

An aerial photograph showing a calm body of water in the upper half, reflecting the sky. Below the water is a lush green field, possibly a pasture, with some brown patches. In the bottom left and right corners, there are dense clusters of trees and shrubs. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

# LIVING

# WATER

Dairy and freshwater thriving together  
Te puāwai ngātahi a te mahi pāmu me te wai māori

**Establishing a Partnership**  
**May 2022**



# Introduction

Fonterra and the Department of Conservation (DOC) formed a partnership in 2013 with the shared vision of:

*A sustainable dairy industry is part of healthy functioning ecosystems that together enrich the lives of all New Zealanders.*

DOC is the central government organisation responsible for conserving the natural heritage of New Zealand on behalf of and for the benefit of present and future New Zealanders.

Fonterra is a dairy co-operative owned by approximately 10,000 New Zealand farmer shareholders. It is one of New Zealand's largest companies and is the world's largest exporter of dairy products.

This was the first national partnership of its type in New Zealand - between a government conservation agency and a primary industry cooperative - and emerged at a time of growing national concern about the impact of dairy farming on water quality.

Forming a partnership with Fonterra was part of a wider shift by DOC to have more partnerships, particularly in the business community, which had not been a particular focus for DOC previously. The government of the day wanted to expand DOC's partnering role to access funding and support for conservation activities and increase influence and reach. DOC had a strategic priority for freshwater to 'restore 50 freshwater catchments from mountains to sea' but had not advanced delivery plans at the time the partnership formed.

A formal agreement between DOC and Fonterra to create a 10-year national partnership was signed in March 2013. Under the agreement, Fonterra and DOC were to work collaboratively and constructively through the delivery of the 'Community Investment in Water' programme to foster, implement and promote healthy functioning ecosystems and environmental sustainability<sup>1</sup>.

For Fonterra, water quality was a clear organisational priority and they were party to the establishment of the Dairying and Clean Streams Accord in 2003. They had been moving things forward for ten years in relation to farm management change to achieve water quality improvements in line with the Accord but realised that complementing this work with expertise in freshwater science and ecology would accelerate progress. Fonterra sought to partner with an organisation that held relevant expertise to complement their farm systems expertise. DOC as a national organisation with high public awareness was a natural choice of partner.

Additional aspects that were considered important for the success of the partnership were that both DOC and Fonterra have national reach along with a local place-based presence and delivery model; and bringing together DOC's biodiversity and freshwater expertise with Fonterra's sustainable dairying expertise and working side by side on the ground more could be achieved together.

This article provides an overview of the initial experiences of forming the partnership and how it evolved to address some of the challenges encountered by the two organisations working together.

Insight is drawn from in-depth interviews with 15 people from DOC and Fonterra who are currently or have previously been involved with the partnership, either in governance, relationships or delivery (operational, technical, farmer facing) roles. It also incorporates findings from a number of internal reports and reviews.



Department of  
Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*



## What happened in the early years?

Under the 'Community Investment in Water' Partnership Agreement (renamed Living Water) Fonterra committed \$20 million over 10 years (to 30 June 2023) for projects that DOC would manage. DOC's commitment would amount to approximately \$500,000 per year in staff time.

At a high level the Partnership Agreement outlined a vision, principles and understandings (individual commitments, mutual commitments, points of difference), objectives, governance arrangements, project selection criteria, funding arrangements, implementation methods and monitoring arrangements.

With an agreement signed and funding in place, expectations were high that Living Water could deliver results on the ground immediately. However, while senior staff from both organisations were committed to the programme, and had agreed a high-level partnership framework, there were no initial operational plans to guide delivery in the five selected catchments. The partnership managers in each organisation had to spend much of the first 18 months developing these plans, which resulted in budget underspends and slow progress on delivering partnership outcomes.

Without detailed plans of what work would take place in each catchment, it also wasn't possible to accurately identify the staff skills and experience and supporting resources required to ensure the success of the work programme. This led to shortfalls in knowledge and experience in freshwater ecology, behaviour change and relationship management. Nor was there any detailed plan for how staff from the organisations would work together in the partnership.



