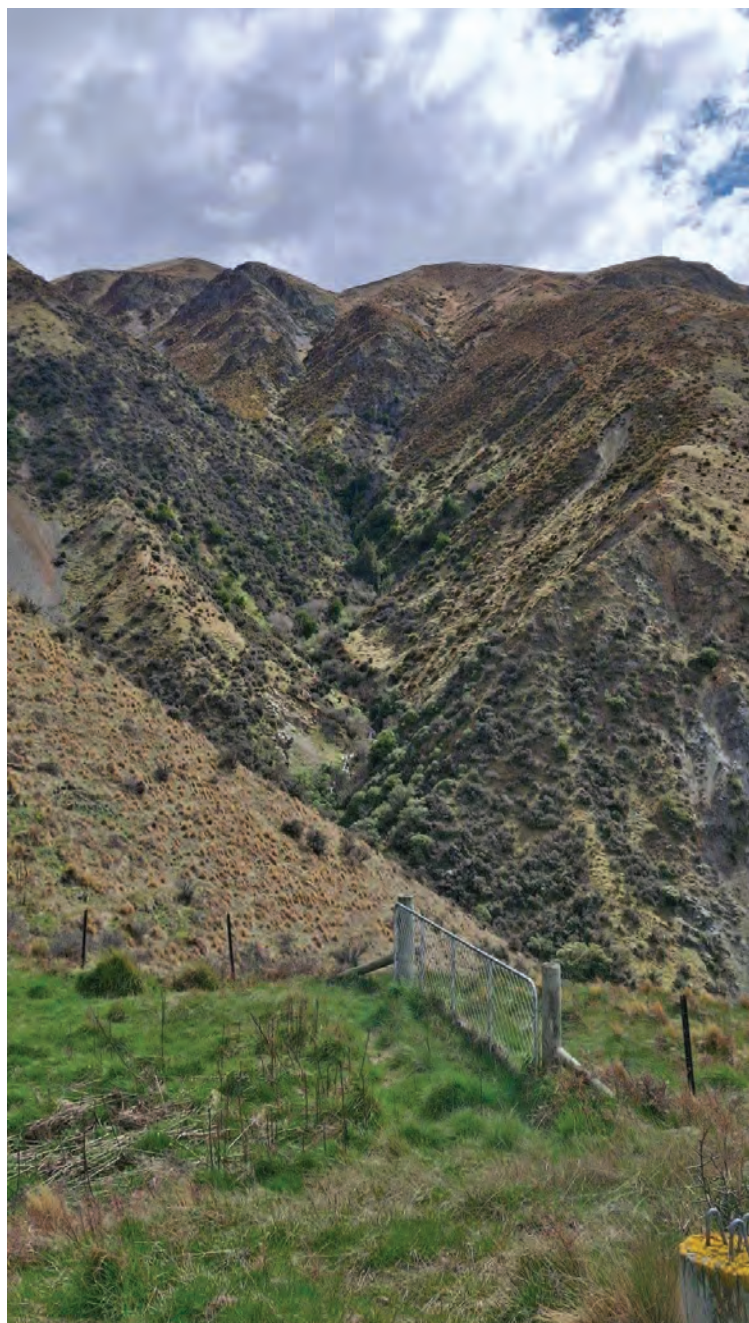
methodology. This project is not just about carbon; biodiversity and community co-benefits are accounted for as well.

On the Chatham Islands, the main barrier to regeneration is feral animals such as cattle and pigs, so fencing and feral ungulate control will make the biggest difference. In addition to this, pest control will be implemented to ensure regeneration is successful in the long term. The project aims to return land not suitable for farming to native vegetation. This will increase habitat for wildlife endemic to the island (such as the Chatham Island Tāiko, one of the world's rarest seabirds) and provide landowners with an alternative source of income: carbon revenue.

Our project areas have been flown with LiDAR, and the first fencing has been completed. The next steps are to complete the fencing programme and conduct baseline vegetation measurements and soil sampling.

