

**BEFORE THE COMMISSIONERS APPOINTED ON BEHALF
OF THE OTAGO REGIONAL COUNCIL**

UNDER	the Resource Management Act 1991 (the Act or RMA)
IN THE MATTER	of an original submission on the Proposed Regional Policy Statement for Otago 2021 (PRPS)
BETWEEN	OTAGO WATER RESOURCE USER GROUP Submitter OS00235 and FS00235 FEDERATED FARMERS NZ INC Submitter OS00239 and FS00239 DAIRY NZ Submitter FS00601
AND	OTAGO REGIONAL COUNCIL Local Authority

EVIDENCE IN CHIEF OF MICHAEL LESLIE LORD



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EVIDENCE IN CHIEF OF MICHAEL LESLIE LORD

Introduction

1. My full name is Michael Leslie Lord. I have lived and farmed on the Taieri plains for 30 years and serve on several boards and trusts over that period. I have recently sold the farm but continue to live in Berwick. I have four children.
2. I am the Chair of the Otago Rural Support Trust ("the Trust") and have held that role for 3 years. I have been involved with the Trust in a range of capacities for 10 years.
3. I have been involved in a range of community activities that include school support, children's and youth programmes, church affairs and Rotary.
4. I was a Councillor for the Dunedin City Council from 2013 till 2022 when I chose not to seek re-election. I chaired the Finance and Council Controlled Organisations Committee for 6 years and was a member of a number of Council committees including Audit and Risk Subcommittee, Infrastructure Services and Networks Committee and the Strath Taieri and Mosgiel-Taieri Community Boards. I was also a member of Resource Management Hearings panel and the district Licensing Committee.
5. I am a past president of Otago Federated Farmers and have been involved in a range of capacities within that Executive over the past decades.
6. I am a trustee of the Otago Youth Adventure Trust.
7. I am a past President of the Mosgiel Rotary Club and have been involved with the Club since 2012.
8. During my Council term I was a Dunedin City Council appointed Trustee for the Hereweka Harbour Cone Trust. The Hereweka Harbour Cone Trust was established to manage the property and its values for the benefit of the community.

9. I have previously been the Chair of the DCC Civil Defence Rural Liaison Committee.
10. I have travelled on a number of occasions to Africa, where I have assisted with orphanages, community projects and voluntary medical aid.
11. I am a previous Trustee of both the Marantha Retirement Village in Mosgiel and the Lakeland Park Christian Camp in Queenstown.

Scope of Evidence

12. I have been asked by the Submitters (Otago Water Resource Users Group (OWRUG), Federated Farmers of New Zealand (Federated Farmers) and Dairy NZ) to provide evidence and insight from a Rural Support Trust perspective, and in my time as a representative for the rural community.
13. My evidence focusses on the impacts on wellbeing from adverse events, and in response to other pressures, including personal, financial, and cumulative effects of uncertainty and regulation on farmers and farming communities. My experiences in this regard come predominantly from my involvement in the Rural Support Trust, although I am also able to draw on my personal experiences during my farming career.

THE RURAL SUPPORT TRUST

14. Otago Rural Support Trust is part of a nationwide network of Rural Support Trusts that can assist rural individuals and communities during and after extreme weather and other declared events. The Trusts are able to access Government adverse event funding and utilise support from many Government agencies to help rural individuals and communities get back on their feet. The Trust members are local rural people with a wide range of experience and knowledge in dealing with challenging situations
15. The Otago Rural Support Trust provides support to rural individuals and communities through financial, climatic, or

personal crisis. There are now 14 Rural Support Trusts across the country.

16. The Otago Rural Support Trust was established in the 1980s to support farmers going through the challenges of Rogernomics, when interest rates were at 27%, and farm subsidies had just been removed. At that time, farmers were under huge amounts of pressure, but there was no support network like the Trust in place. The Otago Rural Support Trust was the first one established in New Zealand.
17. Today the Trust is well connected with rural networks, Civil Defence, and local and central government agencies, with a strong working relationship with the Ministry for Primary Industries. The Trust aids and supports rural people and communities through stress, pressures and uncertainty, including through adverse events such as flooding, drought, and snowstorms.
18. In more recent years we have observed the impact that increasing regulatory uncertainty is having on members of the sector, and how this is becoming its own source of stress and pressure for people working within it.
19. The Trust has connections and networks across the wider Otago farming communities. The Trust has observed that there is a lot of farmer concern and worry about the changing regulatory regime - including the likely flow on effects of the Otago Regional Council's Proposed Regional Policy Statement.

