



Farmer Perspective series

October 2021



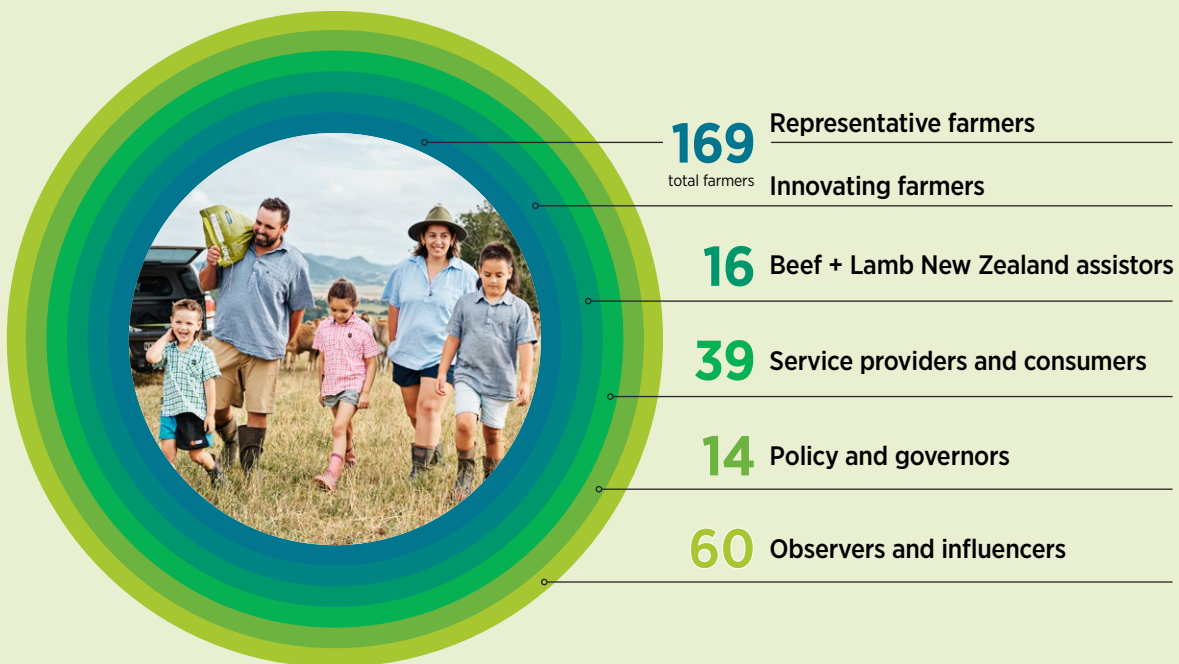
1 Introduction



The Hill Country Futures Partnership programme is co-funded by Beef + Lamb New Zealand (B+LNZ), the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), PGG Wrightson Seeds and Seed Force New Zealand. As part of the programme, we set out to find out what is happening in hill country farming and what its future might be. To do this, we needed to hear directly from the people and organisations in this sector.

We talked with almost 300 people in 170 interviews and six focus group discussions between July 2019 and March 2020. The Farmer Perspective series is a summary of some of the biggest issues that were identified during our interviews.

Who did we interview?



Farmers are at the centre of hill country farming so it's critical to hear their perspectives about the future of the sector.

We listened to farmers, farm advisors, decision-makers and observers involved in hill country farming.

Who were the farmers?

169 farmers

Farm owners, farm owner/operators, farm managers, stock managers, and shepherds. The sample included:



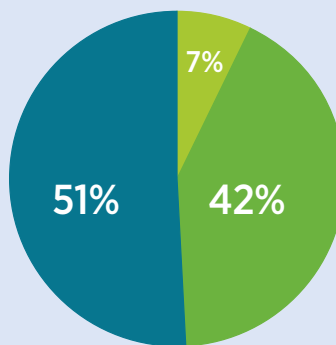
Multigenerational and first generation farmers



A variety of ownership models: Owner/operator, companies, trusts, and equity partnerships



Farmers with **high debt** and farmers who were **debt free**



Trainee farmers

From agricultural colleges

Innovating farmers

Identified as innovators, or community leaders

Representative farmers

Randomly selected farmers from throughout New Zealand

What were the biggest issues?

Some of the most popular topics raised by farmers have been included in this Farmer Perspective series.

Barriers and opportunities to on-farm environmental action

Economic diversification

Vision for the future: 2050

Next generation of farmers: Succession

Regenerative agriculture



2 Barriers and opportunities for on-farm environmental action



We have had the privilege of listening to a range of people involved in hill country farming. This article is part of a short series that provides insights on some of the biggest sector issues our interviewees identified.