The substantial sums being invested by Fonterra (approximately \$2 million p/a) placed pressure on the partnership to demonstrate to shareholder farmers value for their investment. This meant that in the early years, at an operational level, the relationship between the two organisations more closely resembled a sponsorship arrangement, without a clear outline of what was being sponsored. The bulk of the work occurred on public conservation land, rather than a partnership with work on and off farm. This resulted in many Living Water projects extending existing DOC projects and activities in catchments, such as riparian planting and pest and predator control, rather than any new projects focused on the farming and freshwater challenge that spanned public and private land.

This was confusing for staff from both organisations who had been advised they would be working in a partnership, when on the ground there was little if any integration between teams. DOC staff primarily worked on projects on conservation land and Fonterra staff managed the work on farm. In addition, catchment-based staff were isolated from a national perspective without any guidance on how their work aligned with the high level vision and objectives. Integration between staff was further restricted by each organisation using different IT platforms and business processes, with simple things like sharing documents being surprisingly difficult.

Two years into the 10-year partnership it was agreed to review the programme and operation of the partnership.



## Changing course – setting a strategic direction

The review of the partnership in 2015 identified a number of the issues and challenges. A key finding of the review was that in the excitement to implement the partnership, the strategy development step had been missed out, and along with it the opportunity for the partners to co-design a robust programme strategy with mutually agreed goals and outcomes. Involving people with different expertise from each organisation (senior management, operations, technical, science) in strategic development of the programme would make a shared future and purpose more visible and compelling and achieve greater buy-in across both DOC and Fonterra.

A comprehensive strategy development process was implemented through 2016 that resulted in a new national strategic direction and operating model for the Living Water partnership and programme. Briefly summarised, the strategic intent for Living Water is to work in partnership to co-design and trial solutions to improve freshwater ecosystems and accelerate sustainable farming. The partnerships approach was applied both internally and externally. Internally Living Water wanted to ensure staff from both partners, DOC and Fonterra, were able to work together in a true partnership sharing knowledge and expertise, and engaging jointly in trials and catchment-based projects. Externally Living Water wanted to engage with mana whenua and local organisations in each of the catchments where trials were being held.

One example of the new approach is The Waimā Waitai Waiora partnership project that involves working with landowners to develop farm environment/water quality improvement plans for 230 farms, including sustainable land management practices and the principles of Mātauranga Māori. The goal is to reduce sediment flowing into the Kaipara Harbour. Living Water is one contributor to this project that brings together a range of partners under an innovative '[Mana Enhancing Agreement](#)'. This agreement places the principle of mana at the centre of a living relationship to manage the expectations, roles and responsibilities of the partners working together.





One of the first tasks following the setting of the new strategic direction in 2016 was the process of developing a monitoring and evaluation framework. Without monitoring and evaluation there would be no way of knowing what was or wasn't working and why. Measuring the organisational performance, in addition to the outcomes of trials, ensures the role of the organisation and partners is also understood, as the degree of participant buy-in can be critical to the success of a project.

The framework was developed over eight months in workshops with partners in each catchment. Living Water wanted to know what information would be most meaningful for partners as the programme of trials was rolled out. By being involved in the development of the framework, stakeholders gained understanding that Living Water was primarily focussed on trialling concepts rather than restoring catchments (though many of the trials, such as habitat restoration, have improved the catchments). Stakeholder participation ensured targets set and being measured would have value and meaning for all partners involved.

The newly appointed national programme manager, a role that sat within both organisations, had to balance driving the strategy forward with ensuring all staff were engaged and contributing towards it. With strong engagement and deliberate implementation of the new strategy, staff bought-in to the clarity and focus the strategy provided. Through 2017 a strategic planning process was used to involve Living Water teams and key stakeholders in developing implementation strategies and annual work programmes for the five Living Water catchments.

As part of the strategic refresh of the programme, a clear 'Telling our Story' strategy and narrative was also developed that addressed both internal and external communications requirements. The new narrative clearly stating the focus of the partnership, which is trialling and proving practical solutions to freshwater issues that can be used regionally and nationally, rather than restoring whole catchments.

