

GETTING STARTED WITH FARM ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING

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In response to concerns about water quality and environmental sustainability there is now increased interest in the practices undertaken by farmers from outside of the farm gate. Driven from central government requirements, our local councils are demanding more information to help them meet demands of the wider community in managing water quality.

Many Regional Councils have chosen Farm Environment Plans as their preferred method of ensuring farmers meet their environmental obligations. These plans are increasingly becoming mandatory conditions associated with resource consent for particular land uses or practices (such as irrigation or effluent application).

This workshop is **not** intended to debate the merits of the FEP as a means of achieving the councils' outcome. Given that in many regions FEPs are already a requirement for many farmers this workshop serves as a basic introduction to Farm Environment Plans and through group discussion aims to identify other opportunities that these plans may offer for dairy farmers to obtain value from the process in excess of mere compliance.

Why are farm environment plans necessary and what are they?

- They are required under many of the Regional Council Plans as a tool to manage environmental risks associated with intensification of land use.
- Most plans aim to specifically minimise the loss of nitrate nitrogen to soil drainage water and to minimise any loss of sediment, phosphorus or nitrogen to surface waters. In addition they also ensure stock is excluded from waterways and wetlands including drains and races, that all native plants and animals and their habitats are protected that water application effectiveness is maximised and that all irrigation systems meet industry standards.
- A FEP serves to identify adverse environmental risks of farming activities and requires farmers to plan and record the strategies they will take to manage and mitigate the risks.

Notes:

- Although council templates for FEPs may differ, in general farmers must list their management and mitigation strategies under each of the following headings:
 - Irrigation (fresh water)
 - Application of nutrients (fertilisers)
 - Effluent Application
 - Stock exclusion from waterways
 - Offal pits
 - Farm rubbish.
- For dairy farms, DairyNZ has established a preferred industry template to be used as a Farm Environment Plan, this template is called a sustainable Milk Plan. DairyNZ are working in some catchments to develop these plans in a manner which allows integration of farm information from milk companies, fertiliser co operatives and council.

How do you get, or build a FEP?

In several catchments DairyNZ is working to confirm a nationwide standard template for dairy farmers that will meet the requirements of all regional councils and the milk companies. Because the regional processes are all at different stages and there are many players involved this optimistic objective is a work in progress! At present if you would like to initiate a Farm Environment Plan for your dairy property and you are outside of one of these priority catchments then it is likely that DairyNZ would direct you a professional they are currently involved with to support you in working through the SMP template. It may be possible to utilise the template for a SMP yourself in the future once the integration of all players is finalised. Speak to your DairyNZ team to check their progress.

If you can't wait for the SMP and you just want to get started then there are other templates already approved by council. Environment Canterbury specifically requires that you use one of their approved templates. A list of the providers and templates are available on the ECan website.

There is also a guide on the website that outlines the requirements of each plans. It is a good idea to employ a professional to help take you through your first plan, after that you might find it easy to update yourself as part of your seasonal management/budgeting process. Or you might decide to keep using a professional.

An example of the nutrient application, irrigation and effluent management section will be worked through during the session for a Canterbury case study example.

Things you need to have ready in order to undertake your FEP

- Farm Maps (various maps may be available via Fonterra if working through the SMP process).
- Knowledge of your current practices for irrigation, effluent application and nutrient management (these must all be recorded in your plan)
- Clear understanding of your budget for the coming year – not all options to manage environmental risks will require expenditure, but many will. It is fundamental that you DO NOT commit yourself to items in your FEP that you may not be able to afford.
- Copies of your consented activities on the farm (e.g. irrigation and effluent consents).
- Your nutrient budget (most up to date one you have for the current season).
- An idea of aspects you are looking to improve.
- An idea of how you would like to update your plan during the season (if necessary) and keep all records. Plan your approach to reporting at the same time as you put your plan together! Think about all of the tools you currently have at hand for recording. For example, Ravensdown customers can use their My Ravensdown tools (attend the session to hear other ideas from fellow farmers about how to manage recording and compliance in association with the plans).

Why is it important for farmers to find benefit in this FEP process?

- Quite simply, if farmers can't find value to their own business from utilising an FEP process it is simply another compliance cost to the business.
- It is important that since farmers must undertake these plans that we find and focus on other associated value outcomes. For example when GST returns were first required it seemed like there would be no benefit, but in fact it helped focus on budget and variance reporting and for many provided the necessary prompt to focus more regularly on the financial side of the business.

Notes:

- Attend the session to obtain case study examples of 2-3 sections of a Farm Environment Plan and to hear and contribute to ways we can ensure these plans have wider business relevance (for example record keeping options). Farm Environment Plans must be valuable for farmers too if they are to be a successful means of managing environmental risk and compliance associated with farming.