



Understanding our Hill Country Futures

First steps



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New Zealand sheep and beef farmers are subject to a constantly changing scene. Society's expectations around food production transparency, environmental sustainability and climate change obligations are all impacting on farmers' livelihoods. In addition, New Zealand hill country is diverse - geographically, climatically and productively. The Hill Country Futures programme differs from most pastoral-based research, in that it considers the whole-farm system and, critically, the wider communities that these systems exist within.

Over the past year, researchers from the Hill Country Futures team have listened to voices and views from people all over New Zealand that work in the hill country sector. We are interested in what farmers, decision makers and influencers think are the best outcomes for the future of hill country farming and how they can work together to shape these better long-term outcomes.

We talked to almost 300 people in 170 interviews and six focus group discussions between July 2019 and March 2020. From these discussions, we now have a unique and in-depth bank of information that we are currently analysing. This analysis will help us construct a vision for the future of hill country farming, identify pathways to get there, and examine the key challenges and opportunities for farmers and other stakeholders.

This work has been inspiring and rewarding, and at times, confronting. People have shared their thoughts and feelings and through this have showcased the passion and resilience of our farmers. In this brief report, we discuss the interviews and our early high-level research findings.

About the Hill Country Futures programme

The interview work described in this report is part of the Hill Country Futures programme; a five-year programme that will end in 2022. It 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. The four work areas in the Hill Country Futures Programme are given below and the work presented in this report informs areas 1 and 4.

1. Developing a 'pathways' framework.
2. Biodiversity in forage landscapes.
3. Developing landscape classification tools.
4. Communities to market: Identifying and sharing the stories of hill country farmers to showcase our sector.

Why is the Hill Country Futures programme important?

Agriculture in our diverse hill country landscapes is an iconic part of New Zealand's primary sector. In New Zealand we have 9,165 commercial sheep and beef farms, and 4,595 of these farms are in our hill country landscapes. As well as being a large employer, these farms support the red meat sector, as well as other sectors such as forestry, honey and tourism.

Agriculture sits at the nexus of some of the world's most pressing challenges and the scene is rapidly changing for New Zealand's farmers. For example, society's expectations around food production transparency, environmental health and sustainability and climate change

obligations are already influential at an on-farm level and are expected to become even more so, presenting both challenge and opportunity.

What did we set out to understand with the interview work?

To find out what is happening in hill country farming, we first needed to hear directly from the people and organisations working in this sector. To do this we listened to farmers, farm advisors, decision makers and observers (see Figure 1). We have called this our Knowledge Nest with farmers placed in the centre. We took this wide ranging approach to ensure that we gained a full and informed picture of the entire hill country sector.

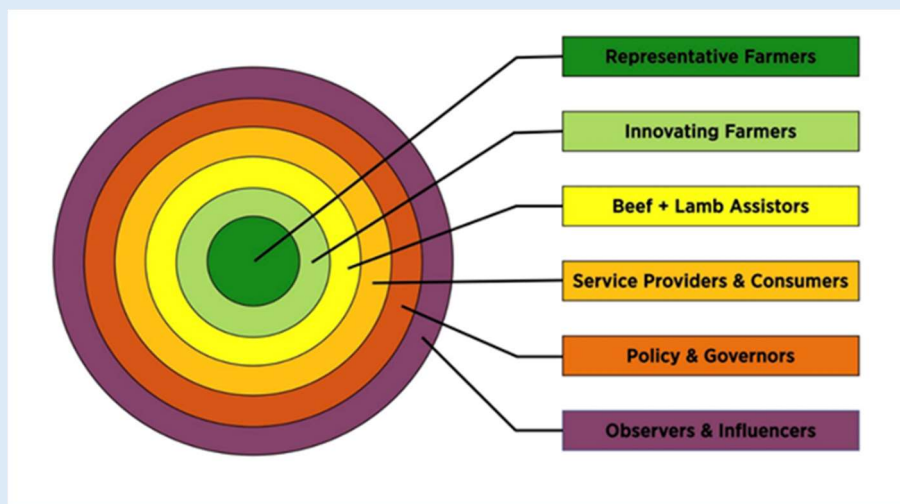


Figure 1: *The Hill Country Futures Knowledge Nest*

How did we conduct the interviews?