The internal communications programme that was developed includes regular face-to-face time for Living Water teams, and an annual national DOC and Fonterra staff hui. A dedicated website and social media presence were also established that shares information with staff, the partner organisations and people interested in what Living Water is learning through its projects and trials.







## Living Water delivers on the national strategy

By the end of 2017 the partnership had an agreed national strategy and integrated operational plans in place for all five catchments. Five years on, by the end of the 2021 financial year, Living Water had achieved much of what it had set out to do.

Working across 35,000 hectares in five catchments, Living Water had engaged 72% of farmers in the catchments, with 48% of farmers implementing freshwater improvement activities on their own land that went beyond regulatory requirements. This was in addition to the work being undertaken on crown-owned and DOC-managed land within each catchment.

Of the 64 projects that were underway or completed, 10 were directly building iwi and hapū capacity and capability, and 12 had integrated Mātauranga Māori. In the Waikato, Ngāti Apakura have agreed to an annual work plan for lakes Ruatuna and Rotomānuka, which includes a cultural health index for monitoring the restoration of these freshwater ecosystems and a garden containing rongoā (medicinal plants) and plants suitable for cultural material harvesting. Similarly, eight hapū (Ngā Kaitiaki o Ngā Wai Māori) with mana whenua over the Upper Wairua catchment of the Kaipara Harbour have worked with Living Water to record in writing and video what Mātauranga Māori means to them. Collaboration with this hapū collective and NIWA on a four-year project to survey native fish habitat in the streams and creeks of the Hikurangi Repo/Swamp and catchment is gathering information to enable the restoration of tuna habitat.

Living Water had conducted 36 trials of solutions to improve freshwater quality and 9 proven solutions were already being used by other organisations. This includes on-farm tools for nutrient and sediment management, such as floating wetlands and sediment detention bunds, through to catchment scale tools for prioritising where to focus efforts. In addition a range of social tools aimed at bringing people together and making decision collectively have been trialled.

Living Water also formed partnerships with over 52 other groups and organisations and partnered on projects funded to continue beyond the end of the formal partnership, such as the Manga-o-tama Ōhaupō Peat Lakes to Waipā River Connection project that brings together Iwi partners, local farmers and stakeholders including Waipā District Council, Waikato Regional Council, NZ Landcare Trust and the Manga-o-tama Stream and Wetland Restoration Trust (MSWRT) to improve water quality and restore habitat for native biodiversity.

As many of the projects and trials were reaching completion and attention was turning to sharing the results and learning from the partnership's work, an independent communications survey of key stakeholders was commissioned to determine what stakeholders wanted to know about Living Water's work.

The research revealed people wanted regular updates on trials even if they haven't finished, which isn't the traditional method of working for scientists, who prefer to complete research and get it peer reviewed before sharing their findings. Another fascinating insight was that people wanted to know about trial set-backs and failures as much as they wanted to know what was successful.

Understanding the information requirements of stakeholders helped focus communication activities and ensured people received the right information at the right time and through the right medium.

Informed by the stakeholder communications research, Living Water developed an integrated communications strategy. Key messages were re-aligned with high-level objectives and assigned to every project and trial to create a comprehensive messaging matrix that could be applied to all Living Water's distinct audiences.

In 2021, the Living Water website was revised to identify completed trials and tools ready to use, and a media releasing programme focused on rural publications commenced. By the end of the 2021 financial year, social media followers had quadrupled since 2019..

Engaging with stakeholders is critical because when the partnership ends in 2023 some of the work started by Living Water will want to be taken forward by partners and stakeholders. Ensuring a successful handover of lessons is an increasingly important focus for both DOC and Fonterra, stakeholders and the wider community concerned about improving the quality of freshwater in New Zealand. The successful transfer of everything that's been learnt will be the enduring legacy of the Living Water partnership.



