

# Country-Wide

## Ladies and gentlemen,

start your engines

01-02-2007

There was a time when I was a lot younger when all I wanted to do was drive a bulldozer. Like when I was seven years old!

Unlike the pose indicates, I never really wanted to do ballet dancing, not that there is anything wrong with ballet, it is just not me. This pose is 'normal' for old Caterpillar tractor operators. That is, the tractors and the operators; as young people who know the intricacies of these machines are rare! No one would have the patience now!

I have long since given up the wish to be a full time bulldozer operator although I must admit I love the smell of diesel fumes and freshly cut earth. Starting the 1940's J model Caterpillar D2 is always an exercise in procedure too, and a chance to practice ancient incantations to the God of small auxiliary starting engines.



Robert Carter, Kirikau Valley, Taumarunui

Sticking rigidly to the ritual of starting one of these machines is always rewarded by the staccato beat of the starting engine, soon followed by the musical rumble of the main engine.

Departing from the ritual in any way brings forth poetry of the most blue and ribald variety followed by an analysis of what one should not have done.

These machines always make one appreciate push button starting!

I must hasten to say that this machine is now 59 years old and still works very happily cleaning up tracks around the farm.

These small machines have played a big role in trying to flatten the King Country and despite their best efforts it is still very steep and prone to erosion.

Things have changed now forever and we are being encouraged to do more to limit the loss of soil from our hill country.

It could be that the old Cat will have to be put into the lounge as a conversation piece and one could have a competition on Saturday nights, a dozen of Speight's to the guy or girl who can start the machine in less than five minutes without swearing!

Having got your attention I would like to talk about my new Horizons Regional Council whole farm plan, number three to be precise.

As a result of being an enquiring, nose-y so and so, and I suspect because Alec Mackay from AgResearch Grasslands knew I could not resist the chance to do something useful for the advancement of the cause to keep soil up and on the hills rather than in the creek heading out to sea; I have just completed the process of building a Horizons Regional Council whole farm plan.

Initially I was quite concerned about the implications of the plan on my business, with regard to likely restrictions it would place on land use. But as we worked through the process I realised that it would more than likely enhance what we are doing on this little patch of paradise.

This initial suspicion was further diminished by the work our local sustainable farming group had done, which indicated clearly that the principles of sustainability, when applied sensibly, gives a win/win situation for both the farm environment and the farm's economic performance.

The plan looks at all factors, economic, environmental and social impact of changes to our business.

Current and future business practices are examined along with the environmental impact footprint being overlaid onto the enterprise.

Indeed it soon became apparent that the status quo with our farming methods was likely to reduce our long term business success, because some of our practices were going to do some serious long-term damage to the soils.

An example of this was our cell type bull finishing area on ash/clay soil types where pugging and 'Hui' areas were starting to seriously damage the paddocks.

On top of that, having an expert team look critically at our enterprises threw up some new, quite revealing insights into where we could go from now on.

Horizons, for these few initial pilot whole farm plans, used a team of industry experts to carry out the review and development of the plan.

Sarah Dudin and Lachie Grant from Landvision as well as Lucy Ferguson from Horizons carried out the physical farm soil and underlying rock type assessment. This led to an analysis by Alec Mackay from AgResearch which indicated best farm enterprise practice on the relevant land and soil types.

Both Tony Rhodes (PGG Wrightson) and Greg Sheppard (Sheppard Agriculture) carried out the farm business and enterprise analysis and helped us create a farm business plan.

Finally Alec Mackay and his team drew up the whole farm plan along with the relevant maps.

Looking out five years the plan identifies areas where soil erosion control is needed and this will be actioned with a variety of methods from tree planting through to drainage and managed retirement of some areas.

This particular property is situated on an old folded and up-thrust sea plain, with layers of stratified mudstone rock visible on steep banks. The parent material was once under an ancient sea and was the result of unimaginable millennia of erosion of the old land mass.

After the massive up-thrusts 50 or so million years ago, the result of one earth plate sliding under the other, the planes of layered sedimentary rock now sit at an altitude of 400 to 1700 feet asl, sloping downwards towards the northwest. (Geosyncline is the word!)

This is actually quite relevant as this farm has a series of slumps on north-western faces, the result of water percolating through the strata and lubricating the boundary of the slump and the escarpment.

The slump country is our best country. Being of moderate slope it has some lovely volcanic ash soil on it and the soil experts wax lyrical about this soil's ability to grow things.

Having gained this understanding, I can now think more critically about how I can work to retain the soil on the slopes and hence keep on farming into the future and as my Maori friends say; "Taonga tuku iho" to pass the treasure onwards, better than before.

Of course there is a lot more to a whole farm plan than understanding soil types and the origins thereof, however it is the basis of understanding the farm system, your farm and what you can do to retain the inherent capability.

One of the most controversial aspects of the plan is the need to retire areas from grazing.

My take on this is that it is quite obvious that my current practices cannot continue, such as forcing cattle up on very steep slopes to control pasture in the spring and early summer.

We have identified about 14ha of such country on this farm and it is very steep sandstone land, so steep that one can stand on a sheep track and reach out horizontally and touch the slope adjacent.

It's the kind of country that created the joke about the sheep here with short legs on one side. Cows bungy off this quite well, to their detriment, and I would have to admit that it is not growing much more than 2t/ha/year. So, if I shut this bit off I will lose 28t/ha/year and not great feed at that.

Should I be worried? Well, no not really, when one considers that some quite conservative attention to a better part of the farm will more than yield a catch up of feed grown.

My intention here is to continue to graze it with sheep, restrict cattle from accessing it and put the fertiliser normally thus targeted onto some much more productive country.

So, in conclusion, the whole farm plan is a very useful document containing a lot of common sense methodology for this property.

It has enabled me to plan future development with some confidence, and it is a nice feeling knowing that the regional council is happy with our future intentions.

I found the whole process interesting and affirming of our intentions as well as making us aware of limitations and opportunities on this farm.

The year one "to do" list includes work to protect our dwelling from a possible landslip that could be a bit more than just embarrassing if we choose to do nothing. It took someone with some knowledge who is not here every day to notice the potential danger and make us aware of it so we can act.

Some drainage work and trees planted will ensure that the old slump our house sits on the toe of stays put during the next 100 year storm event.

We are grateful to Horizons for the plan and we really enjoyed the process and experience of working with the people who helped us with it.

If Sarah and Lachie ever want a career change they could become wine writers. Whoever heard of a soil with a "fine nutty chocolaty slightly goeey texture intermingled with pumice fines and colloidal material"?

I had to have an early lunch having read that.....

---

© 2007 Country-Wide Publications Ltd. All Rights Reserved  
Freephone: 0800 85 25 80  
Website: [www.country-wide.co.nz](http://www.country-wide.co.nz)