New Zealand's hill country farming is facing a system wide move towards environmental sustainability. To secure the future of hill country farming, this change needs to happen at all levels, one of which is on the farm. We must understand what causes farmers to embark on, or resist, taking environmental actions on their farms. Then we can identify the best ways to support them to create resilient farms and farming systems, now and into the future.

Why might farmers want to take action?

Goals



Pursuing benefits

To pursue benefits for livestock, climate resilience, profitability, market access or even personal enjoyment that emerges from sustainable farming.



Fulfilling responsibility

To fulfill their responsibility to themselves, future generations, communities, and the public by ensuring that their farming is sustainable and ecologically healthy.

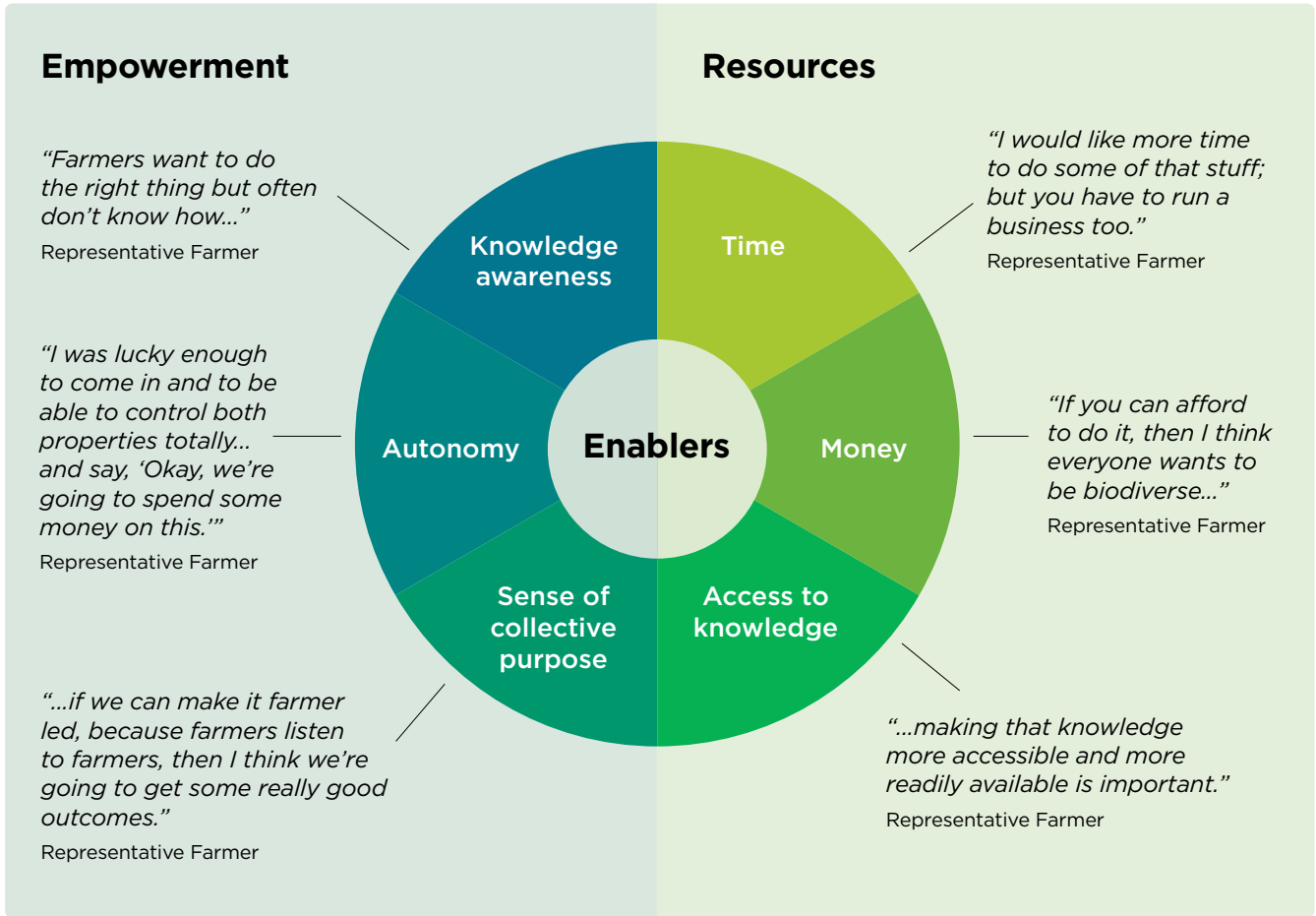


Meeting requirements

To meet the requirements set by government or council regulations.



