



Address to the Catchment Communities Aotearoa National Forum

16 June 2026

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to speak today. Catchment groups have to be at the centre of how we move forward in tackling the many environmental challenges that exist outside of city boundaries. I say that as a rural landowner who doesn't have a local catchment group to belong to. I know I can't make progress if my neighbours don't. We all like to think we're good neighbours. But we're not living in the Middle Ages. Properties are changing hands all the time. Governments are fast-tracking everything from subdivisions to coal mines. You never know who is going to tell you what plans someone has for your land or what may crop up on your boundary.

We're a typical, developed society – and a very urbanised one at that, 84% of Kiwis live in towns or cities. They often have strong views about what happens in the country without much of a clue about how any of it works. We can't complain about that. It's the way things are – and given that rural New Zealand relies on governments and cities for a vast range of services, from fuel to biosecurity to trade policy to research, we won't get far if we pretend that we in rural New Zealand should be left to decide what happens without interference.

But rural New Zealand needs to be organised to ensure that when the rest of the community starts worrying about water quality, biodiversity or erosion, it can prove that it is engaged, informed and up for whatever needs to be done. Lobby groups can't do that – they're seen to be defending their corner. Catchment groups can.

Since the mid-2010s we've had a series of policy upheavals from central government. Since 2011, we have had four separate National Policy Statements on freshwater. These have spawned a plethora of regional plan changes and court cases. Few have actually been implemented before the national goalposts have been shifted. Further changes are on the cards with an entirely new resource management framework based on stronger national direction – which could well mean more extreme pendulum swings.

Farming and working on the land, like environmental action, requires a long-term perspective that goes beyond election cycles. It is only action on the ground that will make a difference – I believe catchment groups are the best way of catalysing that. Whether they will be able to, depends on whether governments are prepared to acknowledge their own limitations.

What role do catchment groups play in the 'new environment'?

Which brings me to the question you've asked me to address: What role do catchment groups play in the "new environment"? That phrase – the 'new environment' – is doing a lot of work. In this context, it really means what comes next in a post-Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) system that is still taking shape but will define how environmental management works for decades to come.

Resource Management Act Reform

Land and water managers, regional councils, farmers, iwi and environmental managers remain in something of a vacuum with submissions now closed on the Natural Environment and Planning Bills and the Environment Select Committee examining the draft bills. Until the

Natural Environment Act is passed and subsequent national policy direction is promulgated, the 'new environment' is going to remain a bit murky. That could take several months.

As an advisor to the committee, I have followed and reviewed the submissions made on the Bills and have provided my own independent advice to the Environment Select Committee. At this point, I am restricted in what I can say about the advice that has been given to the Committee. What I can point to, and this is clear from the draft legislation, is that there will be much greater reliance placed on top-down direction from central government. Much of the detail that will govern our lives and our landscapes is being delegated to standardised national policy direction. And while national direction is useful and necessary, it has the potential to be very prescriptive if we cannot adapt it to catchment contexts.

We know that many landowners and farmers have their gripes with the current RMA. It is not a perfect system, no system is. Politicians of all colours have been happy to sympathise and repeat horror anecdotes about the implementation of regional council policies. Yet, we also have to remember that it was central government that required them to implement many of them. Councils faced an array of rapidly changing national policy statements, often with inadequate resourcing. Local Government Reform, in addition to RMA reform, adds complexity and uncertainty for catchment communities.

As introduced, the Bills to replace the RMA do not provide a clear role for catchment groups. I believe this is a real missed opportunity to formalise integrated catchment planning, maximise local knowledge and enable collective action within the legislation. I can't speculate on what changes may be recommended by the Select Committee. But if you're interested in my detailed advice to the Committee, this will be available once the Committee has completed its deliberations and reported back to the House.

Where we are today?

So where does the current uncertainty leave catchment groups?

You will have heard me say before that the way we use the land will need to change if some environmental trends are to be headed off. Based on 2020 bottom lines, in roughly one third of catchments, environmental bottom lines for nitrogen, phosphorous or sediment are being exceeded beyond levels that can be mitigated using current management techniques.¹ In other words, even if we did everything we practically can, we'd still be over the limit.

For example, in the Selwyn catchment in Canterbury, the environmental bottom line for nitrogen is currently being exceeded. And at the bottom of this catchment sits Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere. Over the last 15 years or so, the lake's water quality has been characterised as 'very poor' with super trophic conditions around six and seven on the Trophic Level Index. This represents the most advanced state of eutrophication, with excessive nutrient levels causing massive, frequent algal blooms. Poor water quality is not the only issue in the catchment. The Selwyn River, which flows into the lake, frequently experiences low water levels, with large stretches of the river drying up entirely for much of the year. This turns the riverbed into a 'disappearing river' and is in part driven by high demand for water abstraction.

During recent submissions on the Planning and Natural Environment Bills, I have heard from the rural sector that in some overallocated catchments, farmers have disengaged from progressing environmental improvements because they don't seem feasible. As the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, I won't be advocating for weaker environmental regulation, but the way forward must indeed be pragmatic and practicable.

