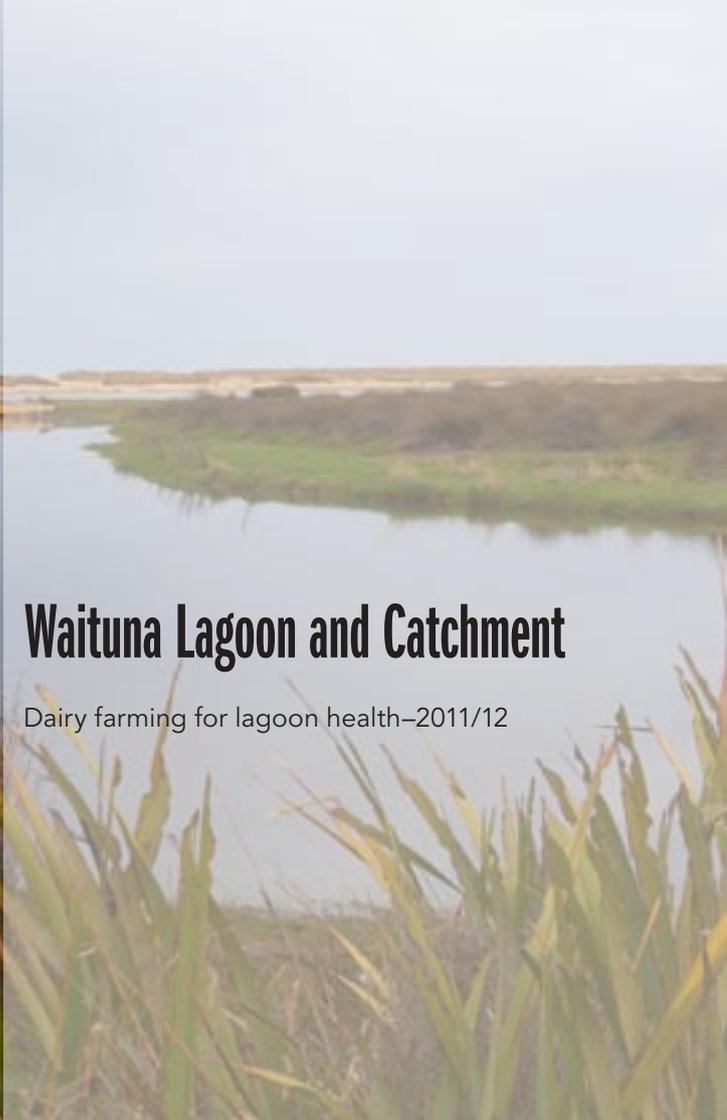




Waituna Lagoon and Catchment

Dairy farming for lagoon health—2011/12



This catchment Action Plan was produced by dairy farmers in the Waituna Lagoon catchment with the support of DairyNZ. We are faced with the challenge of ensuring a sustainable future for the Waituna Lagoon and our community. As local dairy farmers we are proud of the initiatives we are taking to secure this future.

