PROPOSED CHANGES TO FRESHWATER REGULATIONS

Submission from Upper Moawhango River Catchment Group
October 2019

Introduction

We are a group of Farmers, Iwi, Genesis, Fish and Game, Rangitikei District Council, Horizons Regional Council, NZ Landcare Trust, NZ Defence Force and keen fisherman and women. Our group was set up in October 2018 with the idea of enhancing our river. We cover a total area of close to 50,000ha of which 50% is farmed. The Moawhango River dissects our farmland

Our objectives are;

- to maintain or reduce current levels of Nitrogen and Phosphates in the water
- to reduce sediment runoff
- to encourage thriving biodiversity within our waterways
- to OWN a pristine waterway, we are proud of

Our catchment is within the Horizons region and currently 92% of our farmers have a SLUI plan (a farm environment plan)

Our goal is to have all farmers within the catchment to have a SLUI plan by 2020.

Our group is gaining momentum.

We all agree that healthy, swimmable waterways and thriving diversity are important to us.

1. Because the Moawhango River is mountain fed and subject to high rainfall in the headwaters, erosion that causes turbidity is part of the natural process. Some of the turbidity and sedimentation issues are beyond our control and are similar to the problems faced by South Island glacial rivers. To put legislation around issues we can’t control is unworkable and unreasonable. We believe the new proposals need flexibility. Please recognise that every catchment and region is different and we need a regional or district approach rather than (a blanket) national legislation.
The Government’s own impact assessment concludes that the average catchment will require a 27 per cent reduction in nutrient loss, with some catchments needing to reduce nutrient loss by up to 80 per cent.

We have been testing the nutrients in the water every month for the past 12 months along with Turbidity and E. coli, and found that the nutrient levels in the Moawhango River are well below the requirements set by the Horizons one Plan which are more stringent than the Governments. For us to drop our nutrient levels by 27% is absurd when at times we are finding, through our science, that the nutrient levels before the water meets the farmland ie upstream of any farmland in the Army country, has levels that are already impacted.

2. We appreciate that, being hill country, we will not be expected to fence off our waterways and wetlands but have concerns about Clause 8.5 Excluding Stock from Waterways on pg. 74—“at paddock scale, the land has a carrying capacity equal to or greater than 18 stock units per hectare”. This will prohibit rotational grazing if we need to fence off waterways in our hill country. Periodically we need to ‘mob’ cattle up to clean up rough summer pasture, particularly after a dry spell, in order to maintain and promote quality grass growth later in the season. This is not a constant practice. It is seasonal and for a short time.

Weaning time in the autumn is another time we need to have options to ‘mob’ stock together.
We need clarity around this clause and prefer it to be removed if it will mean fencing on hill country.

3. We are concerned about the limitations imposed by the ‘grand parenting’ clause.
We feel in an ever-changing world we will be locked into existing farming practices that will in time be considered draconian. Furthermore, it appears these interim restrictions would apply to all catchments, regardless of whether they meet the new proposed bottom lines. This proposal to effectively “grandfather” land use intensification will prevent farmers with low-emitting systems from making any changes that would add even a small amount to their emissions.

This is one example of how the proposals, as they stand, would restrict future flexibility of farming systems and penalise farmers who have already implemented robust freshwater plans on their properties. Such a clause will take away flexibility and productivity that won’t meet changing consumer trends and a growing world population. Being more extensive, the farming systems in our catchment are being penalised and limited. Those leaching at the higher end of the scale will be allowed to remain at these high rates while adjusting to the new regulations, while low input systems such as ours will be restricted. It is inherently unfair to our existing extensive systems. While hill country headwaters would be ecologically healthy, further downstream the same problems would persist with no meaningful improvement to freshwater health. Fix the problem where the problem is.

4. We are concerned about the uncertainty our businesses are facing nationwide—the social and economic implications that these new proposals may mean to many farmers in New Zealand. We are concerned about the short time frame to implement these proposals and the cost of this new compliance. There is currently not the professional capacity to oversee the development of these environment plans and fresh water modules or the subsequent auditing. Reduced profitability and uncertainty will have a domino effect on our small rural communities with less people being employed, less expenditure in our towns, loss of services and schools etc. We are concerned about our farmers’ mental health including stress, depression and suicide. We feel we are losing our licence to run viable, profitable businesses.

As a catchment group we are already committed to continuing to improve the standard of our waterways and land. We believe our industry-led farm assurance schemes; our Beef and Lamb Land and Environment Plans and the growing catchment group initiatives will achieve the desired
outcomes wanted by the “2019. Action for healthy waterways – A discussion document on national direction for our essential freshwater”. These schemes/plans/initiatives will continue to enable and encourage farmers to set and achieve environmental goals that will give us our “healthy swimmable rivers and thriving biodiversity” while still allowing farmers to have viable businesses.

The overall impact of these series of reforms represents a substantial challenge for farmers and growers. The proposals also underplay the significant progress many farmers and growers have already made in improving freshwater management on their properties and in stepping up their environmental sustainability practices. Our Catchment is leading the way with this environmental work and we believe the government should be empowering Catchments rather than disincentivising them.

**Hydro-electricity**
Yet another exemption for hydro-schemes. We don’t think rivers with hydro-electric dams should be exempt from meeting the national regulations on water quality.

We know from the Moawhango River example that it does not take much (and we don’t lose that much generation capacity) to have a really significant impact on water quality and river ecology.

**Wetlands**
We do not support the current wetlands rules in the proposed NES. The way it is written now, any vegetation clearance within a natural wetland or any soil disturbance within 5 metres of a natural wetland (which is poorly defined) will need a consent. This is ridiculous.

The NES has a framework set up requiring a consent (discretionary activity) for any work within these wetlands for education, enhancement etc. This rule should be a permitted activity with conditions. This rule is going to put a roadblock in front of Farmers to put in these Wetlands. We support the need for more wetlands and believe using experts like NZ LandCare Trust without consents is a better way to go otherwise, professionals are going to struggle to convince farmers to use wetlands as an enhancement tool.

We would certainly like the questions raised by the green groups to be answered too. Rules need to be applied consistently and We personally think all wetlands should be caught – although if you are altering them for any beneficial reason you should be able to do this without consent – subject to basic conditions like not dumping heaps of sediment into a creek, informing council of your works etc.

5. **Conclusion**
The Moawhango River Catchment Group supports the Government’s goal of improving the quality of New Zealand’s freshwater and reducing pollution entering waterways from cities and farms. Equally, we support Ministers’ stated goals of ensuring the pace of change is manageable and that appropriate transitional support is in place.

However, we are not confident that that the proposed freshwater reforms, in their current form, will achieve those stated goals in a fair and balanced way.

Over the decades, our local food and agribusinesses have proven themselves to be resilient, innovative and adaptable. We are among the most successful and efficient food producers in the world, fast adaptors of technology and operate without subsidies a long distance from their main markets.
At the same time, our farmers have made significant strides forward in improving the management of freshwater on their properties. We therefore urge policymakers to take account of the issues we have raised in this submission, as they confirm the next steps in embedding a new freshwater framework.

Currently we have a very good working relationship with Horizons Regional Council. We also work respectfully and successfully alongside local iwi, Fish and Game, NZ Landcare Trust, Genesis, Massey University Ecology Department and others.
The reason the relationship works is because it is farmer driven and the organisations, we work with understand farming and hear our voice.
We work as a team. Side by side.

Personal details removed