What makes action possible?



Resistance: in a nutshell

Farmers feel...

- Misunderstood
- Unfairly blamed
- Undervalued
- Unheard

because

- They perceive regulations as imposed and impractical
- They perceive themselves as already being "green"
- They perceive that their positive work is going unseen

so they are...

- Uncertain about environmental investment
- Unempowered and feel unsupported to change

Next steps

Hill country farmers need

Socially focused investment

Because fixing the environment requires farmers to be supported and empowered

- Improve the narrative of agriculture using positive storytelling
- Improve the narrative around agriculture through honest discussion
- Encourage farmer-led holistic learning about the environment
- Promote resource-based incentives to support farmers to change

3 Regenerative agriculture



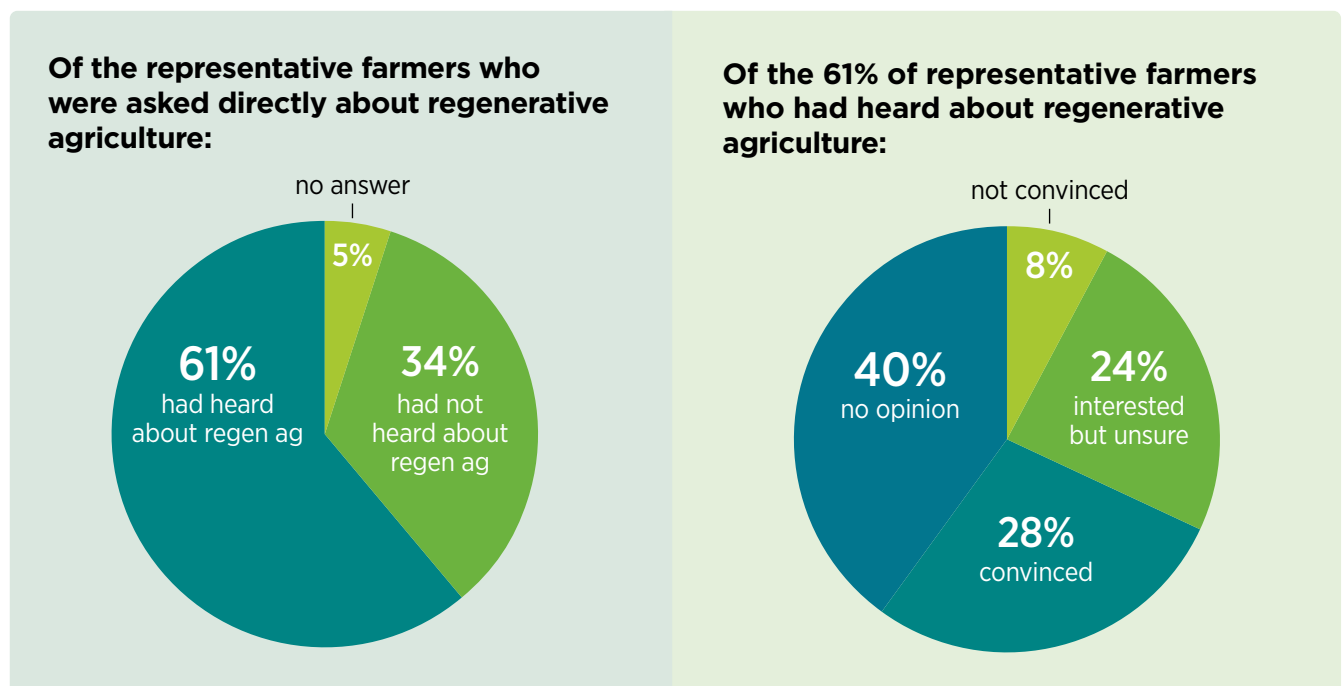
We have had the privilege of listening to a range of people involved in hill country farming. This article is part of a short series that provides insights on some of the biggest sector issues our interviewees identified.

There is an increasing interest in regenerative agriculture (regen ag), both in New Zealand and internationally. Regenerative agriculture has the potential to bring improved environmental, social and economic outcomes to farming. However, it is important to investigate regenerative agriculture to understand more about the movement and if it has a role in helping future-proof hill country farming.

How well known is regenerative agriculture?

10% of interviewees mentioned regenerative agriculture unprompted, but

28% of all interviewees (farmers + non-farmers*) mentioned regenerative agriculture unprompted



*Non-farmers includes B+LNZ assistors, rural professionals, policy makers and researchers

What attracts farmers to regenerative agriculture?

