

news 3.

The value of experts to a farming business

Farming is becoming increasingly complex and farmers don't necessarily have the time or headspace to deal with the raft of new information coming at them.

What to do? Call in the experts.

This is what Cheviot farmers **Mark** and **Joanne Stevenson** have done, specifically in relation to improving water quality on their farm.

For the past 12 months, the couple has been part of an AgResearch-led Sustainable Land Management and Climate Change (SLMACC) project looking at the value of specialists to the farming community.

Through this project, Mark and Joanne engaged two specialists to help them better understand their on-farm biodiversity and farming with carbon.

For Mark and Joanne, the use of an experts over the past 12 months has given them confidence in their decision-making as well as a new knowledge resource they can call upon.

One example was in relation to their pole-planting programme. The initial focus of this programme was on erosion control, shade and shelter. They questioned whether this should continue to be a priority or whether they should be focusing on expanding their plantings to meet Emissions Trading Scheme criteria.

Expert advice have them confidence for them to continue with their initial objective, while gaining a clearer understanding of their tree assets and where carbon fits in relation to other investment opportunities.

The couple say having expert knowledge can help farmers understand how new concepts (such as the ETS) can be applied specifically to their business.

"You could take the time to read through all the information that is available on the ETS and how it can be applied to your farming business and still not be clear on what it means for you."

They found forming a personal connection with their expert enhanced the value that person could bring to the business.

They suggest using personal networks (such as discussion groups) to identify what experts might be suitable for an individual farming business at any given time.

"Having an understanding of what expertise you may need to pull into your business over time, can help grow awareness of who might be available to provide that service."

Mark and Joanne say that through the use of an expert, their farming partnership was learning new information together. For them, it meant a new role could be created which gave autonomy to the person implementing that knowledge on-farm.

In their case, Joanne was tasked with setting up monitoring sites and working on projects that were important to the farming business.

Reports that were written by experts specifically for the Stevensons were also able to be used for streamlining funding applications.

Mark and Joanne credit their success in an enhancement planting application to the information they used from one such report.

"Having the report made the application process easier and illustrates a level of commitment to funders."

HDLG has funding available to help individual farmers or farming groups get expert advice on any aspect of environmental or resource management. Please contact your Catchment Farm Advisor for more details.

Pest and weed control critical for tree establishment



Earlier in the year North Canterbury Farm Forestry held a field day at Alistair Malcolm's property – Alistair was Husqvarna Farm Forester of the year – here is a summary of his learnings.

Weeds, hares, rabbits and wandering sheep all pose a threat to the successful establishment of both native and exotic trees, but proactive preventative measures will pay dividends.

Former horticulturalist, now farm forester, **Alistair Malcolm** has established 45ha of hardwood forests and natives on a 63ha property on Glenmark Drive.

Alistair bought the farm nine years ago and through trial and error, knows the challenges and pitfalls of establishing trees in a low rainfall environment. Glenmark Drive receives an annual rainfall of around 700mm.

With the primary aim of claiming carbon credits, Alistair has planted eucalypts as while radiata has a higher wood value at the present time, eucalypts have a 10-year shorter rotation, so he has a bob both ways in the unlikely event that the carbon market collapses.

Alistair says radiata is an idiot-proof tree crop in that the area earmarked for planting can be sprayed, the tree planted and three months later, a herbicide can be safely sprayed over the top of trees.

This is not the case with the hardwoods or especially natives. They will not tolerate a general herbicide spray, rather a spot-spray is needed to control weeds. While there is a greater cost in labour, (Alistair uses contract gangs) there are savings in chemical costs.

"It's not as big a job as you might think it is."

Weed control is critical in that first year after planting, particularly in low rainfall environments.

Alistair has found that natives do not compete well with weeds and weed control needs to be carried out for up to three years to allow natives to become properly established.

Hares, rabbits, deer and stray sheep all pose a threat to young trees, although sheep tend to steer clear of eucalypts and eucalypt blocks can be lightly grazed by sheep after a year. The exception is some ground durable eucalypt species which are palatable to sheep.

But sheep can decimate young radiata and native trees.

Alistair says rabbits cause more damage than hares. Trees can recover from a hare nibbling on the shoots, whereas rabbits will eat the trees and dig up the roots.

He says being proactive and setting up pindone stations before planting, in combination with a shooting programme, works well. He finds this strategy protects the trees through from planting in August until February and by that stage, hares and rabbits are no longer interested in them.



Catchment Farm Advisor: John Holmes



The role of Catchment Farm Advisor was almost tailor-made for John Holmes.

A farmer for 25 years, John remained in the agricultural industry after selling his sheep, beef and cropping farm at Methven, initially working with the sheep and beef genetics company Rissington Breedline before spending several years with Beef + Lamb New Zealand's Economic Service.

After gaining nutrient management qualifications, he worked for Ravensdown helping farmers with their nutrient budgets and auditing of land-use consents before taking on the Catchment Advisor Role.

All of these post-farming roles have involved John driving down a lot of farm driveways, gaining an understanding of individual farm businesses and the people who make them tick.

"I've sat at a lot of tables and talked farming."

Talking farming is what John enjoys most about his job as Catchment Farm Advisor; getting to know the farmers, their businesses and helping them understand the environmental regulations coming at them.

"It's about building relationships, guiding farmers and answering their questions. There is a lot of value in that."

