Community led catchment groups are a better approach than a regulatory process driven from Government and Regional Councils Region.

Catchment groups provide a constructive and positive interface with farmers and other community members.

Focussed on identifying and understanding the critical issues of their local waterways.

Targeted outcomes and the associated benefits are clearly understood, finding solutions then becomes positive result.

Implementation of mitigation strategies can be prioritised for the greatest environmental benefit for time and money invested.

Farmers are innovators, this has driven the success of agriculture. The focus of previous decades has been production, whereas currently shifting to sustainability, both environmental and financial.

Small environmental gains incrementally add up to significant positive outcomes -the 1%ers which often are also the low hanging fruit. To achieve these requires a daily mental focus and awareness, this is only achieved if it is a positive experience. Farmers make many management decisions daily, ideally environmental impact sits alongside stock performance and pasture quality as key considerations.

Farmers acting collectively on an issue provides motivation and support, sharing of innovation and knowledge and there is collective pride in results that are achieved. Peer pressure is effective in lifting individual’s performance.

Celebrating progress is important driver of any change. Water quality monitoring on an individual farm level has limitations in terms of reliability of results, catchment and sub catchment results more accurately show a trend.

Catchment groups are being initiated throughout the country, initiated and being driven by farmers. Supporting these groups and using this model as the primary interface with farmers will maintain the current momentum of farmers understanding and making better decisions regarding their impact on water.

A catchment group is where science meets practical farm management to produce positive environmental outcomes

What is wrong with the prescriptive regulatory approach proposed.
National blanket bottom lines and restrictions on permitted activities are not focused on localised water quality issues.

If the positive outcomes are not apparent, then farmers will not choose to be engaged.

There will be uncertainty of what regulations and the associated detail until regional Councils design and have their freshwater plans approved. The timeline for this is Dec 2025.

In the interim farmers will stop investing in mitigation work, not knowing whether it will meet the regulations. The current momentum will be lost.

Freshwater components in Farm Plans

The catchment group supports the requirement for all farmers to have a Farm plan, with a freshwater component.

We do not agree with the requirement for accredited consultants to write these, nor the audit requirement.

Consultants will generally need at least two years practical experience in addition to formal training to be competent. There is not the personnel capability in the sector. Cost of these reports will be much higher than the quoted $3500.

The available consultants should be allocated to catchment groups to upskill and empower farmers to prepare much of their own plans. Existing farm plans such as Horizons Whole Farm plans and Beef & Lamb Environmental plans should be accepted with the freshwater component being an addition.

Farmers need to own these plans and what is in them, the best way to achieve them is to have them determining much of what is in them.

Utilisation of existing expertise

Industry groups such as Federated Farmers, Beef & Lamb, and Dairy NZ have environmental policy and extension to farmers as key priorities.

Many service providers have relationships and contribute expertise to farmers.

These relationships and their knowledge are key enablers in changing behaviour.

An example is the forming of winter grazing plan.

The PGG Wrightson field representative would currently walk a paddock that has been selected for cropping, identifying weeds present and would prepare a crop establishment plan. He/she is the right person to discuss what is the best practise feeding plan for the paddock, identify critical source areas and suitable mitigation.

This process will be more constructive and cost efficient than a consultant performing this and similar tasks.

There can be some stick in the Catchment group model.
Peer pressure is an effective tool to motivate change of behaviour, and farmers are generally very proud of their farms.

Those farmers that choose not to be part of their catchment group, the regulatory pathway is the alternative.

**Monitoring of individual progress of individual farmers.**

Farmers can be required to report their progress of implementing their mitigation work. The poor achievers can be identified within the group, and support and motivation initially provided to them. An independent consultation or regional council employee could be involved, their time targeted at these farmers.

The performance of individual catchment groups can also be monitored, with additional resources or oversight provided where needed.

The cost and resources around auditing and compliance can be better utilised by targeting its approach to the poor performers.

The result is that the constructive structure of catchment groups will lead the transformational change required, the early adopters motivating the next 2 quartiles of farmers, with the slower regulatory approach being targeted at the slow adopters.

**Recommendations**

Utilise Catchment Groups as the primary interface with farmers and their communities.

Provide resources for these groups, building on the good work of Landcare Trust, and industry bodies such as Beef &Lamb.