

Thriving Southland [00:00:04]:

Catchment Convos with Thriving Southland, your link to Southland catchment groups and their impactful projects. Each episode, we'll dive into grassroot effort by local farmers and communities that are driving change and sustainability in our regions. Listen in for inspiring stories and insight. Real people, real change, the Southland way.

Rachael Halder [00:00:26]:

Welcome to Catchment Convos. I'm your host, Rachael Halder, Senior Catchment Coordinator for Thriving Southland. And joining me on today's episode is Thriving Southland's project lead, Richard Kyte and senior economist, Bill Kaye-Blake from the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research.

Rachael Halder [00:00:43]:

Bill is a seasoned economist with over 25 years experience. Bill has a knack for cutting through complexity and getting to the heart of challenges and opportunities in farming regulation. He spent his career working closely with rural communities, helping them navigate economic shifts and policy changes with practical, down to earth strategy. Bill's insights are grounded in real world experience, making him the perfect guide for today's discussion on how regulation impacts the farming sector and what the future might hold. Okay. Bill, Richard, let's get into it.

Rachael Halder [00:01:17]:

Richard, you know, can you talk us through a little bit about how this initial idea and, you know, how was this project scoped initially?

Richard Kyte [00:01:24]:

Yep. Thanks, Rachael. So I suppose it all started out with, you know, we're hearing a lot from the farmers and from catchment groups about the problems with regulation and multiple regulation. And I think everybody's quite aware of that within the farming community about that. But we've decided we'd actually look at how that was actually affecting farmers and their ability to operate in that space. So we did an initial piece of work with a few catchment group farmers and brought them in to talk about the challenges and all the challenges they're facing. And out of that, we basically got an understanding of what their challenges were. But then, there was nothing that said, well, what could a possible pathway forward be? And that's where this work has come from.

Rachael Halder [00:02:07]:

And so, Bill, you are a part of that piece that first piece of information and research as well. Do you you know, can you share with us some of your thoughts from that first initial piece of work?

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:02:17]:

Yeah. Sure. So that first piece of work was a really interesting set of discussions with different farmers. And, I was looking back, it was actually about 3 years ago that we finished that up. So, you know, this is a piece of work that's been a long time putting together. What we heard was farmers said they're under a lot of pressure. And that's kinda typical of farming. There's always something going on.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:02:40]:

So there, there's weather, there's market prices, you know, there's problems on the farm, but then regulations just that added pressure on them. It's another layer of stuff that they've gotta deal with. But it's not just the fact that there is regulation. They said that it was really kind of two things going on. One was the uncertainty associated with the regulations that were coming along. So they couldn't say, this is what's going on, and I need to deal with it. Instead, it was, I don't know what's happening. I I know I've heard that something's going to happen or, you know, government signal that something's going to happen, but we don't have the rules now.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:03:14]:

So that was leading to a kind of delay in decisions on farm. I don't wanna make a decision now. I don't want to invest in a new something because I don't know what's going to happen. And then the second thing was just the number of regulations coming along. So it was these kind of different ministries all trying to do something, and they were just layering on top. So they didn't see kind of coordination coming out of central government and local government.

Instead, it was just boom, boom, boom, and they were going to have to deal with it at the farm level. So those were sort of the two bits of challenges that they were facing.

Rachael Halder [00:03:49]:

Yes. And, still very tropical at the moment. And I guess that's a big thing about what Thriving Southland does is, you know, we try and listen to those ground up messages and, you know, fill gaps. So, so as Richard, is that, you know, sort of what happened here that, you know, out of this piece of work, you know, we were listening to what the farmers on the ground were saying and, you know, is this how the project then got scoped into what it was for this report?

Richard Kyte [00:04:14]:

Yes. I suppose we looked at the first piece of work and and and the impact it was having. And then there was it's quite interesting. We sort of went out to farmer groups and we said, you know, would you be, you know, the the some of the catchment groups and said, would you be interested in actually talking about solutions looking at the way forward or what good good looks like? And at the time, I thought, oh, people had enough of regulation, and they won't be interested. But, actually, there's quite a a strong uptake, and people were actually wanting individuals wanting to have their say and their thoughts on what and how regulation and if regulation, should be brought in, what it should look like.

Rachael Halder [00:04:55]:

And what what were the next steps from here? Or how how did you build the status and information and get Bill involved again?