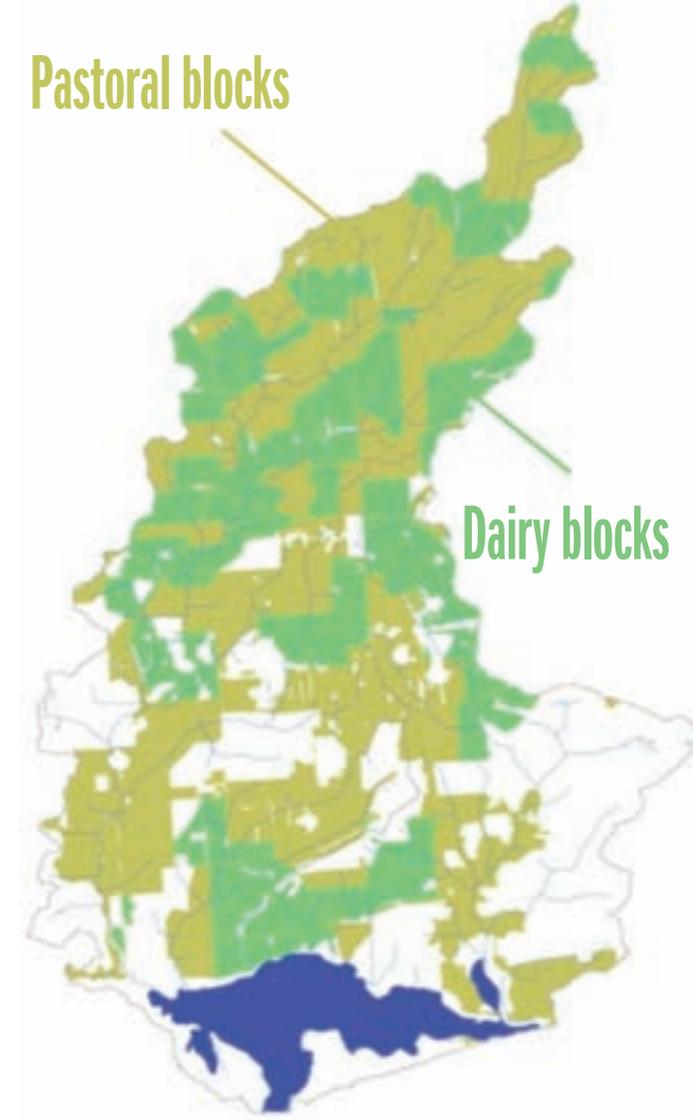


Our lagoon, our values and our future

Waituna Lagoon is a large brackish coastal lagoon that supports unique biodiversity and is internationally recognised for its environmental value. As dairy farmers in the local community we value the health of the lagoon and are committed to securing its long-term future. As a group we farm about 35% of the lagoon's catchment, with the remainder farmed by other pastoral farmers or in native vegetation.

We are proud Southland farmers. Our businesses have become important contributors to local income, employment and wellbeing. We take pride in our role as stewards of the land and recognise that we have an important role to play in maintaining the lagoon's health. We share these values and responsibilities with other farmers, local iwi and the wider Southland community.

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Pastoral blocks

Dairy blocks



The challenge

Dairy farming is a tough business, particularly in Southland where the climatic conditions can be challenging. Over the decades we have met these challenges by building extensive drainage networks to support pastoral land use in our lowland catchments like Waituna. Like all farmers, managing the impacts of nutrient loss on local water quality is something we need to keep on top of. Managing stock through our cold and wet winters is an important consideration.

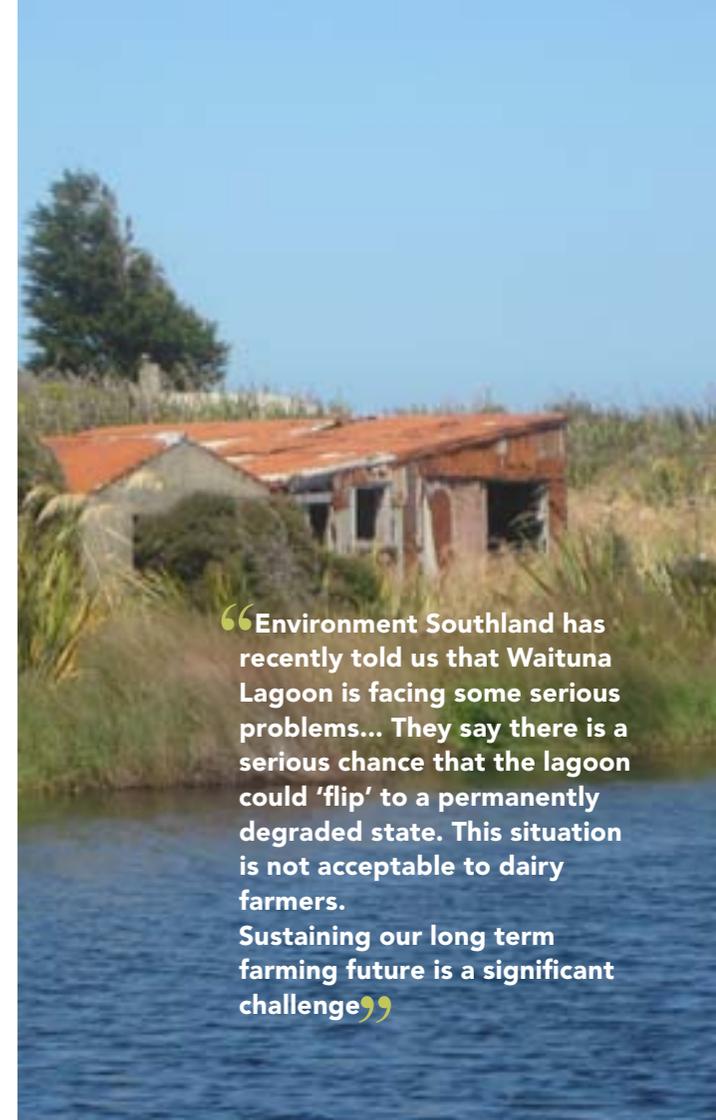
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Environment Southland has recently told us that Waituna Lagoon is facing some serious problems that include a build up of sediment in the Lagoon and loss of the Ruppia (seagrass) which helps to maintain its ecological balance. They say there is a serious chance that the lagoon could 'flip' to a permanently degraded state. This situation is not acceptable to dairy farmers.

We have discovered that the environmental science for Waituna Lagoon is not straightforward. No one is sure how much our dairy farms are contributing to the problem, or if the opening of the lagoon is alleviating it or making it worse. A group of scientists are now working hard to build this knowledge, which we fully support.

Sustaining our long term farming future is a significant challenge. Despite the lack of clarity in the science, some organisations have suggested a number of options that would severely restrict how we operate our farms including removing our businesses altogether. In order to have the confidence to invest it is very important for the farming community that we have regulatory certainty, and that we have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to any policy responses that are developed.

