

# We're taking health to farmers

## The Voice



**Craig Wiggins**

WHY don't farmers go to see their doctors was the question I was asked at a health provider meeting in September.

The meeting was attended by the local doctor, suicide prevention team leaders, Rural Support Trust, the Asburton Community Alcohol and Drug Service and support counsellors from the local hospitals and schools. Primary Industries Ministry welfare team members were also there to inform the group of issues and support around Mycoplasma bovis.

“*This for you so look for the bright orange caravan and pay us a visit.*”

My involvement came about when my own doctor asked me to give a farmers' perspective on rural issues as well as to improve the lines of communication between all concerned to benefit the farming families around Mid Canterbury.

As usual I laid it on pretty thick regarding the disconnect between what the providers of the services think is needed and what the farmers really want to help them through their working week.

It's hard to understand the

needs of rural NZ when the directives given to the health providers are set in Wellington on advice from people who might not have a real understanding of the continually changing environment farmers now face as well as working in the low financial envelop the rural health budget finds itself in.

The last three years have seen an increase in many external pressures on farmers that were never around before the run-up to the last election.

They include huge social media and mainstream media analysis of the perception of farming, serious vote catching by the Labour Party at the farmers expense and the fallout since as those policies on water and environment are implemented or proposed, M bovis and, of course, the insecurity around the milk price and milk co-ops to name a few.

Now we see a rise in pressure from banks as equity in farm ownership is challenged by the falling share price of Fonterra and uncertainty around land values while the water and environment policies are in the pipeline.

Farmers are just too busy getting through the day and do not prioritise their own health as an important cog in the wheels of success and sustainability of their business.

Match that with the increasing difficulty of getting an appointment with a doctor who has both the time and knowledge of farming issues to do the visit justice and many farmers put it on the back burner for when it's necessary to see a doctor not as proactive personal management.

I told the group to stop expecting farmers to go to them but for them to go to farmers and to put my money where my mouth is I literally threw the good doctor Sue Fowle and her nurse



**WORK IN PROGRESS:** The team at GlobalHQ will be taking its health and wellbeing caravan to an event or sale yard near you.

in the back of my horse float and went to the Coalgate sale yards. We put farmers, stock agents and sale yard workers, men and woman, through a mini health check where we found about 25% of those tested needed further medical advice or testing and perhaps medication for high blood pressure, lung capacity and breathing issues matched with a family history of serious issues and a lack of recent doctor visits.

The same tests were done at the Waimate shearing competition and the results showed closer to 30% needed to take preventative action.

Fowle, from Rakaia Medical Centre along with the team here at GlobalHQ are now going to where

the farmers are and facilitating these health checks for those who are too busy to look after themselves.

We see you rural people as the most important part of the community and without you this country is sliding backwards.

Healthy communities are made up of healthy people. Doctors used to be a pivotal part of those communities, however, that has been diluted but they want to be at the forefront of farmers' minds when it comes to wellbeing. They can facilitate a lot of support for mental health and physical issues and use the many government and volunteer support networks that might be needed.

With the support of local doctors and nurses looking

to extend their practice and contribute to their communities the team at GlobalHQ will be taking its health and wellbeing caravan to an event or sale yard near you.

The checks are free and will help rural people make an informed decision about their health rather than living in the unknown.

If we gather enough data we might be able to put rural health back at the forefront of talks in Wellington leading up to the next election or we might just save a life.

Either way this for you so look for the bright orange caravan and pay us a visit.

Brought to you by PGG Wrightson Livestock.

## Fences won't stop nutrient leaching

DEAR Auntie Thistledown,

Just wanted to let you know that calving and lambing are going well but I heard on the telly that David Parker wants me to add some fencing to my to-do list. I am afraid I was so tired that I must have fallen asleep while he was explaining the ins and outs of it. Could you please tell me where to put my fence?

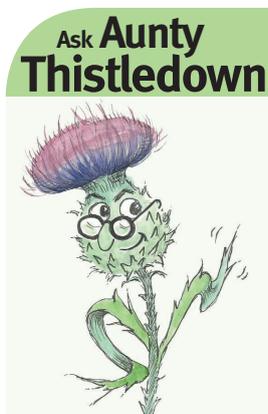
Cheers,  
WaterSchitt Down

Dearest Waterschitt,

Where to put your fence?

I'll tell you where to put your fence.

It's pretty simple really. The Government wants you to erect a fence that is 5m but not less than 1m away from the edge and/or centre of the waterway if you have land that is flatter than an average slope value of five, seven or 10 degrees (to be decided by a submission process) on a farm that carries more than 14 stock units a hectare or in a paddock



that carries more than 18 stock units a hectare.

That is for a waterway that is at least a metre wide. If you have a waterway that is less than 1m wide you should look into the tea leaves and follow your heart.

With that question adequately

answered I want to use the rest of my word count to take us on a thought experiment.

What if, for a moment, we imagine the Government wasn't there to expertly guide us through the process of putting up a fence. What would we need to know to make our own decisions?

Firstly, we would need to understand there are three threats we need to protect the waterway from. We need to stop E coli, nutrients and sediment from entering water that flows off the property. E coli comes from the arse-end of your stock and causes issues when it enters the front end of people further downstream. Reducing the E coli concentration in the water is as simple as keeping the arse-end of your stock out of the waterway. Note that I said reducing not eliminating because your fence is probably not going to prevent birds putting their bottoms in the water.

"I want my stock playing in the river," cried no farmer ever.

Fencing off waterways is a win-win for stock management and the environment. Luckily, the Government has calculated that it costs only about \$14,850 a year and pushes the poor couple in their example (pg 93 of the freshwater document) below the living wage. But we aren't done yet because the fence is only part of the solution.

Nutrients and sediment are not great for the waterway because they feed the algae in the water causing a green hue that upsets green-tinged voters. Sediment gets into the waterways when dirt gets into the water. This occurs through erosion (which was how the waterway was formed in the first place) and via surface flooding that washes soil into the waterway. This can be mitigated by riparian planting. But planting is a loose term because even rank grass will do. All you need is something that will sieve the surface water on its way to the waterway. Does it

need to be five metres wide? No, it probably doesn't, unless you are going to be dealing with a lot of surface flooding. Does there need to be trees? No, unless you are dealing with an erosion-prone site. But trees are lovely and they sequester carbon dioxide. Though the Government will give you no credit for your tree-planting efforts until there is at least a hectare of them in one place.

That just leaves us dealing with the nutrients. How does your fence stop nutrients from entering the water? Well, the nutrients we are most concerned with here are nitrates. Stopping your stock from urinating in the water is a good start but, if I am honest, your fence will barely scratch the surface of the nitrate issue. Grab yourself a tea and a nice bickie cause there are a few more items going on that to-do list.

Have a question for Auntie Thistledown? Email her at [aunty.thistledown@globalhq.co.nz](mailto:aunty.thistledown@globalhq.co.nz)