

## Farmers trialing new systems for profit and lake protection

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The land around Lake Taupo may soon be dotted with dairy goats and sheep, blueberries, grapes and willows for biofuel as farmers look for alternatives to current pastoral farming practices, the main source of nitrogen leaching into Lake Taupo.

The intensification of land use around Lake Taupo has increased the amounts of nutrients and sediments entering the lake, leading to a decline in water quality. Nitrogen is the main problem, with 92 per cent of the manageable nitrogen leaching from farms.

An environment court decision released this week ruled that nitrogen-leaching land use activities, particularly farming, needed to be controlled to restore Lake Taupo's water quality to 2001 levels.

In order to achieve this by the target date of 2080, at least 20 per cent of the manageable nitrogen will need to be permanently removed from the catchment and farmers will have to work within their consented nitrogen discharge allowance. This allowance is based on their 'best' - that is, their highest nitrogen-leaching year - between 2001 and 2005.

Environment Waikato's Jan Hania is responsible for implementing the new rules in Taupo.

"What's significant is that landowners can continue to farm at the intensity and scale they have in the past while also having flexibility to innovate and diversify their farm systems," Mr Hania said.

He said Environment Waikato staff were working closely with farmers to benchmark the nitrogen emissions of the 100 farms of more than 100 hectares, accounting for almost 90 per cent of the pastoral farmland in the Taupo catchment. The benchmarking of the remaining 100 farms of 20 to 100 hectares will follow, with the expectation that 95 per cent of farmland will be benchmarked over the next three years.

"We are making the consenting process as easy as possible for farmers and many are developing plans to operate successfully under the nitrogen cap - already we're seeing innovative practices and new ideas, including trials of alternative uses for the land like dairy goats, blueberries and biofuel crops," he says.

"This is a real opportunity to think outside the square to protect this iconic environment, with the added benefit of being able to apply for financial support from the public fund to trial innovation."

The \$81.5 million fund administered by the Lake Taupo Protection Trust will support the conversion of high nitrogen-leaching land uses into low nitrogen-leaching land uses, research, new technologies and education.

"Changes to farm practices do not require changes to the resource consent unless the changes impact on the nitrogen discharge allowance - good relationships between farmers and council staff will allow changes to a farmer's nitrogen management plan to be evaluated quickly and inexpensively in most cases.

The overall cost of benchmarking ranges from \$2500 to \$10,000 a farm. This is currently funded by the Lake Taupo Protection Trust.

Costs to the farmer for processing the initial resource consent are expected to be around \$600 to \$1700, depending on the complexity of the system or any changes proposed, with annual consent holder charges of approximately \$400.

"In addition, the Environment Court has ruled on a 25-year resource consent duration which will give farmers more certainty in planning for the future."

Farming interests were philosophically opposed to the need for consents to farm in rural areas on the grounds that the regulation cut across farmers' traditional rights and could be expensive to administer, but the Environment Court ruled otherwise.

The court found that farming, like many other businesses and industries in rural areas, required resource consents and could see no reason for farming to be treated differently from other activities.

While Environment Waikato and farmers worked together to draft a more permissive regime, the court found that the proposal would not achieve the required level of certainty to enable nitrogen trading, would make monitoring more difficult, could not effect appropriate cost recovery, was too complex and required considerable expert technical input.

The court found that a controlled activity for farming would be the most appropriate way to achieve the objective of protecting Lake Taupo.

### Useful links:

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