Richard Kyte [00:05:02]:

Yes. So so that was, you know, there was obviously the the voice was, yeah, we we'd like to have a voice. And, so we went back to Bill, and we said, Hey, Bill, can you, you you know, could you come in here again? Whole new group of farmers and and quite a diverse range of farmers, age, stage, etcetera, and actually work through, you know, we, you know, what good would look like for them. And that's where Bill came back into the project.

Rachael Halder [00:05:29]:

Oh, okay. Well, so Bill, so you got this, the set of instructions that was, you know, we we want to investigate further. We want to look into a little bit more. What, you know, what was the next steps and and what was the building process to try and extract some of this knowledge and information out of those farmers?

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:05:45]:

Yes. We got a really clear steer that there were kind of two things going on. What's what does good look like? You know, what would good look like from a farmer perspective? And then also, how can Thriving Southland help with that? So we worked with Thriving Southland to set up three different workshops in three catchments. So we had these diversity of people involved in different places, different land use, farming type, size, age, etcetera. And we ran through this workshop, and there were three parts to the workshops that we held. And so in the first part, we just had people talk about good regulation and bad regulation, essentially. So what is an example of regulation that works really well and does a good job, does something useful, and what are some bad examples of regulation? And what was really great about that is, obviously, people can talk about bad regulation. Everybody can point to, you know, oh, that guy's really messed up.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:06:41]:

But there are really good stories about stuff that works. So just as an example, regulations for chemical storage on farm, that was one of the things that people pointed to as a regulation that has a useful purpose, is well done, farmers know what to do, and so they have sheds that have signage and all the rest of that. So that's an example of regulation that has a good purpose and does well, and farmers know what to do about it. Then, in the workshops, we went from that to talking about, okay, as regulation is developed, how would you know that your voice is being heard? One of the topics of discussion in the previous workshops was about consultation. Farmers feel like they've been part of consultation, but it hasn't actually affected regulation. So they can't see that they are affecting the rules that come out. So we talked about, well, how would you how would you know that you're being heard? How would you know that your voice is being heard? And then the final part of the workshops was about practical actions. So what can farmers do, regulators do, and thriving Southland do to help, have this voice or show that this voice is being heard, that the consultation is actually

having an impact, and that regulations are, I guess, appropriate in the way that farmers can see that some regulations work.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:07:59]:

So how do we, how do we get there with new regulations? Those were the three parts of the workshops.

Rachael Halder [00:08:04]:

And, you know, as the conversations went on, was everybody quite quick to join in? Did it take a little bit of, you know, getting everybody on the same page in each workshop? Was everybody, you know, on the same, you know, I guess, the same page with the same opinion, or was there, like, a huge variation within the room?

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:08:22]:

That's a great question. So first of all, everybody participated. We were really pleased that we got really good participation. You know, sometimes you go you set up these workshops, and there's a guy in the corner who doesn't say anything, but not that. You know, people were really happy to share their experiences and their opinions. So that was really great. But there's actually reasonable diversity of opinion in the farming community, certainly among the people that we talked with. I'll give an example.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:08:48]:

This came from the first set of workshops, but it was an interesting one about, firearms regulations. So we had one person talking about the difficulties of getting the the right firearms for pest control, and and they felt that the regulations were a bit too overbearing. And then somebody else said, oh, well, but all you have to do is go down and do this and fill out that and talk to that person, and then and then the problem's solved. So there was a real sort of, that particular one, there was a diversity of opinion about what was necessary and how kind of hard the hoops were to jump through, and we found that with some of the other regulations as well. So there was there was diversity of opinion, but people were were, you know, quite open in sharing them.

Rachael Halder [00:09:30]:

And so, Richard, you were you attended one of the workshops, didn't you? It was a bit of a, a bit of a by, a bystander.

Richard Kyte [00:09:36]:

I did.

Rachael Halder [00:09:36]:

Did you want to add anything to those sort of comments just around, you know, how how did the workshops go and how they feel?

Richard Kyte [00:09:43]:

I was, really impressed that, you know, people actually with a positive head on. And in a in a sense, they were dealing with what was seen as a negative topic for them, but with a positive, let's have a, you know, we we realized some regulation needs to be there. Others, we're not sure about whether it should be there at all. And but I suppose the whole, there's a really good buy in from the group. And, yes, to say the diversity of farmers and agents stage there also, led to that. But, yeah, everybody everybody wasn't on the same page, but everybody was looking, you know, for solutions.