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The way forward

As good stewards of the land we recognise the need to manage some of the risks facing the catchment. In July 2011 we welcomed advisors from DairyNZ, Fonterra, Federated Farmers and Environment Southland so that they could see things first hand. We asked them to develop on-farm management recommendations with us.

We learnt that some of our farms need some work in some areas and that there are practical actions we could take, particularly around managing soil erosion. The key actions identified included measures to:

- Eliminate stock access to waterways;
- Build and maintain riparian areas;
- Better wintering through paddock selection, off-catchment or off-paddock wintering systems;
- Changing how we maintain our drainage networks to reduce sediment loss that is occurring through bank slumping;
- Maintaining and enhancing natural wetlands to act as natural filter zones; and
- Installation of sediment traps.

There was also room to improve our management of nutrients, effluent and rubbish disposal by:

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- Utilising nutrient management plans;
- Stopping effluent irrigation to saturated soils;
- Reducing effluent application rates and/or depth; and
- Improving rubbish disposal practices.

In addition to the initiatives that we are taking, we would also like to see other parties taking responsibility for action, particularly around drainage and river management which affects the amount of sediment flowing into the lagoon.

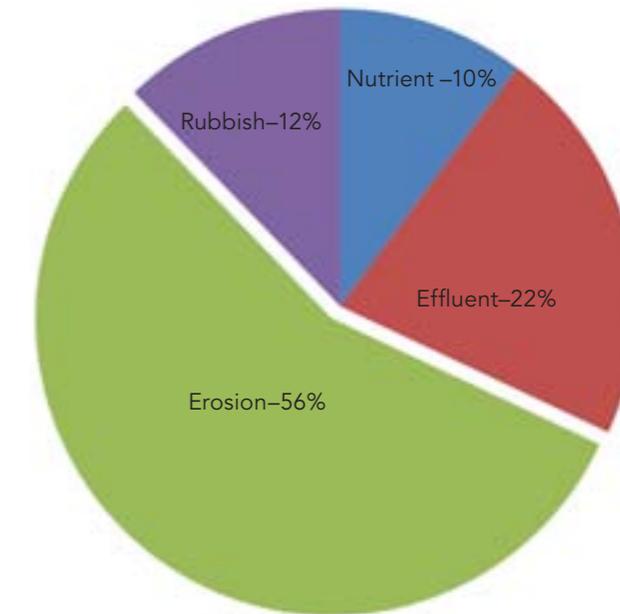
Farming in the Waituna requires an ongoing commitment to the environment and we are always looking for ways to improve our management practices. A number of local dairy farmers have invested significant amounts to improve their practices, including one farmer that has recently invested more than \$100,000 to:

- Upgrade and expand their dairy effluent system;
- Build new concrete races;
- Expand the riparian fencing and planting on their property.

Such investment provides little return to the farm balance sheet but is an investment in the health of the catchment. Initiatives like this are being implemented on farms all the time but they do take time and careful planning.

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Management recommendations 2011





“We discovered that every farm is different... Actions need to be tailored to every single farm in the catchment”

On ground action

We have developed a plan for now and in the future. We discovered that every farm is different and that some have very little to do while others have more. Some of the key findings included:

- Actions need to be tailored to every single farm in the catchment.
- There are a lot of things we could do almost immediately and have rolled these into individual action plans for 2011/12.
- Other actions are more expensive or have longer timeframes and will require careful planning. We have rolled these into the development of Sustainable Milk Production Plans that will help ensure we are managing our environmental footprint as effectively as possible.
- We are also prepared to continue to be open, and to be able to demonstrate progress to others. We will review and report on our progress at the end of 2012.
- We will also be receiving science updates to ensure what we are doing is effective.
- All sheep and beef farmers have been offered professional assistance to complete land and environmental plans for their properties.
- Workshops have been carried out with sheep, beef and dairy farmers to ensure farmers have the resources to support environmental stewardship.

Key actions of dairy farmers in 2011

- We opened up our farms to independent assessment;
- We have identified and developed a broad range of practical initiatives;
- We have rolled these into action plans tailored for each farm;
- We are implementing all short-term activities;
- We have done this in a way that reduces nutrient and sediment inputs to the lagoon despite lack of scientific clarity.

The process we are following:



Key planned actions for 2012

- We are developing careful long-term plans that will provide for viable and sustainable future businesses;
- We will respond appropriately as more science comes to light that informs development of long-term solutions;
- We will continue to work with the wider community to ensure that all parties are doing their fair share;
- We will report openly on our progress;
- We want to form partnerships with others in the catchment to work together to improve the health of the lagoon;
- We will complete “Overseer” modelling of all sheep, beef and dairy farms in the catchment;
- We will keep abreast of new proven information in order to respond in a timely and appropriate manner.

Key Waituna concepts

- A catchment community approach based on openness and trust;
- Working directly with the environmental stewards of the land – farmers;
- Recognising problems and our responsibilities;
- Sharing the responsibility and actions between ourselves and with others;
- Moving past emotions and engage with high quality decision making;
- Getting support from experts (keeping them on tap not on top);
- Communicate well with each other and with local authorities;
- Promote leadership and celebrate success.