A team of six interviewers hit the road to meet our interviewees on their land, in their homes or in their offices – wherever they were most comfortable. We went to great effort to ensure that we had the best chance of connecting with each interviewee and understanding what matters most to them. In total 298 people were interviewed in 170 interviews and six focus group discussions. This included 169 farmers. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Of the farmers interviewed, 87 were randomly selected from throughout New Zealand. A further 71 farmers were chosen because they were identified as innovators or community leaders and 11 were trainee farmers from agricultural colleges (Figure 2). The farmers that we talked to included farm owners; farm owner/operators; farm managers; stock managers; and shepherds. There were multi-generational farmers as well as farmers who were first generation and there were many ownership models including companies, trusts, and equity partnerships. Some farmers had high debt and others were debt free.

Through the face to face interview process, the researchers were able to pick up on depth and nuances that might have been missed in a postal, phone or digital survey. Subtle changes in body language and/or energy that would be missed in remote survey techniques prompted researchers to gently dig deeper into issues raised. The result is that we have a unique in-depth insight into the views of stakeholders in the hill country and have been able to capture emotions, beliefs, values and attitudes toward change to a depth that would not have been possible using remote surveys.

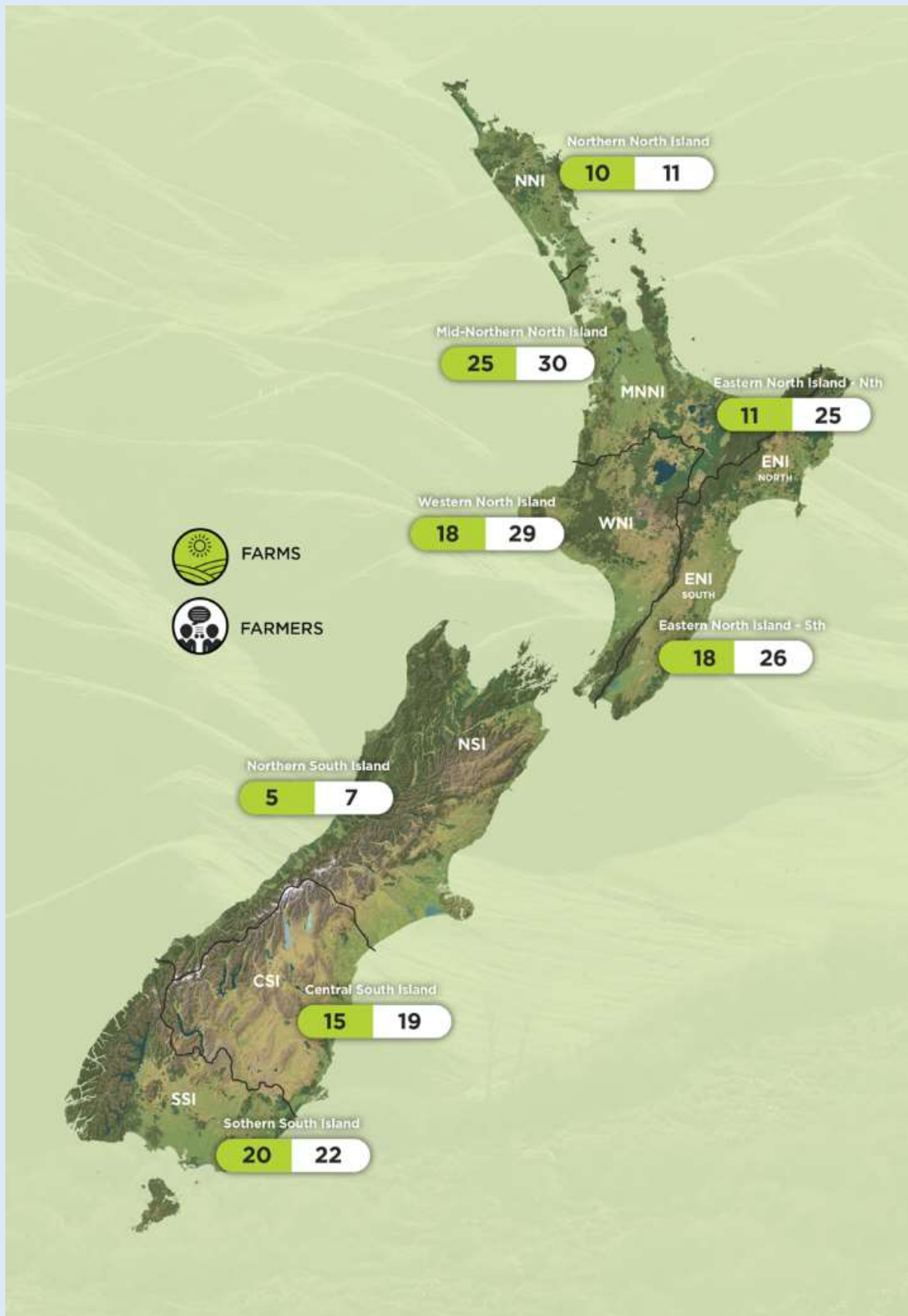


Figure 2: Location of farms that were owned or managed by participants in the Hill Country Futures programme.