Rachael Halder [00:10:18]:

You know, I was lucky enough to to be a part of another one of the workshops as well. And I think, if Bill and, his coworker hadn't been there to to facilitate, we could have stayed up all night, you know, trying to go into some of the detail. But it's a conversation that is big and it is really broad. So, you know, Bill, you obviously out of those workshops ended up with a whole heap of information and differing opinions. What was your sort of next step there?

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:10:45]:

So what I wanna do, I'll actually start with with an example. We spent a lot of time talking about wintering, winter grazing regulations, because that was something, you know, it's complex, it's big, people have a lot of, experience with it, and it's fairly recent. So that was a really great practical example to use in our discussions. And what was interesting

about it was the initial regulations came out or draft regulations, whatever they were, and it was clear they wouldn't work. And then farmers came out, and they said, well, this isn't going to work in Southland, so we need to do something about it. And kind of three things happened. 1, farmers got engaged. They they saw that there was an issue, and they started getting involved in trying to figure out how to deal with this.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:11:31]:

The second thing that happened is the industry groups also got involved. So the farmers in Southland weren't having to deal with this on their own. The industry groups, so Beef & Lamb and Dairy NZ, got involved as well to say, okay, well, what do we do about this? And then the third thing was the, regulators from central government listened. They they came to Southland. They attended some meetings. They listened to what was going on, and they made modifications to the regulations. So we saw all of these people coming together to figure out how to make things better and change the regulations so they they worked for Southland.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:12:06]:

And everybody was happy to kind of talk about that. And, yeah, I mean, there was a bit of sort of, that didn't work very well. You know, we we wanna grumble about it. But, also, there was a lot of kind of explaining, well, how did we react, and what changes did that make to the regulations? And I guess what we what we saw with with that is there were some practical things that people could do. So coming out of that, that was an example of the regulations didn't work, but we changed them. And so that then led to some discussions about what are some practical things that people can actually do. So, for example, sign up for, for your local newsletters or your Facebook pages or, you know, whatever kind of social media is going on. Signing up for those so you get the alerts.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:12:55]:

That was something that was useful in that case. People were alerted. There's a problem. We're going to have a meeting. You know, come on down. Paying attention to the farming press. So reading the articles that come along in your weekly newsletters or in your magazines or whatever, reading those and paying attention is another thing that farmers can do. And we kind of built on that to talk about, well, what are those practical things that people could do and who can do them?

Rachael Halder [00:13:19]:

Yeah, no, that's like, those are great examples and very topical for Southland. And, you know, we do have a lot of regulation in today's, you know, rural sector and farmers are trying hard to navigate that space. And I think we've got a long way to go. So this is probably just the start, I imagine. But, Richard, did you sort of wanna add any comments here at this stage?

Richard Kyte [00:13:41]:

Yeah. I think there's certainly a lot of useful information that came from the farmers. And I think one of the key points that I took away was that, you know, need for clarity area and regulation. And, you know, there was regulation out there and nobody had actually put it clearly what it meant. And so it's very hard to actually adopt it or say this isn't further for you kind of don't know where everything sits. But, and the other key point was really saying, actually, you know, the models of it the wrong way around because the regulators build the regulation and put it out there. Then, we tell them it's all wrong. Our voice needs to be right in at the start.

Richard Kyte [00:14:21]:

So instead of coming to Southland after the regulation doesn't fit, it's actually coming to South and talking with farmers and those, you know, the levy groups and federated farmers, you know, the people dealing in that space and say, you know, 1, why do we need this regulation? Okay. So if we need this regulation, what should it look like and how do we make it practical? So it's actually, you're getting engaged in the conversation, but also for the regulators to actually think, Oh, we actually need to talk with the people who this is designed to work with and is going to affect. And then, yeah, and build the regulation from that with you know, the the farmers and the levy groups, etcetera, in a in at the start.

Rachael Halder [00:15:01]:

Yeah. It's a good point, isn't it? That that whole working with the user and, you know, looking for the intended outcome. So I guess that's a a good sort of thought to have next as, you know, it's great that we've we've talked about it. It's great

we've had the conversation, and I think the farmers that were in the room for those workshops, you know, we almost opened a can of worms to start that conversation of really thinking about the good, the bad, and everything in between. So the report's out, which is fantastic, and it's been a really insightful read. But, you know, what what what next, Bill?

