

# How the land lies

Rural protest group Groundswell NZ does not represent the attitudes of most farmers, argues GARY TAYLOR.

**W**atching Groundswell NZ protests around the country, people might think farmers are indeed hard done by and over-regulated. In fact, the sector is booming. Dairy prices are at record highs and horticultural products are demanding high prices in the supermarkets. As for the regulations railed against, they are not only essential but also need strengthening.

The regulations of concern to Groundswell are on freshwater, indigenous biodiversity, climate change and the High Country.

First, freshwater quality is bad. Many of our rivers, lakes and groundwaters have unnaturally high levels of nutrients, chemicals, disease-causing pathogens and sediment. This pollution renders many of them unable to sustain aquatic life and unsafe for swimming. The public has been calling on the Government to clean up these waterways.

Since 2008, farmer representatives have been working with others in multiple forums on freshwater reforms. The framework for these is now in place. Agricultural groups are represented on the Freshwater Implementation Group that is overseeing the roll-out of the reforms. Freshwater regulations that will be catchment based must be notified by 2024. The intention is to reduce nutrient and sediment runoff from all land-use activities so that our rivers and lakes are cleaned up within a generation.

Groundswell is a minority in the rural sector, out on its own in wanting to continue to pollute. Most farmers accept the need to improve water quality and are getting on with it. There are millions of dollars available to help with the transition. Regulations are vital to clean up our rivers.

Second, Aotearoa has a seriously concerning record on indigenous biodiversity, with more than 3740 species unique to our country threatened or at risk of extinction. Many of them are on private land. In 2016, Federated Farmers and Forest & Bird led a joint effort involving all key stakeholders to develop a National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity. This was to avoid

repetitive litigation around the country. After 18 months' work, agreement was reached on a draft. Federated Farmers insisted on incentives to sit alongside the regulation, and that was agreed, too. That instrument should be deployed along with its complementary measures right away. It is quite extraordinary that there is still no national direction on protecting our native fauna and flora. Federated Farmers has gone quiet on this agreement. It needs to show some guts, stand up against Groundswell and support our agreed position.

**T**hird, there is climate change. It's ironic how farmers are quick to seek Government support when affected by extreme weather events but then deny responsibility for addressing the 48% of the country's greenhouse-gas emissions

that come from the sector. You can't have it both ways. Responsible farmer groups have been working on He Waka Eke Noa, a system of measuring farm emissions and paying for them. Groundswell says 'no' to that initiative.

The reality is that He Waka Eke Noa is underwhelming and the Government might need to step in and regulate if we are to achieve our reduction targets. Because they are outside the Emissions Trading Scheme, farmers are effectively being subsidised by the rest of us, who are paying for their emissions.

Four, in its opposition to the Crown Pastoral Land Reform Bill, Groundswell fails to mention that the bill covers only pastoral leasehold land. That land is owned by the

Government and leased to farmers. It is entirely appropriate that controls to protect landscape and ecological values be put on such publicly owned land, while enabling low-impact pastoral farming.

Farmer interests have been actively engaged in all these regulatory changes to improve environmental outcomes. Collaboration works. But it needs goodwill, open minds and the commitment to follow through. ■

*Gary Taylor, CNZM, QSO, is chairman and executive director of the Environmental Defence Society.*



Groundswell: tractors in Auckland during the "Howl of a Protest" event.

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