CONTEXT FOR RURAL MENTAL HEALTH

20. The volume of work that the Trust is dealing with is increasing, consequently, the scope of the Trust has grown. Where there was one facilitator, we have five staff working as required. The work is hard. Our staff are dealing with people and families who are least able to cope. You do not get the great success stories - you get the sad stories and the pain. The role takes a toll on our staff and those who are Trustees. It is just the reality of the role.

21. The wider context regarding the state of rural mental health in New Zealand is important to understand. Research has demonstrated that rural communities have high rates of burn out and stress which often leads to depression and other forms of mental illness.
22. Rural suicide rates exceed urban rates for both men and women. The rate of suicide among rural men is significantly higher than that of women at 16.6 per 100,000 as compared with the female rate of 5.7 per 100,000.
23. It is thought that these issues arise due to a combination of factors including higher levels of isolation in rural communities, high levels of alcohol and drug consumption (particularly within younger demographics), access to health services and significant external pressures outside the control of the individual.
24. For Otago, in 2022 we were dealing with Bovis Outbreak, Covid 19, and droughts. The amount of one-on-one support has increased over my time on the Trust, as well as an increase in travel, networking and liaising for our staff. Our Trust income and spend has increased to reflect the rural community need.

Pressures on farmers and rural communities

25. In Otago, Trust members have been involved with farmers impacted by previous Regional Council Plan changes. For example, Trust members attended quite a few farmer meetings about Plan Change 7. These meetings were overshadowed by the stress and concern about the drought, which was impacting many water users at the time. The added stress and uncertainty at that time was quite significant.
26. In recent years added stress and uncertainty has come from Covid 19. The rural sector largely continued to operate during the pandemic as an essential service, but there were significant flow on effects due to the wider impact of the Covid 19 response. These effects included staffing shortages associated with illness and border controls, reduced access to important markets due to

border controls, reduced availability of essential support services such as abattoir capacity (which were and continue to face staffing difficulties). There were other pressures created such as those on the volunteer communities (for example, the volunteer fire brigade) within rural areas which are also staffed by rural people.

27. Then there have been the significant cost increases that have arisen due to a combination of Covid-19 and other international events. This is felt particularly accurately in the primary sector due to fuel prices. Fuel is required for almost every aspect of farming, from fuelling machinery for feeding stock, to transporting stock/feed to and from farm. This is compounded by rising interest rates placing increased financial pressure where there is existing borrowing or reduced access to funding for capital as a result of reduced scope to service debt.
28. A particular stressor, and one that is cumulative, is farmers feeling a lack of control over what is happening both within, and outside their properties. Many of the issues I mention above fall into this category. As do adverse weather events and the uncertainty created by rising amounts of central and local government regulation.
29. Farmers the Trust talks to feel they always seem to be in the cross-hairs of these things, no matter how many good practices, changes, or investments they make on their properties. Farmers often feel that every election cycle, they become the target for politicians and political agendas.
30. The other thing the Trust has observed is that stress affects everyone in the farming family. Yet the support and wellbeing information is predominantly targeted at just the farmer – we need to talk more about farming families. Not just farmers. The impact that things like the Proposed Regional Policy Statement can have on families is often underestimated. Partners (and children) are an essential part of the overall picture and provide a vital role either as key support to ‘the farmer’ or as a key part of the overall

operation. They are subject to many of the same stresses and pressures and are just as likely to be exposed to similar risks including isolation and lack of access to health services.

31. Running a farm business is a huge technical operation – much more so than it used to be. Farmers in the Trust that I talk to now almost feel like they need to also be planners, ecologists, lawyers, scientists, accountants, or computer experts just to get through the day. This is particularly the case given they need to make sure they are complying with all the plans and regulations before them. This all adds to on-farm stress as it takes farmers away from their main jobs – working on the farm.