The research team are extremely grateful to all interview participants, many of whom provided extremely frank and personal accounts under the safety of an ethical contract, which meant that all farmers and participants could retain their anonymity if they chose to. This research was assessed and approved by the New Zealand Ethics Committee (NZEC19_47).

How have we analysed the information?

All the interview recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts sent back to participants to check within a two-week timeframe. Once the two weeks had elapsed, the research team analysed the interview transcripts to identify the key issues that were most frequently discussed. They also searched the interviews for references to important themes such as 'future vision', 'leadership and following', and 'farmer/local knowledge'.

The research team also kept field notes as a reflective process of each interview.

What matters the most to New Zealand sheep and beef farmers?

By and large, hill country farmers enjoy their lifestyle because of the freedom and autonomy that farming and being on their land provides. Alongside these positive feelings we also heard of some of the current challenges in hill country farming. Below are some of the "hot topics" that emerged from the interviews.

A pride and passion for farming

There were many heartfelt comments about the richness of farming family life and the wonderful lifestyle enjoyed by farmers and their families. For many farmers, their identity was underpinned by a strong sense of pride and passion for their work. This was expressed by references to their contribution to "feeding a hungry world", their contribution to New Zealand's economy, to caring for our iconic landscapes, and their service to their own local community.

Many farmers took pride in their environmental work, describing work to enhance their farms' environment through proactive and sustainable practices. Examples included re-establishing native bush and bird life, planting more trees to enhance stability on the sloped land, improving shade and shelter for stock, or to improve their farms' aesthetics.

Farmers often spoke of pride in their stock and the link between stock health and their management practices. For example, changes made in grazing and/or genetics to have healthier, happier stock that were more productive.

Farmers are used to change

Many farmers pointed out that farming is constantly changing and has a proud record of innovation and continuous improvements in productivity. They expressed that this approach to innovation would help the hill country farming sector navigate today's challenges, although there was often concern over the current pace of change. The 1980's was cited by many as a benchmark for change processes. Many who farmed or grew up on the farm during this time spoke of knuckling down, a strong sense of community, the importance of community support, and the need to go without to get by and survive. There were many references to the resilience and grit of farmers during those turbulent times.

The trend of land-use change, from farmland to forestry, is moving at an alarming pace

Land use change was the most common subject with an emphasis on conversion of farmland to pine trees and, to a lesser extent, manuka and redwood trees. Many participants expressed concerns around the New Zealand Government's One Billion Trees (1BT) initiative. A smaller group also mentioned the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), and the perceived increased foreign ownership of farmland, and the probable conversion of this land into exotic forestry for carbon credits.

The vast majority of participants agreed that increasing trees (native and non-native) on farm and managing blocks of forestry in the hill country can be both environmentally and economically beneficial as part of farming operations. The common fear expressed is that the scale and pace of conversion of whole farms to "carbon forestry" will be detrimental to rural communities - environmentally, socially, and economically. Many farmers expressed frustration regarding the details of government policy and wanted the government to recognise the carbon sequestration in soil and trees planted outside of forestry blocks.

Increasing land prices are seen as a risk for the hill country farming sector

High rural land prices were identified as a major threat to the economic viability of hill country farming. The high prices have lowered returns on capital, making borrowing to develop farms, investment in innovation or the purchasing of more land difficult, and increases the debt burden for farmers. High land prices are making it more difficult for young people trying to enter the industry, having implications in family succession, which is a particular concern given the relatively high average age of farmers. In addition, rural land prices are seen as leading to an increase in productive pastoral farmland being sold and converted to forestry plantations and making the already challenging process of succession planning even more difficult.

The amount of new regulations is confusing and overwhelming

There was a lot of talk about regulatory pressure mounting with "environmental policies" leading most of these discussions. The timing of the interviews coincided with government and media attention on freshwater policies and this topic was commonly discussed. The changes in freshwater policy caused a high level of anxiety for most of the farmers interviewed as the cost associated with required actions was uncertain.

The media and public perception of farming seems too negative and unfair

Public perceptions of farming were challenging for a lot of the interviewees. Our interviews showed that the majority of farmers placed immense value and pride in their stock and their environmental surroundings and wanted to distance themselves from media stories of farmers performing poorly in terms of environmental stewardship and animal welfare.