John describes his role as being that of a guide or enabler. The CFAs are not regulators, rather they work one-on-one with farmers to not only help them with regulatory requirements, but also make the most of any funding or other opportunities that might arise from environmental protection and enhancement work.

This could include helping with applications for funding for erosion control planting or supporting the formation of a local community group.

Much of the work John does is helping farmers document the good farming practices and work they are already doing through Farm Environment Plans. But he also offers guidance on possible changes that could be made to help future-proof businesses from whatever regulatory changes might be coming their way.

John says his work is very much farmer-led, so the CFAs are there to serve the farmer and whatever their requirements are. Through the HDLG, they also have funding to seek expert advice on behalf of farmers.

This includes finding experts to talk to individuals or groups of farmers on a subject of mutual interest such as the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS).

Johns works with farmers south of the Hurunui and east of Amberley. This includes Scargill Valley, Glenmark Drive and out to Motanau, so a range of country from dry, early country out to coastal hill country.

John says as a collective, HDLG is a local, farmer-led organisation that members feel part of.

"There is an understanding that they are all going through these challenges together and maybe they feel in a stronger position by being part of the collective."

John says he feels privileged to work alongside the other two other CFAs, Rebecca Hyde and Harry Miller. Together they have a wide range of skills and knowledge which help HDLG members meet regulatory challenges and grow strong businesses within a new operating environment.

John can be contacted by on 027 774 7772

"It's about building relationships, guiding farmers and answering their questions. There is a lot of value in that."

Winter grazing

Are you planning your winter grazing for 2022 – during lockdown HDLG held an online session to help members with their 2022 winter grazing planning – if you missed this session HDLG has a winter grazing template and our CFAs are able to assist you with your planning. Contact your CFA for more information.

Upcoming events:

SAVE THE DATE!

ETS 101 Workshop

23rd November

4-6pm

Scargill Domain Pavilion

More details to follow

23 NOVEMBER

Strength from Adversity Workshop

In July and early August, the Hurunui District Landcare Group ran two Strength from Adversity workshops. These featured three speakers talking about building both business and personal resilience

Held in Omihi and Cheviot (a third scheduled for Culverden was postponed due to snow), the workshops started with a presentation from farm consultant **Wayne Allen** (Omihi) or **Jansen Travis** (Cheviot) talking about **Managing Drought- The Recovery Phase**.

They talked about the challenging autumn and winter the region's farmers had experienced and strategies for recovering this spring.

These included applying nitrogen as early as possible – as soon as soil temperatures lift above six degrees – to boost pasture production.

They stressed the need to try and maximise ewe intakes in the 30-days before lambing, particularly in twin-bearing ewes.

Jansen said cows can be the most challenging class of stock to manage during drought because *“if a cow can't wrap her tongue around it, she can't eat it.”*

He recommended saving supplement for calving cows and pointed out that fresh spring grass is low in magnesium so supplement may be required.

Feed budgets are unlikely to work during drought and while in survival mode, farmers should just focus on one stock class at a time, early ewes for example.

“Lower expectations and accept there will be compromises.”

Ewe deaths are likely to be higher this spring which will impact on lamb survival. Weaning weights are likely to be lower due to compromised lactation.

Going into the recovery phase, they recommended thinking about next year's production and what opportunities there are to trade sheep or cattle to generate cash flow.

Think about the future, consider forage rotations, summer and winter feed options or arable crops.

“This is an opportunity to revise the farm system and create a safety valve.”

This includes considering the feed demand of the different breeding enterprises, the timing of events (sales policies) to best capture value, awareness of changes in market prices, annual livestock performance, the ability to feed at critical times and creating flexibility in the system.

Future Proof for the Next Adverse Event

Joanne Stevenson, *Principal Consultant at Resilient Organisations* and local farmer, talked about how businesses, people and organisations get through crises.

She said resilient businesses do more than just survive a crisis, they thrive in a world of uncertainty.

Businesses should be structured to be proactive; so they are creating or controlling a situation rather than just responding to it after it has happened.

By adopting a proactive posture, a business can detect changes early and act before a problem starts affecting the business.

“Every business should have its canaries.”

These are signals that a crisis or problem is looming- for farmers this might be soil moisture levels or long-term weather forecasts.

“What are the trigger points to act?”

Unity of purpose is critical during a crisis so everyone should know what the business priorities are. These will underpin decision-making.

Businesses should know their minimum operating requirements and individuals understand their personal minimum operating requirements- how much sleep do you need to remain effective?

Joanne said farmers are typically very good at making gut decisions, but emotional decisions tend to be reactive.

Decisions should be able to be justified against the businesses objectives and take into account a range of possible futures.

“You can't plan to go back to where you were before, you need to plan for a range of possible futures.”

For example, on-going drought.

Plans should be stress-tested. If X happened what would it look like? If we make this decision, what would happen if prices go down or interest rates go up?

Financial resilience was critical and economic volatility should be anticipated. This means building equity from cashflow and capital and having flexibility through diversity, so there are financial release valves in the business.

The Healthy Mind

The final speaker was well-known sports psychologist and high-performance coach **John Quinn**.

He talked about the importance of relationships, the strength in vulnerability, the importance of sleep for well-being and the signs of stress.

The Healthy Mind Platter

- Sleep time
- Physical time
- Focus time
- Tune in (stop, pause and check-in)
- Play time
- Connecting time

A more detailed summary of John Quinn's presentation was emailed to all HDLG members. This is available upon request.