How can these issues be addressed?

32. Farm investment is a huge financial commitment, and investment in infrastructure requires confidence and certainty in you and your family's future.
33. A working example of how clarity regarding the end point it important is available in the management of the *M. bovis* outbreak.
34. Across Otago, the Trust has seen stark impacts on rural mental wellbeing following the *M. bovis* outbreak. There is no denying that. However, the difference with the *M. bovis* outbreak was that there was a detailed recovery programme that farmers and impacted communities could work through. Despite the stress, impacted parties could see the end result. The 'light at the end of the tunnel' is really important. Farmers are problem solvers.
35. Farmers do not feel the same with the Proposed Regional Policy Statement and the overhaul of the Regional Plans. Because there are no clear or defined outcomes currently. Otago farmers cannot see or even imagine the end point.
36. This has been exacerbated by the poor engagement process (which I accept is not entirely the Council's fault given the impact of Covid-19 and the time pressure they have been put under by the Minister). However, the consequence is that the sector feels

that these matters are out of their control, that their voices and input is not valued or important and that the decisions have been taken away from Otago decision-makers and placed in the hands of courts and central government.

37. For Otago this has now been compounded by the process issues. What started out as one Freshwater Process is now two processes. This uncertainty and double up creates an extra burden, and it places many people considerably outside their comfort zone. We are often told by farmers they simply won't be up to presenting before the court, as it is too overwhelming, and too costly for them to seek legal expertise and assistance.
38. Otago farmers in particular have gone through a plethora of regulatory change. Farmers have already been through the previous Regional Policy Statement process which only concluded in 2019. They have also had Plan Change 6A (which was effectively withdrawn by the Council prior to the key rules 'biting'), Plan change 8, Plan Change 1 and Plan Change 7. The regulatory pressure and uncertainty has been relentless. And these things come on top of all the other central government driven change including the NPS's, NES's, He Waka Eke Noa etc that are discussed in the Evidence of Kate Scott.
39. What those outside the farming community may not understand is that 99.9% of the Otago farmers that the Trust see, care deeply for the environment. They understand that if you care for the environment it will care for them. But the representation of farmers through the media is that they are 'environmental vandals'. From the farmer point of view this seems to inflame an increasing rural/urban divide.
40. The Otago Rural Support Trust has observed that Otago farmers seem to feel that policy is drafted by people with no concept or understanding of the reality of rural life and the complexity of the changes that are being sought. Direct examples of this were observed with the *M. bovis* outbreak with response directives from

government that were unrealistic and impractical on farm (e.g. the difference between yarding dairy cattle and beef cattle).

41. What the Trust is wanting, is for greater recognition and acknowledgement that pressures, uncertainty, and stress is cumulative. That pressures falling on farmers and farming families has negative impacts that go well beyond that family. Rural communities are hurting.
42. There needs to be clear recognition of the transition process that the sector will need to undertake once it knows what the end game actually is. The time that may be required for transition is likely to vary from catchment to catchment depending on the scale of change. Social wellbeing should be given greater attention when regulation is decided. The importance of the rural sector to the region should be recognised and valued by providing a framework that enables the sector to manage the changes required of it in a way that can be sustained, so that the communities themselves are sustained.

Personal Farming Experience

43. Farmers have to deal with regulatory change and stress along with the normal pressures of farming. Farmers and rural communities must respond to and deal with environmental situations as they occur, for example, wild fires, landslides, flooding, and drought.
44. For me personally, during my time farming on the Taieri over the past 30 years, there was nothing worse than a drought. In my view, the insidiousness of it is far worse than a flood on mental health.
45. A flood comes quickly and while the impacts can be devastating, the effects are often short term. The waters recede and you can get on with the task of cleaning up. Your pathway to recovery from a flood is typically pretty clear.

