

Managing the Land 'Sustainably'

Farming is still the backbone of New Zealand. The export of dairy produce, beef, lamb, venison, wool, and horticultural produce is vital for our economy.

Our produce finds ready markets in a world hungry for clean, green, quality product. The removal of farm subsidies in 1984 has seen a blossoming of innovation unheralded in New Zealand's farming history.

Unlike many United States and European farmers, who decide what to grow depending on the level of Government subsidy, we are more focussed on our markets. I recently hosted a U.S. Congressional delegation who asked how many times a month I met with officials from our agricultural ministry. They were amazed to learn that I didn't even know the name of our local MAF official but that we do have regular contact with the Europeans who buy our merino wool.

New Zealand's international reputation for environmental sustainability underpins the marketing of our produce.

A Fletcher company, Tasman Forestry, recognised this early on and after 12 months of negotiation with Forest and Bird both parties signed the Tasman Accord in 1989. In this way Tasman agreed to protect all its native forest and not to establish new forests by clearing native vegetation. And Forest and Bird agreed to support New Zealand plantation forestry. This trend setting Accord developed into the New Zealand Forest Accord in 1991. This binds most plantation forest companies operating in New Zealand to the same principles of the Tasman Accord. Twelve years on the Accord remains the cornerstone of New Zealand's exotic forestry company-environmental group relationship.

The New Zealand Forest Accord shows that Forest and Bird is not anti-business or anti-primary production as some try to

portray us. Many of our members are farmers, foresters, horticulturists, or operate rural tourism businesses. We are committed to a strong economy, but this need not be at the expense of New Zealand's natural environment.

In recent years there has been a much greater emphasis on environmental protection, biosecurity, and public involvement in planning through the Resource Management Act. Even so we have seen a dramatic expansion of our economy.

Serious environmental issues remain. Pests and weeds are a major threat to native birds and plants. We need a pragmatic approach to 'integrated pest management' targeting all pests at once — possums, goats, rats, stoats and feral pigs — by chemical and mechanical means.

Because eradicating bovine tuberculosis by reducing possum numbers is of highest priority for the farming community, Forest and Bird and farmers must work closely together to convince an increasingly urban and detached New Zealand public that practical pest control, although unpleasant, is vital.

Vast amounts of silt pour into streams and coastal waters during torrential downpours from farmed hillsides and coastal developments unprotected by trees. This silt chokes life in streams and smothers ocean life. The problem is exacerbated where streams and wetlands are open to stock trampling. There is direct animal excretion of dung and urine into streams. There is also the infiltration of pollutants such as nitrates and phosphates from farm fields by soil leaching and overland flow.

It is possible to farm in harmony with the environment. Unfortunately there are also huge economic pressures on farmers, including soaring land prices, which mean farming will sometimes occur at the expense of nature.

Forest and Bird has campaigned to protect native forest and shrubland on public lands, and to ensure their management by the Department of Conservation includes adequate weed and pest control. On private lands, we support the Landcare movement. We also support the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust in promoting the legal protection of nature through covenants.

Communities are also active in protecting natural areas through their district planning schemes. Forest and Bird has worked with our members, branches and communities throughout New Zealand encouraging local authorities to have rules to notify and control bush clearance.

Sadly, sometimes even this doesn't work. In Wairoa District, 700 hectares of native forest and shrubland on farms was recently killed by helicopter spraying in breach of the District Plan.

We support Fish and Game's efforts to clean up the dairy industry. We also see the Dairying and Clean Streams Accord recently launched by the giant dairy co-operative Fonterra as a good start. This proposes that 50 percent of farm streams will be fenced by 2007 and 90 percent by 2012. We would prefer that 100 percent of streams were fenced by 2005 or sooner.

Sadly the Federated Farmers dairy chairman and many dairy farmers immediately denounced the Clean Streams Accord.

In the 21st century our future as a food exporting nation and a visitor destination is totally dependent on maintaining our reputation for environmental quality. We urge those farmers, for all our sakes, to support stream protection and sustainable land use.

Gerry McSweeney
National President

Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand Inc. (Founded 1923)

Registered Office at 172 Taranaki Street, Wellington.

PATRON: Her Excellency The Hon. Dame Silvia Cartwright PCNZM, DBE, Governor-General of New Zealand

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