Before I delve into how we make progress, let's review a few numbers that paint a picture about catchment groups in New Zealand.

¹ McDowell, R. W., Monaghan, R. M., Smith, C., Manderson, A., Basher, L., Burger, D. F., Depree, C., 2021. Quantifying contaminant losses to water from pastoral land uses in New Zealand III. What could be achieved by 2035? *New Zealand Journal of Agricultural Research*, 64(3), 390–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00288233.2020.1844763>

What do we know about catchment groups in New Zealand?

There's a survey of rural decision-makers that has been conducted by Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research – now part of the Bioeconomy Science Institute – every two years since 2013. The last edition was conducted in 2025. If you've never heard of it, I encourage you to visit the survey and take a look at some of the results.² It is one of the longest running farmer surveys in the world. While not exhaustive, it gives a good picture of what is going on in the rural sector. We inserted a few questions about catchment groups into the most recent edition that I thought might be of interest to this audience.

In 2025, 40% of the respondents who were aware of catchment groups in their catchment actively participated in one.

Participation in catchment groups is dynamic. It varies strongly by region, with some regions like Northland (22%) and Auckland (16%) on the low end of participation; and Canterbury (51%) and Otago (52%) at the high end.

The composition of catchment groups is not static. People join and leave again for various reasons. Respondents that had joined catchment groups and left again were, on average, only involved for 2.8 years. Respondents that were still members of catchment groups at the time of the survey, have a better track record with average participation length of 5.9 years.

In the survey we asked what percentage of landowners in a catchment should participate in a catchment group for it to be effective? Opinion varied a lot, but the average answer sat around 70%. So, 70% of landowners in a catchment should be active members of the catchment group for this group to be effective in terms of environmental progress at the catchment scale. It is clear from the regional numbers, that nowhere in New Zealand is there currently a participation rate of 70%.

Despite catchment groups becoming more prominent, environmental action on the ground remains a low priority for the cross section of farmers and landowners who responded to the survey. The survey asked commercial respondents to indicate the extent to which they had focused on various managerial on-farm activities over the past two years and the extent to which they anticipated focusing on those same activities the next two years.³

For 18% of all respondents, improving the health of waterways had been a major focus over the past two years. And 18% also indicated it would be a major focus for the next two years as well. That means improving water quality isn't a major focus for 82% of respondents.

If we look at green house gas (GHG) emissions, the picture is even bleaker: of those commercial landowners who replied, just 6% of respondents said reducing GHG emissions had been a major focus over the past two years, while 7% said it would be a major focus over the next two years. That means that for 94% of all respondents, reducing GHG emissions has not been a major focus over the past two years, and won't be going forward.

So, if catchment groups are to play a more prominent role in addressing environmental issues at the catchment scale, these numbers are not that auspicious. How do we actually make progress?

How do we make progress?

In 2024, I published a report entitled, *Going with the grain: Changing land use to fit a changing landscape*.⁴ That report tried to outline a way to tackle some of these challenges, as well as address conflicting interests that cannot be resolved from a purely environmental point of view.

² <https://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/discover-our-research/environment/sustainable-society-and-policy/survey-of-rural-decision-makers> and www.landcareresearch.co.nz/discover-our-research/environment/sustainable-society-and-policy/survey-of-rural-decision-makers

³ Commercial respondents included sheep and beef farmers, dairy farmers, other livestock farmers, arable farmers, horticulturalists and foresters.

⁴ See <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/going-with-the-grain-changing-land-uses-to-fit-a-changing-landscape>

Catchment groups

One of the central tenets of that report is that **some** – not all – decision-making should be devolved closer to the people who are having to make significant management changes or even change land use. That could be through catchment groups (or irrigation companies, where they are present). Central and regional levels of government still have to agree on **what** the desired environmental goals and outcomes are – but **how** those are met should be led and driven by landowners, local communities and mana whenua. I believe it is important that participation in catchment groups is broad. While they will most likely be driven by farmers, other community members in the catchment have an impact on the natural environment and are affected by it.

Our problem is that we are still trying to manage landscape and catchment-wide problems through the lens of the responsibilities of individual landowners. I think that is doomed to failure.

Of course, individuals are important. But to shift the dial, we need to focus on catchment-scale planning rather than individual farm-scale actions, to address environmental concerns across property boundaries. There might well be better ‘bang for buck’ in focusing on hotspots – for example, retiring some of the leakiest or most erosion prone farms in a catchment, rather than have everyone do the same thing because a rule says so. Catchment groups offer a forum in which to have these difficult conversations.

To be very clear, I am not advocating for catchment groups to become regulators within their catchments, but for the legislation to enable collective action and planning at the catchment scale. For that to work, catchment groups need good environmental data and steady funding to make environmental progress on the ground. I’ll take these in turn.

Environmental data

I have had lots to say about environmental data over the course of my tenure.

Environmental data is fragmented, often lacking geographical coverage and inconsistent time series. Much environmental data is also inaccessible or held disparately across central and local government.

We need to invest in the ability to easily and quickly draw together existing information from these disparate sources so that it can be used to support robust decision-making at every scale, including at a catchment level. This data should be easily accessible and affordable. Landowners and catchment groups should be able to interrogate multiple data sets for a specific geolocation.

