



Catchment groups in Aotearoa New Zealand: understanding why farmers participate and how it influences their farming practices

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KEY FINDINGS

Catchment groups are trusted farm advisors.

Farmers join and continue participating in catchment groups to receive help with regulation compliance and non-regulatory certification schemes.

Why farmers join catchment groups may not be the same as why they continue participating. For example, social connectivity and well-being may encourage them to keep participating, even if these were not the triggers to join.

There is some evidence that catchment groups influence farming practices and changes to environmental management. However, for more farmers the catchment groups raised awareness rather than leading to direct changes.

BACKGROUND

Catchment groups have prospered and grown over the last decade. Central government allocated funding to support catchment groups in both the 2024 and 2025 budgets. In justifying the funding, Associate Minister of Agriculture Andrew Hoggard said:

[s]upporting locally led catchments projects is one way the Government backs farmers' efforts to improve land management practices and water quality. Every catchment is different – we need local solutions, for local issues.¹

A recent report² on bottom-up, farmer-led collective action initiatives suggested that collective action fostered by catchment groups contributes to farming practice change by enabling the sharing of new knowledge and information, building trust between members, and, in some cases, broadening the perspectives of members by integrating different values into decision-making. Leadership of catchment-scale initiatives and trust between members are also noted as crucial factors enabling collective action to influence on-farm practices. A range of motivations

influence farmers to join collective action initiatives, but currently these motivations are poorly understood.

Although catchment groups aimed at improving ecosystem health have been established in New Zealand for some time, insufficient time has passed to measure the impacts of these groups' activities on ecosystem health due to time it takes to see environmental changes.^{3,4} Also, many catchment groups do not regularly measure attributes of ecosystem health.⁵ The varied biophysical and social contexts of these catchments mean it is challenging to determine which approaches and components of collective action initiatives are most effective at achieving ecosystem health improvements.

This policy brief reports on findings from a series of one-on-one interviews, and a focus group with two catchment groups in Canterbury, which sought to understand (1) why farmers join and continue participating in catchment groups, and (2) how catchment groups influence farming practices. The catchment groups were chosen specifically because they are self-organised, bottom-up, and farmer-led, and their membership is linked to a specific area. Four high-level themes were identified from the qualitative data collected, and these are discussed below.

FINDINGS

Catchment groups are trusted advisors

Farmers confirmed they use and value catchment groups as a trusted source of advice. One interviewee stated that the catchment group is 'a trusted advisor for whatever ... environmental or regulatory issue a farmer might be facing'. Another stated that relationships are important to farmer decision-making, and catchment groups have greater credibility because they offer local advice.

Many of our interviewees stated that they joined the catchment group to receive help to respond to regulation from central government or regional council. One of the catchment groups we studied is negotiating a collective

irrigation consent between its members and the regional council, and this motivated several local farmers to join.

Other interviewees were motivated to join and participate in catchment groups for help to join certification schemes. One group helped its members to apply for New Zealand Farm Assured Programme Plus (NZFAP) certification, utilising the expertise of the catchment group's paid professional staff to collect all the evidence needed for certification. Another farmer, after the catchment group hosted a talk on the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), decided to enter areas of their farm into the scheme, land which included both regenerating native bush and existing exotic tree species.

Importantly, catchment groups offer independent advice and information that contrast with the advice farmers receive from government or commercial enterprises. One farmer reported they could go to their catchment group for help without fear of 'getting in trouble' with regulators. Others talked positively about their catchment groups being 'provider agnostic' and lacking a 'vested interest' in providing advice and information to their members.

Engaged volunteers and paid professionals help catchment groups to inform farming practices

Interviewees noted the importance of both engaged volunteers and paid professionals to catchment groups. Engaged volunteers often comprise the committees that govern catchment groups and make decisions about purpose and vision. Paid professionals with specialist knowledge and skills advise farmer members on their practices, thus helping the groups to operate and achieve their purpose and vision.

In both the catchment groups we studied, paid professionals helped farmers to respond to regulation (such as helping with irrigation consents, or mapping for farm environment plans) as well as encouraging voluntary change (such as the NZFAP and ETS examples noted earlier). Interviewees reported that these staff bring a 'professional, independent' focus to the catchment group activities. Many of these paid professionals also work across catchment groups, which had enabled the groups in our study to learn from others' mistakes.

Engaged volunteers were also identified as intermediaries between the community and paid professionals. As one paid employee mentioned during a focus group, 'we've got ... committee members that are amongst the community and hearing what the need is, and then that need is brought forward'. This information enabled the employees to plan activities and information days that were suited to the needs of catchment group members.

Catchment groups can support the continued evolution of on-farm management practices

Interviewees reported that catchment groups help with the continued evolution of their on-farm environmental management practices. Sometimes this was limited to

awareness raising about the impact of certain practices on the environment, or the underlying rationale for certain policy changes (e.g. winter grazing practices and new regulations). In other cases, information or advice provided by the catchment group preceded changes to on-farm practices.

Interviewees were more likely to report awareness raising in response to catchment group activities than tangible, on-farm management change. After a winter grazing consultation, one farmer stated they hadn't made any changes but are now 'more aware of how we graze with these creeks and gullies and bits and pieces and be more conscious of that sort of thing'. Also, in relation to winter grazing, one farmer stated that they have always produced winter grazing management plans, but after consultation with the catchment group 'I know the right way to do them now, which is important'. Another farmer stated that their farm is always changing, and that 'the expertise and the support of the [catchment] group has been hugely influential in the continued evolvement of our management'.