## Give us a call!

If this has got you interested, get in touch with our team in Methven for further information. Verity NZ is the genuine one-stop-shop, seed-to-credit company who will deliver for you. Scan the QR code below to find the link to our new documentary showcasing our restoration projects.





# When is it time to seek professional mental health help?

KATHRYN WRIGHT

Stress, worry, and low moods are part of the human experience. Everyone encounters moments of emotional strain, especially in today's unpredictable world. Yet when these feelings persist or begin to interfere with daily life, they may signal something more serious than ordinary ups and downs. Distinguishing between everyday challenges and knowing when professional care might be needed, is an important step toward protecting your wellbeing.

If you find yourself overwhelmed by stress, unable to regulate emotions, or struggling with depression or anxiety that disrupts your daily functioning, it may be time to reach out for help. The same applies if you notice these patterns in someone close to you. Recognising the signs of a mental health condition can guide you toward timely support.

## Understanding mental health

Mental health refers to our emotional state, thought patterns, and psychological balance. Mental health challenges can alter how people think, feel, and behave. Importantly, mental health and mental illness are not identical concepts. A person may experience poor mental health without having a diagnosed disorder, while someone living with a mental illness can still participate in a successful life and be important members of the community.

The most common mental health challenges are mood disorders caused by depression and anxiety. Despite lingering stigma, these issues are widespread. Around a quarter of the population at any one time can be experiencing these challenges, and around half of the population over their lifetime. These numbers highlight the importance of awareness and early intervention.

## Warning signs that may warrant professional help-seeking

### 1. Stress becomes overwhelming

Stress is the body's natural reaction to perceived threats,

triggering the fight-or-flight response. While stress can arise from events such as divorce, illness, financial strain, or workplace pressure, prolonged stress takes a toll on physical health. Headaches, digestive problems, muscle pain, and a weakened immune system are common consequences. The body often signals when it's time to slow down.

### 2. Anxiety interferes with functioning

Anxiety shares similarities with stress, often presenting as rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, or nervousness. Typically, these symptoms fade once the stressful event passes. However, anxiety can persist even when no immediate threat exists, leading to constant worry and impaired functioning. Anxiety can stop people from

fully living their lives, mainly through avoidance of whatever is causing the anxiety, which is counterproductive.

### 3. Depression becomes persistent

Depression is more than sadness—it is a disorder that disrupts brain function and daily living. Symptoms include withdrawal from social activities, sleep disturbances, appetite changes, physical aches, and feelings of guilt or hopelessness. Enjoyment of previously meaningful activities often disappears. While occasional low moods are normal, ongoing depression requires evaluation by a professional who can determine whether treatment such as therapy or medication is appropriate.

It can be difficult to judge whether your feelings are temporary or signs of a deeper

issue. Only trained professionals can provide an accurate assessment. The bottom line is that if your symptoms are impacting your daily functioning, whether that is through avoiding people and situations, and having to change major aspects of your life to fit around your symptoms, it's probably time to seek external help. One thing that I often hear from people is that they do not want to "take up space" from someone who might need it more. The truth is, that most mental health professionals do not want to have all "high level" clients, we actually want some clients with whom we can set goals, work on values, or to help make a big decision. It is not just for mental illness that you may see one of us. We will tell you if we cannot see you.

## Finding the right support

The first step is often speaking with your GP who can refer you to a mental health specialist. Treatment may involve therapy, medication, lifestyle adjustments, or a combination of approaches. Because each person's needs differ, finding the right plan is crucial.

Therapy can be especially beneficial. Counsellors work with clients to set goals, develop coping strategies, restore balance and improve resilience. Video sessions also make it easier to connect with specialists who match your specific concerns, especially when you are isolated on farm.

For a good starting point with trained and registered counsellors, check out [www.nzac.org.nz](http://www.nzac.org.nz) and go to "find a counsellor".

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