# Establishing a partnership: Key lessons from Living Water

## Step 1: Determine if a partnership is the right approach to achieve your strategic priorities and which are the right organisation/s to partner with

- Clearly understand what each partner wants to achieve and why before entering into the partnership.
- Be very clear about how working in partnership will help your organisation achieve its strategic priorities and ensure key leaders and staff in your organisation understand this. This might drive new ways of working, requiring a shift of organisational culture and mental models that can take time.
- Understand the difference between a partnership and sponsorship. Partnerships require a large investment in time to ensure staff and organisations are aligned, and significant ongoing leader and staff time and energy to implement. If working in partnership won't help achieve your strategic priorities, a sponsorship might be a better opportunity and fit.
- If, by creating a new partnership, you are introducing new strategic priorities, this needs to be endorsed by each organisation and socialised within each organisation to ensure buy-in.
- Being clear about the strategic fit within each organisation provides opportunities to explore the issue, to start conversations, establish a shared purpose and find beneficial solutions.
- Use best practice partnership tools/resources to follow a deliberate process for deciding if a partnership is needed and to set up the partnership



## Step 2: Take time to understand each organisation's values and operating environment



- Be clear about values; where do they differ and where do they align. What shared values will be applied to the partnership?
- Understand the drivers, pressures and context each partner works under which vary considerably from the private sector to the governmental and not-for-profit sectors.
- Understand size and style differences, and how each partner organisation operates. For example are the organisations' structures bureaucratic or entrepreneurial; what's the speed of decision making; the culture; and available resources / skills.



### Step 3: Develop a shared strategy

- Involve all relevant roles (technical, delivery, management) and parts of the partner organisations, especially those who will be responsible for delivery.
- Take the time to work through the partnership steps together; the shared vision, strategy, delivery model (capacity and capability) and work programme.
- Have a graduated budget profile and don't expect significant spend in the first year or two – allow time for work programme scoping and development, evidence/baseline information gathering and stakeholder relationship development.
- Be optimistic and brave, focus on the benefits of the partnership and have a compelling story about why it is needed.
- Understand that partnerships / relationships take time to establish, which will impact on the timing of implementation and results.



### Step 4: Develop a shared delivery model and programme of work



- A delivery/operating model should be developed alongside your strategy to ensure the right capability, skills and resourcing needs are identified and committed to deliver on objectives.
- Consider the length of the partnership and different stages that projects move through, such as start-up, strategy development, relationship development, operational delivery, sustain/transition/ wind down). Different stages will require different operating approaches, skills and resourcing. Remain agile as things will change over the life of the partnership.
- Be clear about funding arrangements, time and people resources required to realise your shared objectives and ensure commitments are in place.
- Consider the operating environment each organisation is working in, such as reporting timeframes and the 3-year political cycle for government organisations.
- Understand what benefits / skill sets each partner has so you can build on each other's strengths. Allow time for staff from both organisations to get to know one another and the way they work.
- Partnerships and work programmes evolve over time, and require reviewing continuously to ensure the approach is fit for purpose.



## Step 5: Develop purposeful communications for both internal and external audiences

- Being clear about why you are in partnership and how this helps achieve strategic priorities enables effective internal and external communications to be developed.
- Develop a communications strategy with objectives (based upon the partnership objectives) with a clear narrative or positioning statement and key messages all integrated.
- Ensure internal audiences are kept well-informed, accept the messaging and buy into the narrative to be used with external audiences before sharing it.
- Never assume you know what external stakeholders want to hear about your partnership. Different stakeholders have varying communication needs and requirements. Regularly consulting with stakeholders provides an opportunity to build engagement, refine messaging and ensure information reaches the right audience at the right time and in the right method.
- Ensuring your messaging reaches the right audience requires a planned communications programme consistently implemented across multiple preferred channels.
- The communication needs of target audiences change over time. It's important to regularly review the impact of communication activities to ensure they deliver the desired outcome.





## Related Living Water stories

[Governance and Operating Model](#)

[Monitoring and Evaluation Framework](#)

[How we selected the Living Water catchments](#)

[Identifying Initial Information Needs](#)

[Using SPRINT approach for strategic planning](#)

[Telling our Story and Championing Change](#)

### Partnership Resources

There are excellent resources available to support establishing partnerships using robust best practice approaches.

[Partnerships Brokers Association](#)

[The Partnering Initiative](#)

[Effective Partnering to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

[DOC Partnerships Work Delivery System for Step Change Growth Projects](#)



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