There was some evidence that catchment groups influence change in on-farm management practice. Examples include a farmer planting poplars on their property after advice from the catchment group, another farmer fencing off an area of remnant native bush on their farm after advice from a catchment consultant, and changes made in response to trying to achieve NZFAP and ETS certification. Although not directly related to on-farm practice, one farmer also spoke of changes they had made to succession planning after they attended a workshop hosted by the catchment group. In this case, the workshop gave the farmer confidence to switch lawyers and pursue a new approach to farm succession.

Catchment groups help build social connectivity and rural resilience

Interviewees reported that one of the benefits of being a member of a catchment group was building social connectivity and resilience. They recognised that social connectivity was often not the core purpose of the catchment group, but that it was an important reason people keep participating. The job of a farmer is 'fairly isolating' and so it is good to have a catchment group to bring together 'like-minded people'.

In one catchment many farmers had just experienced the worst drought conditions in 100 years. In referring to the drought and subsequent catchment group events hosted in response, one farmer stated:

You can actually bog yourself down on your own farm and feel like it's only you that's going through this, but you go away to go to anything, really, off-farm or with other farmers and talk to everyone else and realise they've got the same things going on ... you're not the only one in a sinking ship at times.

According to one interviewee, negative public perceptions of farming has affected farmers' confidence, but the catchment group provides them with a trusted advisor they can call on for help: 'You can't underestimate that someone to ring, someone who's on their side, someone to help them understand the change and how to deal with it'. Thus, the catchment group builds farmer resilience by offering them expertise to respond to new pressures. Similarly, catchment groups can help farmers collectively and proactively negotiate with regional councils: one group has been assigned a 'principal planning advisor' by the regional council to help them process consents and respond to emerging regulatory issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, we make the following recommendations to policymakers working with catchment groups.

Recommendation 1:

Resource more catchment groups to employ local, paid professionals to provide farmers with guidance on how to respond to new regulations or standards.

We recommend resourcing more catchment groups to employ paid professionals to help farmer members respond to new regulations or standards. In the two catchment groups we studied there was a combination of engaged committee volunteers and paid professional consultants. A recent survey of 234 catchment groups and community environmental groups in New Zealand reported that 31% had received central government funding.⁶ We propose providing funding to a wider range of catchment groups to enable them to employ local paid professionals, something that is critical to catchment groups fulfilling the role of 'trusted advisor'.

Relationships and trust are the foundation of primary industry advice provision, but recent research for the Ministry for Primary Industries confirmed that farmer trust in advisors has eroded due to perceptions of bias and vested interests, a 'telling rather than listening' approach, and the politicised context of advice provision.⁷ Our research suggests that catchment groups are trusted because they do not promote certain commercial products, they listen to the landowner and craft context-specific advice, and they are not representing the political mandate of regional councils or central government.

As a result, resourcing and funding catchment groups specifically to employ local, paid professionals can help these groups to fulfil the role of 'trusted advisor' in more locations across New Zealand.

Recommendation 2:

Broaden catchment group funding criteria to acknowledge their important role in building social connectivity and rural resilience.

We recommend broadening catchment group funding criteria to acknowledge their role in building social connectivity and rural resilience. The evidence we collected suggests that social connectivity and resilience – despite not being the core purpose of the catchment groups we studied – are major benefits (alongside the trusted advisor role) that encourage farmers to continue participating in catchment groups. The new contestable Rural Wellbeing Fund could provide opportunities for catchment groups to fund activities related to wellbeing, mental health, and community pride and resilience.⁸

All catchment contexts are different, and all catchment groups have different levels of maturity and development, so one approach to funding will not fit all. Further, the purpose and membership of catchment groups is typically driven by local catchment dynamics, and these do not always mirror national policy directions for improvement to freshwater management or growth in commodity production.⁹ Alongside broadening criteria for funding, we suggest creating flexible reporting guidelines that enable catchment groups to focus on issues that are relevant to local farmers while maintaining a core overarching focus on improvements in environmental practices and regulation compliance.

Recommendation 3:

Conduct more research to link catchment groups to improved ecosystem health outcomes.

We recommend funding long-term research that investigates the links between catchment groups and improved ecosystem health. As noted earlier, government ministers have promoted catchment groups as a way for farmer-led efforts to improve land management practices and water quality. Our research tentatively suggests that catchment groups can influence farming practices, but it is unclear whether the combination of these individual on-farm changes collectively contribute to improvements in water quality or other environmental goals.

As noted above, we suggest that funding for catchment groups should acknowledge a broad range of benefits beyond environmental improvement. However, taxpayers will demand evidence that their investment in catchment groups is leading to outcomes that benefit the public good. Therefore, research that can link catchment group activities to improved ecosystem health outcomes can help confirm the benefits of the multi-million-dollar, long-term investments in these groups.

Recommendation 4:

Build locally led, bottom-up catchment groups in all regions of New Zealand.

All regions of New Zealand can benefit from catchment groups, but current coverage is patchy. Some regions, such as Canterbury and Southland, are well served by catchment groups, with most farmers in these regions having access to local catchment groups. Coverage in other regions is less comprehensive.

Catchment groups ought to establish a purpose bottom-up with their members. But a challenge for all catchment groups will be maintaining a continued purpose or maintaining connectivity once the initial purpose has been achieved.

We recommend that effort be put into building locally led, bottom-up catchment groups in all regions of New Zealand. To avoid the perception of government capture, we recommend that groups such as the Landcare Trust or Aotearoa New Zealand Catchment Communities lead the process of outreach in under-represented regions.

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