

# PARTNERSHIP for PRODUCTION and PROTECTION

Conservation director Gerry McSweeney reports on a successful visit to the Mackenzie Basin where scientists and high country farmers managed to find common ground.

The first real test for the Protected Natural Areas Programme (PNA) took place earlier this year in the high country of the Mackenzie Basin. Happily the programme passed with flying colours.

The test was not whether representative examples of New Zealand's natural landscape could be identified — this had already been done through surveys in at least eight parts of the country — but rather whether the value of identified areas could be conveyed to the landowners and lessees and mechanisms then had to be developed to integrate protection with other productive uses of the land.

## PNAs cover only six percent

The ½ million-hectare Mackenzie Basin was first surveyed for representative reserves over the 1983–84 summer. A report produced in late 1984 identified about six percent of the Basin as priority natural areas, deserving further evaluation and appropriate protection. In February 1986, the Government's scientific committee for protected areas (PASAC) visited the region to evaluate priority natural areas.

It was to be a most unusual visit for the committee, which previously had been accustomed to evaluating proposals in uninhabited state forests. Lands and Survey wanted the committee to understand the implications of PNA proposals for high country farming. As Canterbury's Land Commissioner Laurie Kenworthy told PASAC's first public meeting in the Mackenzie basin: "If tussock grassland reserves are to have a long term future, we need the understanding and long term support of lessees and landowners.

Prospects for a successful visit seemed poor. The whole future of high country public lands is undecided with continuing debate on whether to place them into a narrow commercial corporation or into a neutral stewardship division of the Department of Conservation. Rabbit problems also confuse the issue. Immediately prior to the PASAC tour, the Mackenzie branch of Federated Farmers had voted to stop any further co-operation with the representative reserve programme until Government assisted them by introducing myxomatosis.

However what took place over the week-long tour by the PASAC committee

was a shift from public posturing, and heated debate, to an encouraging example of dialogue in the finest New Zealand tradition. By the end of the week most people emerged with the realisation that multiple use of the high country is possible, involving a partnership in both preservation and production between the public, the government and high country runholders.

## Pests number one enemy

High country runholders have many fears. Partly cushioned by high fine wool prices and fast developing tourism alternatives on their properties, they voice less of the economic despair of the smaller lowland farmers, but more their opposition to anything which might reduce pastoral production. Many see pests as their number one enemy: both spiralling rabbit numbers and attendant control costs; and uncontrolled expansion of weeds such as the introduced flatweed *Hieracium* and the rosehip-covered sweet briar. For Alan Innes of Black Forest Station, *Hieracium* and rabbits seem to eclipse all other concerns. However other farmers are less worried. They see the rabbit problem as unimportant nationally but locally severe, demanding intense poisoning programmes and tighter stock management. They also believe that both briar and *Hieracium* can be controlled by stock management, pasture improvement and in some cases the controlled use of goats.



Simon Cameron's support means that Ben Ohau Station's Pukaki river flats could soon be New Zealand's premier protected short tussock grassland. Photo: Gerry McSweeney

Michael Murchison, Chairman of the high country committee of Federated Farmers, told PASAC's first public meeting that outside pressures for the surrender of eroded mountain ranges, for recreational use and for nature conservation are "the greatest threat to our future".

Since the 1960s Governments have subsidised lowland development by runhold-

ers in return for the retirement from grazing of pastoral leases on severely eroded mountain ranges. Initially started to prevent further erosion choking rivers downstream, retirement programmes have now broadened. They seek also to preserve the unique alpine vegetation of the high mountain lands from further grazing damage and to allow the vegetation to continue holding the soil mantle.

Although runholders have been the major beneficiaries of these subsidised retirement programmes, lack of progress in recent years in achieving the voluntary retirement and surrender of the severely eroded mountainlands led government last year to adopt a new policy. This now requires the identification and compulsory surrender of such lands, subject to appropriate compensation. Runholders have been vocal in their opposition to the new policy. They dislike being reminded that their leases only give them right to the pasture not the soil and thus on the severely eroded public lands where little pasture remains they have little or no lease entitlement. The surrendered mountainlands are highly valued by trampers, climbers and hunters. Clearly too they have great scientific and conservation value.

At lower altitudes, the runholders also fear outside interference. Many of them were caught up by the massive Waitaki hydro developments. More recently there has been considerable interest in preserving habitat for the rare black stilt, down to eleven breeding pairs and restricted to high country wetlands in the Mackenzie Basin.

## New era of balanced land use

Traditionally, pastoral farming has ruled the roost in the high country. It is therefore easy to understand runholders worries about outsiders promoting recognition and protection of the multiple values of the high country. Nevertheless most of their runs are Crown land under pastoral lease, which require balanced use of the high country, even if in times past the administration of the leases has almost exclusively favoured farming.

Former runholder and Land Settlement Board member Arthur Scaife told Mackenzie Basin runholders in February that programmes like the representative reserve programme were always going to happen.

"We high country people ourselves accelerated the PNA programme by seeking further freeholding. We also complained about proposals to increase our rentals and as a consequence got a commission of enquiry (the Clayton Commission) established which inevitably accelerated such things as the PNA programme." (Peppercorn rentals are paid for the 2.7 million hectares of high country pastoral leases — \$131,000 in 1984–85 or 6 cents a hectare. Government policy is for these rentals to progressively increase to more realistic levels.)

The scientific committee evaluating the Mackenzie PNA areas worked like Trojans. They spent up to ten hours a day and long into the night evaluating most priority natural areas in the northern Mackenzie