

Agribusiness: Dairy will do the right thing

An industry leader says the sector is showing it is proactive in sustainability and caring for the environment



Dairy NZ chief executive Tim Mackle.

New Zealand dairying will weather the financial storm and come out stronger, says Tim Mackle, chief executive for industry organisation, DairyNZ.

"Dairy farmers have had a tough couple of years financially but, despite that they continue to do the right thing by our people, animals and environment," he says.

A total of \$1 billion has been invested over the past five years on environmental initiatives. -- such as planting waterways, better effluent management and stock exclusion.

Mackle says the industry's Sustainable Dairying: Water Accord is one way the industry is showing its progress in caring for the environment and sustainability of land.

The accord's "two years on" report shows 96 per cent of the waterways on New Zealand dairy farms are now excluded from dairy cattle. Ninety nine per cent of stock crossing points on dairy farms also now have bridges or culverts.

"We are really proud of the way farmers have been proactive on farms and got out and fenced their waterways to keep stock out," says Mackle. "The work going on on-farm into environmental initiatives is a bit of an untold story."

He says dairy farmers, like everyone, want their water to be as clean as possible, and greater knowledge, science and expertise is helping shift farm management practices to improve water quality for future generations.

"We've made huge strides and will continue to work on reducing our environmental impact, so we have sustainable farm businesses nationwide."

Mackle says recent coverage of the Havelock North water contamination has raised questions over whether agriculture intensification had a role to play.

He says any water issue is very complex and the true source will hopefully be identified. However, he's disappointed that dairying is often quickly raised as a potential source, without evidence to support it.

"We are watching the Havelock North situation closely -- but there is no intensive dairying in the area of contamination and we don't currently believe dairy farms have had a role to play."

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Tim Mackle

The Havelock North situation does highlight why dairy farmers are putting so much effort into looking after their land -- what is applied to it and managing cow effluent.

"We know waterways are a big issue for us and all New Zealanders," says Mackle. "Farmers understand that the public are interested in farming practices, and information and understanding is the key to having the licence to farm into the future."

Looking after their animals is also a priority for dairy farmers at this time of year, with calves on the ground and breeding season underway.

Mackle says animal welfare will always be a priority for dairy farmers -- healthy cows produce healthy calves, which is so important to the future herd.

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"New animal welfare rules are being introduced to ensure farmers all meet the same high standards of care so vital for our cows and our reputation."

Mackle says farmers are under a lot of income and debt pressures during calving, which is well known as one of the toughest times of the year. He is pleased to see Fonterra increasing its forward milk price to \$4.75 per kg MS, and farmers with shares and receiving a 50c dividend should, on average, will be breaking even by the end of the season.

"There's certainly still room for the milk price to improve, but small signs are there that it's on its way back up," says Mackle. "Even when we get there, it's important we don't lose sight of the learnings of the past three years -- cost control and better pasture utilisation."

As farmers head into spring, DairyNZ is focusing on its Tactics campaign and the 'pasture first' approach.

Research shows pasture drives more than 85 per cent of profit for most farms at \$7 per kg MS milk price, and 98 per cent at a \$4 milk price. "We have got to make the most of this important food source, particularly this spring as farmers strive to make a profit," says Mackle.

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