The quid pro quo for catchment groups (and individual farmers) is that in return, you must be prepared to share the details of your practices and resource use, provided there are appropriate protocols in place to protect privacy, etc, so that regional councils and central government can be as effective in their plan and rulemaking.

Catchment groups hold a lot of environmental data that can help complement the regional councils’ environmental monitoring at catchment scale.

In this year’s Budget, the government committed \$294 million over four years to support the roll-out of the Government’s new planning and environmental management system that replaces the RMA. Of that sum, it has set aside \$41 million to invest in the first phase of digital improvements to support the new planning system. While specific details are not yet public, the inclusion of work on standards and core system architecture are a welcome focus.

Addressing these fundamental building blocks is critical to enabling the integration of environmental data from different sources and ensuring it is used to its fullest potential. Equally, the additional proposed investment in the underlying data, such as the New Zealand Flood Map, is sorely needed. However, these investments are only an initial downpayment on what is ultimately necessary. A long-term plan and ongoing investment are required to truly transform New Zealand’s environmental information system.

I will have more to say about federating environmental data and the technology needs of such an approach in a report due to be released later next month. I suspect it will be of great interest to catchment groups.

Funding

Catchment groups also need steady funding. Many catchment groups currently rely on ad hoc funding, like the now disestablished Jobs for Nature fund, time-limited government grants or specific pots of money from local authorities. This creates uncertainty for catchment groups.

I note that in Budget 2026, the government has committed \$40.5 million over four years to back farmer-led catchment groups. This is roughly \$10 million a year over those four years and will help catchment groups keep the lights on. It is unclear how this money is going to be distributed, and if it is going directly to different groups or whether it will also fund MPI's on-farm support and regional councils, both of which support catchment groups.

We remain in a funding constrained environment, and I accept that there is no magic money tree. If taxpayers won't pay, who will? Because if no one is prepared to accept responsibility for environmental restoration and – where needed – land use change, then it is the environment that will pay.

In *Going with the Grain*, I have also reviewed some additional financial tools that go beyond simply socialising the costs. I encourage you to think about these with an open mind. In saying that, I am aware that Federated Farmers has rejected the idea of any tax or levy on water use, or on pollutants, such as nitrogen.⁵

There has been lots of excitement about voluntary nature and carbon markets or biodiversity credits to fund environmental projects. The government has recently announced an assurance role for both international and domestic voluntary nature and carbon schemes. I am sceptical about biodiversity credits. I don't see the voluntary nature market becoming a major source of funding for environmental restoration. But when added to the voluntary carbon market, there is some potential to raise money for establishing new native forests.

Closing

I believe that catchment groups –armed with good environmental information and secure, predictable funding – can genuinely shift the dial on environmental outcomes. Many of you came together voluntarily in response to regulatory pressure. The context may have shifted, but it will likely shift again, and environmental pressures won't just go away because some may wish to ignore them. Participation in catchment groups is uneven, engagement is dynamic and the data shows that environmental priorities are not yet front of mind for everyone. That is the reality we have to work with.

The more things we put off the table, the less likely it is that sustainable solutions will be implemented, leading to yet another round of crisis regulating. There is no shortcut here. If we want durable, workable solutions, they have to be built collectively at the catchment level, not left to individual farms acting in isolation or a centralised one-size-fits-all option.

I leave you with some questions to ponder as you wrap up the day.

- As catchment group leaders you are already working across property boundaries and with your neighbours to address environmental issues beyond the individual farm gate. How do you bring the 'middle' along –not just the already committed, but those who are hesitant, constrained or disengaged?
- As farmer-led catchment groups mature, how do you engage with your wider community, your townships and mana whenua? I am a firm believer that participation in catchment groups should be broad to guarantee maximum buy-in from the bottom-up and avoid 'us versus them' rhetoric.
- What do you do about free riders who benefit from collective effort without contributing?
- Finally, who is going to pay and how? Is it fair to socialise the cost of environmental

⁵ See paragraphs 15.9–15.26 of the Federated Farmers Submission to the Natural Environment Bill and Planning Bill. <https://www.fedfarm.org.nz/Web/Policy/Submission/2026/February/Submission-on-the-NEB-Bill-and-Planning-Bill.aspx>

restoration? What other options exist? In some of my other work, I've suggested reforming the ETS as a source of revenue. You can read all about that in some of my previous reports.⁶ This could tie into the incentives to come up with a catchment plan. Alternatively, catchment groups could be empowered to recommend targeted rates to fund catchment action plans. These rates would be levied on everyone – including those who do not want to participate in collective action, helping to address the free rider issue.

These are just some of the many issues to ponder. An honest attempt to make a measurable difference will be applauded. It won't be cheap. And, given what the survey I've mentioned tells us, it won't just happen because everyone's in violent agreement. As catchment leaders, you need to lead – even when it's difficult and not always popular!

⁶ See <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/alt-f-reset-examining-the-drivers-of-forestry-in-new-zealand/> and see <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/going-with-the-grain-changing-land-uses-to-fit-a-changing-landscape>