- Aligns with personal values
- “Old way” of farming increasingly difficult with regulations
- Market opportunities
- Helps to create autonomy in an era of uncertainty
- Positive climate action
- Peer-to-peer learning

How is regenerative agriculture developing?

Creation of a community

The change that is being created by the regenerative agriculture movement is broader than just farming practices. It is creating a supportive and empowering community.

This community is dispersed throughout New Zealand and internationally.

This community performs trial and error practices on farm, and then shares these learnings and failures.

Farmers are sharing their knowledge as they learn it through grass-roots farmer-led workshops, field days, and online discussions.



But some are hesitant

How can we define it?

The lack of a firm definition of what regenerative agriculture was a significant obstacle for many - but only for interviewees that were outside of the regenerative agriculture community. Within the community there was reluctance to create a definition for fear that it may be too prescriptive.

Why the term “regenerative”?

Some interview participants were strongly opposed to the use of the phrase “regenerative” in the context of hill country farming because they felt it implied that existing practices are “degenerative”.

Where’s the evidence to say it works?

Opponents feel that there is insufficient scientific evidence to justify a sector-wide promotion of the approach. They cite how few scientific studies have been undertaken on regenerative agriculture in New Zealand and globally.



4 Economic diversification and resilience

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Economic diversification is thought to be a pathway that farmers can take to build resilience. Hill country farmers are dealing with multiple crises and issues such as climate change, global market shifts and Covid-19. Diversifying businesses and land use may provide a pathway to reducing this uncertainty and building a more resilient future. But what do farmers think of economic diversification?

Types of alternative income

around

66% of all interviewees mentioned economic diversification

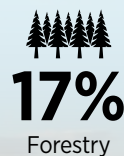
“Diversifying does give you resilience.”

Representative Farmer

“Something will be up and something will be down. It gives you the flexibility to change enterprises.”

Representative Farmer

Forms of diversification that interviewees identified as either already happening or as having potential to develop:



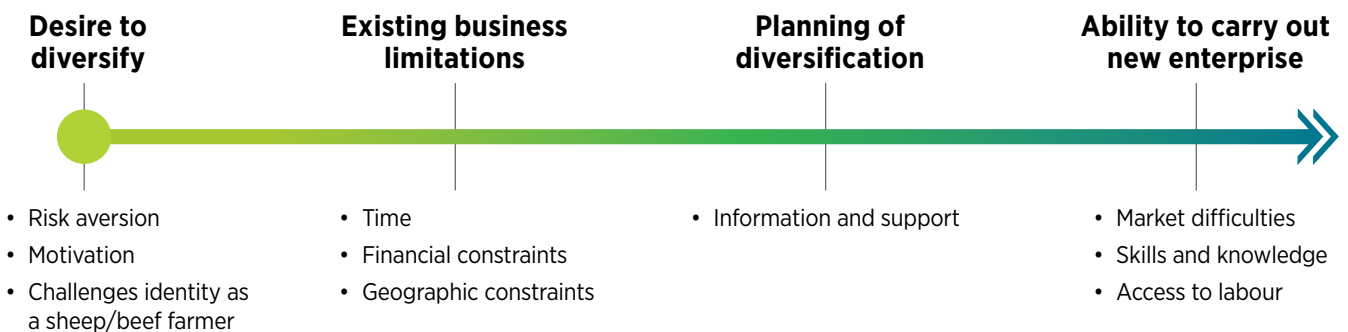
Benefits of economic diversification

Of those who mentioned economic diversification, four broad benefits emerged. Some groups referred to particular benefits more than others.

- Spreading risk/alternative income
- Personal enjoyment and fulfillment
- More ecologically sustainable land use
- Community enhancement - employment and attracting visitors



Barriers to economic diversification



Supporting economic diversification

Economic diversification is not a “one-size fits all” pathway to resilience.

Two strategies that may help farmers and entrepreneurs are:



Public infrastructure development

Physical and digital infrastructure improvements in rural communities can improve viability of diversified enterprises.



More effective land sharing arrangements

Making connections between landowners and people with the skills and financial resources to support diversification.

5 The next generation of farmers: succession

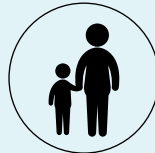


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Family farm succession is an important conversation in rural communities. The average age of hill country farmers is increasing and family succession is fast becoming more complex and difficult. It is critical to understand these succession challenges and the potential impact it has for securing future generations and hill country farming.

Why tackle succession?