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:15:33]:

Yeah. That's a good question. So I think there's sort of three next bits. One of them is out of these discussions, it became clear that industry groups have a role to play in regulation. And it's not clear Well, it's nothing that that thriving Southland can do where that farmers can do themselves. But the industry group does have this role to play as kind of a go between. So first of all, informing farmers and finding proactive ways to get that information out there. But then also finding ways to work with regulators and make sure that that kind of farming voice is being heard early in the process, like like Richard was just saying.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:16:12]:

And that's clearly one of their roles, and that's one of the roles that they talk about. But I guess what we're hearing in the in the workshops is it'd be good to see more of that going on. The second thing was, as far as we're definitely putting it on regulators, getting out there and finding out what's going on and listening to people. Now, again, that's kinda nothing that we can have an impact on. But through the political process, making sure that that the ministries understand that they need to be reaching out sooner is important. So then that takes me to what what can we really do? You know, where where is our, you know, where can we have an impact? And thriving Southland through this whole process, through these projects, has been trying to understand its role. And I I don't wanna tell you what to do. I mean, and and I think Richard will will jump in here and talk about that.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:16:58]:

But what I took away from it is there's a kind of an information broker role to be played here. And it isn't that Thriving Southland is going to tell anybody what to do. But because you're working with farmers all the time, you're at the ground level, and you're working with people who are trying to work through problems in a collective way. Thriving Southland is in a great position to kind of broker those conversations, to set up the meetings, to set up the evening talks, to bring in experts, to kind of share that information so that farmers know what's going on. And also, the industry groups and the regulators are hearing directly from farmers. So I think, you know, thriving Southland, in addition to all the other good work you're doing, can help this process.

Rachael Halder [00:17:40]:

Yeah. Cool. It sounds like a big big role there, Bill. Richard, do you, do you care to comment on Bill's thoughts on that?

Richard Kyte [00:17:47]:

Yeah. I, I, I think the key thing about Thriving Southland is it actually sits in amongst in the catchment groups, supporting the catchment groups and and listening to the farmers and and actually trying to find the way forward for them with it when they come to us and say, can you help with this challenge and that challenge? So I think that that maybe from a thriving perspective, it's more about the voice being connected in with the the levy groups and the voice being, like, the federated farmers having the discussions with the catchment groups and understanding the actual actual on the ground sort of voice at a broader scale because as I say, we were surprised with, you know, the the range of views in the room, but, actually, the outcome is if everybody wants if there has to be regulation, it needs to be fit for purpose, and there needs to be a really strong why about it. And I suppose just finishing the you know, a lot of the feedback was that farmers can say, the markets and the why and the need. That's clearly explained why you have to head down that track. So it's those kinds of discussions. But at the on the ground level, I think sometimes they're missed out of it. And everybody can be a bit guilty of that. You know, everybody has the discussion at a higher level and moves on and nobody's actually had the discussion on the ground.

Richard Kyte [00:18:58]:

So that's probably, not my views. We thriving sets is in that bringing that discussion forward. Yeah.

Rachael Halder [00:19:06]:

Yep. Oh, and yeah. And, Bill, did you have any sort of final comments that you wanted to make about this report that's being done?

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:19:12]:

Yeah. The there's one bit that I've I've missed out, actually. And I'll stick it in here. But Richard made the point about clarity of regulation, and that really came through. The reason it's important is that farmers see themselves as problem solvers. And when the regulation has is clear, then they've got a clear problem to solve. So tell me what you're trying to achieve. Tell me what I need to do.

Bill Kaye-Blake [00:19:36]:

Tell me what the number is I need to achieve. And I'll figure out how to do that on my land, in my farming system, for the things that I'm trying to accomplish. And that that that's one of the great benefits of good regulation is it kind of unleashes the problem solving abilities of farmers.

Rachael Halder [00:19:53]:

That's such a cool way to finish. I like that. And I was actually just looking at, you know, some of the key points that you've identified in the report by farmers, and it is, you know, largely based around this whole problem solving and understanding the outcome that's wanting to be achieved. So with that, I think we have given our listeners a lovely snippet into this report and what it was all about. So thank you for your time, Bill, and thank you, Richard. For anyone who would like to read the full report, challenges and opportunities in the farming regulation space, you can find it on the Thriving Southland website under Resources. And we hope you enjoyed the show and, you know, feel free to share it around. We'd love to see you connect with us on social media and send us a message if you've got any questions.