Taranaki Rural Support Trust’s main issues with the Freshwater Package are:

The effect on the wellness, well-being, mental health and loss of self-esteem of Taranaki Farmers influenced by:

- The lack of apparent recognition by Government through effectively declaring a water quality crisis, of the substantial effort and financial investment already committed into successfully improving water quality in Taranaki by Taranaki Farmers.
- The potentially substantial extra effort required to meet the demands of this package. E.g. re-fencing, reporting, consents etc.
- The substantial extra costs/reduction in income to achieve the nutrient bottom lines of this package for very little further gain environmentally. (As supported by Taranaki Regional Council scientific data).
- The “one size fits all” approach which hasn’t recognised regional variations such as effective riparian planting verses average setbacks and the scientifically low correlation of DIN with ecological stream health in Taranaki, yet it is still a major featured requirement of this package.

These are issues that farmers have highlighted to us as issues of grave concerns to them and the implications are developed in the body of our submission.

Introduction

Taranaki is one of 14 regional Rural Support Trusts who offer free confidential support to farming families when “the chips are down” and supporting their Rural Communities when facing those challenges.

Initially the Trust movement was started forty plus years ago in response to major adverse climatic events, such as droughts, floods and snow storms. However, since that time the Trusts have morphed into organisations that are available to offer support to the rural community, on a 365-day 24 hr basis. In
addition, Trusts run events and workshops aimed at increasing rural resilience for the many challenges that confront those in the rural sector.

*Our Observations*

This is not a submission based on “Policy” that is being suggested, but instead on the “impacts on people and communities” that this may have through the impact on affected farmers and their communities.

We deal only with our observations and anecdotal feedback that we, as a Rural Support Trust, link to the effects that the Essential Freshwater Package are having on the wider rural sector.

The rural people that seek the assistance of a Rural Support Trust are undergoing stress that they are unable to handle individually. In some cases, this stress transgresses into the mental health field.

Stress is usually not the result of a single causative factor – it is usually a combination of several factors. These can range from the financial pressures on a farming enterprise, the Bank’s approach to that deteriorating financial situation, family disputes, the negativity towards the rural sector that often pervades the social media, droughts, floods, low milk price, the ongoing threat of M.Bovis and the uncertainty over the financial implications of methane reductions and possible ETS impositions on the rural sector. These are all items that have significantly affected many Taranaki Farmers and Rural Communities.

In this current financial year Farmers moral should be at an all-time high with Lamb prices at a record, beef market remains very buoyant and the milk price remains looking as though it will have a seven in front of it. Wool is the only concern, yet we currently see farmer’s moral at an all-time low. Some of our Trustees have had 40 plus years in the industry and the closest we have seen to this level of feeling from farmers was back in the 1980’s

*Impact of Freshwater package*

The unveiling of the “Essential Freshwater Package” has seen a further deterioration in moral and increased the stress levels experienced by farming families as evidenced by the increase in calls to our 0800 number and an increase in the number of referrals from rural professionals of people who are experiencing depression.

Taranaki RST are currently receiving record numbers of calls, from farmers that are extremely stressed and wondering “why they bother?” A lot of calls are
based around low self-esteem, generated by media through negative unbalanced stories. Most farmers realise that they have a way to go environmentally, yet very little of the progress made on water quality to date seems to have been recognised by the public, government or media, which is leading to farmers withdrawing from their communities and families.

The apparent declaration of a water quality crisis, moratorium on land use change and ‘top down, one size fits all’ approach of the Essential Freshwater package further exasperates this perception. The community is very fragile and sooner or later something must give.

Our response

Due to our concern regarding current issues the sector is facing, the Taranaki Rural Support Trust is undergoing a “Strategic Review” based on increased work load and the future challenges that we will face. The review will help to identify additional resourcing required through head count and level of training. The Trust is appreciative of the funding we receive from MPI to help (30% approximately) with the work we do, but if we are serious about managing stress and preventing potential suicide are we not better dealing with the causes and not adding to the tension that already exists? There is a limited threshold that people can cope with before they snap.

Being an apolitical body, we leave it to those in Central Government and their advisers as to how the Essential Freshwater Package evolves over time. But the unescapable fact is that the Trust has seen a marked rise in stress levels caused by the Freshwater Package. This is evidenced by the unwelcome rise in requests for our assistance and in addition we have noted the frustrated response from participants at a series of farmer/public events run by various organisations throughout Taranaki. At each event (and there have been at least 8 events attracting 800+ participants) there have been unprompted calls for further physical action e.g. ‘Tractor’ marches, general civil disobedience, non-compliance action and such like. These ‘calls’ from the floor were always received with wide audience approval.

While we, as a Trust do not endorse these actions, we do however; respectfully ask that our observations be taken into account as policy makers and the Government progress the Essential Freshwater Package.

Sincerely
Chair – Taranaki Rural Support Trust

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