There are many benefits to living in a rural community that interviewees wanted their kids to have. These benefits were considered to be worth the effort to tackle the stressors of succession.



Great place to raise kids



Having a tight-knit community



Enjoy the lifestyle of farming



Why is succession difficult?



Financial concerns

Rising land prices, land-use competition, high debt levels, lowering profitability and increasing regulatory costs all make entry into farming and staying in farming less appealing.

"This farm across the river...it's a pretty poor farm to be honest - and they expect moon money for it; and they'll probably get it because of forestry and carbon... It pushes it out of reach of anyone who wants to buy it."

Representative Farmer

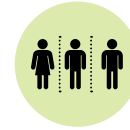


Misunderstood reputation of the industry

Farmers were concerned that the vilification of the industry by media and urban communities was lowering the appeal for young people to enter the industry and the viability of future farming.

"[My] three-year-old is already mad keen on farming and loves it... but, in the back of your mind, you're going, 'I don't really know if you really want to get into this'."

Representative Farmer



Family relations

When farms are inherited there can be major tensions and stress around splitting the value of the farm between siblings and the financial and time costs of doing so.

"[Marginal land used to be] places that young fella's could get a start in; get a cheaper farm and get a start on. But even those places it's just ridiculous the price they want for them now."

Representative Farmer

Where are the young people?

Negative perceptions of the industry

Not well advertised as career option

High debt likely

A lack of young farmers

Key recommendations

Creating entry pathways for the next generation

> Make farming careers known

- Invest in training for young farmers
- Represent sheep and beef farming at career fairs, particularly in urban schools

> Support existing farming families through succession

- Make information and workshops that provide practical knowledge about succession accessible
- Encourage families to think about succession sooner rather than later

> Make farming attractive

- Emphasise the benefits of rural life
- Share positive farming stories



6 The future of farming: Farmer vision for 2030



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The Hill Country Futures programme has investigated many challenges that farmers across the country are facing in their day to day lives. But how do these farmers see the future of the industry playing out? We asked farmers to describe what they think hill country farming could look like in 2030. We asked for their best and worst case scenarios and how they thought the industry can make sure the best vision is achieved.

The vision for the future

Hopes for the future



Environmental stewardship

Farmers were firm that looking after the environment is key to a thriving farm. The majority of farmers want to increase their ability to plant natives, control pests, and improve water quality to make sure their land and business is sustainable.

"I think best case, a lot of us getting waterways clean and continuing to improve that; that would be in the right direction."

Representative Farmer



Achieving ownership and financial goals

Farmers want to build their farming careers and progress into farm ownership. Being profitable was also a big part of this vision, often for the purposes of reinvesting into environmentally friendly practices and technology.

"For me, [best case scenario] would be young people wanting to be involved...and [being] economically sound."

Representative Farmer



Thriving communities

Farmers want to see local schools, sports clubs and farming networks thriving. They want to support, and be supported by these communities as they were highlighted as critical for mental wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

"You can't beat a good community...it is pretty neat to have that feeling...everyone needs that support."

Representative Farmer

Fears for the future



Pine and corporations

Farmers described more and more family farms being bought by large corporations or being converted to pine (carbon) forestry. The direct and indirect impacts of this were seen as the biggest threats to achieving their hopes for the future.

"These beautiful farms that have kept families for generations in a lifestyle, and forestry now; once it goes to forestry, it's bugged."

Representative Farmer



Rising costs and land prices

High land prices due to land use competition and rising regulatory costs were seen as a major threat to achieving farmers hopeful visions for the future. These issues were perceived by farmers as impacting on the financial viability of farms and the future of farm ownership.

"For me, [the best case scenario] would be young people wanting to be involved...and [being] economically sound."

Representative Farmer



Loss of communities

Less family owned farms and shrinking rural populations was a huge concern for farmers. Pessimistic visions of the future included practical issues such as low school enrolment making employment for teachers less viable, and also losing community spirit and support.

"If it all got planted in pine trees and everyone left, it would be terrible."

Representative Farmer

The road to achieving the vision

*Farmers described what they think is the best way to go from where they are now...
...to where they want to be under their best case scenario.*



Giving farmers a say

Farmers want agency over their futures and want to be able to directly input into and help develop a feasible roadmap for the future of sheep and beef farming.



Rural and urban working together

Farmers expressed that they want to work collaboratively with urban communities to bridge the perceived urban-rural divide by sharing the rural experience, connecting with urban spaces and encouraging rural career pathways.



Building positive media

Farmers believed the greatest tool for creating support for farming would be to shift negative media narratives.