The farmers interviewed often felt that there was a gap between how they were viewed by the public and how they wanted to be understood by the public. The mainstream media was seen as the main obstacle here, and there was frustration that the media seemed to focus on examples of bad practice portraying farmers to be cruel to animals and neglectful of their environment. Farmers saw value and opportunity to have the many examples of excellent farming showcased in the media. Many of the people interviewed believed that increasing the public's knowledge of good examples of hill country farming and increasing the connection between the producer and consumer would reduce the perceptions of "urban-rural divide".

Most farmers want to increase the amount of native birds and plants on their farm

Increasing indigenous biodiversity was seen as important to many farmers, however, the term “biodiversity” was not well understood. We found that most farmers talked with enthusiasm and pride about native birds, native bush, and the stream life on their farm without ever using the term biodiversity. For some, native biodiversity was viewed as a “nice to have” but did not see it as having a direct influence on farm production. Others discussed biodiversity more broadly – emphasising soil biodiversity, different plant species, pastoral mixtures, livestock breeds, and genetics – and spoke about the importance of biodiversity for their production and farm business.

There were different views on the productive/economic value of nature. Some participants focused on synergies between environmental protection and financial well-being whilst others emphasised that rising regulatory costs will erode profitability, meaning that environmentally conscious farmers will have less to invest in environmental projects.

Rural communities are important

The importance of strong rural communities was a common thread across the interviewees. Thriving communities with access to the likes of schools, doctors, sports, and shops were frequently mentioned as integral parts of participants’ view of the best outcomes for the future of hill country farming.

Many farmers mentioned good relationships with neighbours and other farmers in their area as particularly important for a thriving community. For instance, formal and informal groups such as discussion groups, catchment groups and Red Meat Profit Partnership (RMPP) Action Network groups were particularly praised for their use in creating a forum for exchange between peers leading to on-farm changes. Organisations like B+LNZ were encouraged to keep supporting these types of groups.

We don’t all use the same jargon

One of our key findings from the interview work is that across all of the different groups of stakeholders, there was an incredible amount of consensus in the testimonies. However, the use of terminology was not consistent across the groups and if we had not taken the time to really listen, we may not have realised just how much agreement there was.

As mentioned above, the term “biodiversity” was not well understood and “soil health” was another term which has multiple meanings even though there was an overwhelming consensus that good soil health was a farming imperative. There is an opportunity to build a common understanding for key terminology used in policies and strategies so that the intended meaning is applied consistently.

What is the vision for hill country success?

A challenge for building a resilient hill country future is identifying a common vision for success. As part of our interview work, we asked all participants what they thought the best outcome for the hill country would be – that is to say, what would be their hill country “utopia”? There was a considerable amount of consensus among the 298 interview participants with many talking about the need for a more integrated approach to hill country farming with excellent environmental and social outcomes running alongside a good profitable business model. Interviewees view of a bright future included thriving rural communities, with lots of local collaboration and strong farmer networks for learning and sharing information. Many interviewees saw the potential in moving from volume to value and targeting high value markets. We have consolidated all of this information into a single concept vision statement that reads:

“A multi-profitable approach to hill country farming that is financially secure and profitable, whilst also building social, natural, and human capital”.

This concept vision will be tested and refined in the next stage of our work.

What are the steps to take us towards this vision?

After asking interviewees about their vision for hill country success, we asked them how they thought the sector should get there. Although we had a lot of consensus for the vision, opinions on the steps to achieve that were much more varied. Some of the options put forward were:

- Increasing the understanding between farmers and other stakeholders working in the hill country sector- especially the people working on policy and regulation.
- Showcasing the good work that is already happening in the hill country sector.
- Finding and supporting community leaders who are already demonstrating farming best-practice.
- Encouraging farmer-farmer learning and farmer led networks.
- Creating a planning system that integrates all of the plans that operate at different scales –including farm environment plans, catchment scale plans and regional plans.

Where to next?

There is still much work to do in analysing the large library of information we have collected through the interview process. We will be diving deeper into the information to understand stakeholders' perspectives on topics such as the impacts of policy change, environmental planning, mental health, farm succession, and regenerative agriculture.

We aim to provide recommendations for action to support the future of hill country farming and will write up our findings into a series short reports to share with our stakeholders.

A word of thanks

The research team knew that through this work, some interesting insights and information would be uncovered to help inform and plan what a thriving hill country future might look like. The people we met along the way, however, gave us deeper insights about how they celebrate their rich history, deal with the present and plan for their futures. The generosity and the openness of the interviewees has enabled us to create a very substantial and important dataset in relation to the hill country and their communities. We are grateful for the opportunity to collect and unpack this information, and to everyone that has been a part of this interview process we say a huge thank you.

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