46. With a drought every day you wake up in the morning to a sunny day and hope for rain. Water is not just critical for growing grass and crops, it is critical to keeping stock alive and in good condition, the responsibility of providing the necessary sustenance for the animals in your care weighs heavily on farmers. Having access to the necessary water becomes all-consuming. You have to continually assess and reassess your options, figure which levers to pull and when.
47. You make a decision based on the forecast which indicates you have rain the following week – but then it never comes. You have to circle back and figure out what to do next. Do you sell off stock at a low price to reduce feed demands, do you buy more feed in at top dollar, do you see if you can just hold out a few more days because there is some rain in the forecast again?
48. The uncertainty and stress compounds over time. We all know the impact that drought and insufficient access to water can have on people and their lives. These feelings are reflected in the Australian poem “Rain From Nowhere” by Murray Hartin (Appendix 1).

Conclusion

49. Our Otago farmers face these issues or similar ones every season. The current regulatory upheaval is like a drought on top of a drought. They don't know when it will end and so it is very difficult to plan a response.

Date: 23 November 2022

Michael Leslie Lord

Rural Support Trust

Appendix 1

Rain from Nowhere

By Murray Hartin

His cattle didn't get a bid, they were fairly bloody poor,
What was he going to do? He couldn't feed them anymore,
The dams were all but dry, hay was thirteen bucks a bale,
Last month's talk of rain was just a fairytale,
His credit had run out, no chance to pay what's owed,
Bad thoughts ran through his head as he drove down Gully Road.

"Geez, great grandad bought the place back in 1898,
"Now I'm such a useless bastard, I'll have to shut the gate.
"Can't support my wife and kids, not like dad and those before,
"Crikey, Grandma kept it going while Pop fought in the war."
With depression now his master, he abandoned what was right,
There's no place in life for failures, he'd end it all tonight.

There were still some things to do, he'd have to shoot the cattle first,
Of all the jobs he'd ever done, that would be the worst.
He'd have a shower, watch the news, then they'd all sit down for tea
Read his kids a bedtime story, watch some more TV,
Kiss his wife goodnight, say he was off to shoot some roos
Then in a paddock far away he'd blow away the blues.

But he drove in the gate and stopped – as he always had
To check the roadside mailbox – and found a letter from his Dad.
Now his dad was not a writer, Mum did all the cards and mail
But he knew the writing from the notebooks that he'd kept from cattle
sales,
He sensed the nature of its contents, felt moisture in his eyes,
Just the fact his dad had written was enough to make him cry.

"Son, I know it's bloody tough, it's a cruel and twisted game,
"This life upon the land when you're screaming out for rain,
"There's no candle in the darkness, not a single speck of light
"But don't let the demon get you, you have to do what's right,
"I don't know what's in your head but push the bad thoughts well away
"See, you'll always have your family at the back end of the day

"You have to talk to someone, and yes I know I rarely did
"But you have to think about Fiona and think about the kids.
"I'm worried about you son, you haven't rung for quite a while,
"I know the road you're on 'cause I've walked every bloody mile.
"The date? December 7 back in 1983,
"Behind the shed I had the shotgun rested in the brigalow tree.

"See, I'd borrowed way too much to buy the Johnson place
"Then it didn't rain for years and we got bombed by interest rates,
"The bank was at the door, I didn't think I had a choice,

"I began to squeeze the trigger – that's when I heard your voice.
"You said 'Where are you Daddy? It's time to play our game'
" I've got Squatter all set up, we might get General Rain.'

"It really was that close, you're the one that stopped me son,
"And you're the one that taught me there's no answer in a gun.
"Just remember people love you, good friends won't let you down.
"Look, you might have to swallow pride and take that job in town,
"Just 'til things come good, son, you've always got a choice
"And when you get this letter ring me, 'cause I'd love to hear your voice."

Well he cried and laughed and shook his head then put the truck in gear,
Shut his eyes and hugged his dad in a vision that was clear,
Dropped the cattle at the yards, put the truck away
Filled the troughs the best he could and fed his last ten bales of hay.
Then he strode towards the homestead, shoulders back and head held high,
He still knew the road was tough but there was purpose in his eye.

He called his wife and children, who'd lived through all his pain,
Hugs said more than words – he'd come back to them again,
They talked of silver linings, how good times always follow bad,
Then he walked towards the phone, picked it up and rang his Dad.
And while the kids set up the Squatter, he hugged his wife again,
Then they heard the roll of thunder and they smelt the smell of rain.