

DIVERSIFICATION

In my article published in the Christchurch Press of 16 January 2009 I called for a farming strategy to meet climate change that benefits the environment and is profitable to the New Zealand economy and farmers. It was subtitled 'Finding ways to farm for the future.' My submission to government was rejected by the then National government.

Two things I recommended in that article were that all farming in areas adjacent to water should be farmed organically. Organic farming is a powerful method of farming that negates the need for chemical fertilizers. The current heavy use of synthetic fertilizer inhibits natural underground worm and mycorrhizal activity which over time depletes soil fertility. Use of nitrogen especially in topdressing also creates a release of greenhouse gas emissions that are very damaging in the atmosphere, as well as large amounts of runoff into nearby waterways.

Secondly that as climate change advances diversification into less damaging products than dairy would be better for the environment and would strengthen the national economy.

'All the eggs in one basket' is a well-known cliché which provides a warning that any investment can be vulnerable.

In recent years intensive dairy farming has been encouraged by the industry and by government to expand into areas where irrigation is available. Throughout Canterbury we have seen the results of this domination of farming utilizing a number of rivers that provide irrigation. The damage to the Canterbury environment, rivers, lakes and aquifers is huge and largely overlooked by officials.

The dairy industry has already had two costly reversals which have constituted a threat to farmers and the nation. Within the last five years the price of dairy product dropped dramatically by fifty per cent placing many farmers further into debt. Although the price has recovered to a degree it is nowhere near the inflated prices that

were once achieved. China, in particular is unlikely to allow such elevated prices again.

Currently dairy farmers are facing a crisis in the debilitating spread of Mycoplasma bovis which again threatens the industry. How much this contagious disease is due to the heavy stock levels on farms made possible by irrigation and topdressing with nitrogen remains to be seen.

Such costly reversals to the dairy industry also have negative impacts on the national economy.

So it is my contention that as climate change intensifies it would be prudent to initiate some diversification to less damaging crops and especially crops we are deficient in like olives, soybeans and nuts.

Changes in farm usage take time and a transition to organic-based farming or to diversification into new crops can't be achieved over night. It will take a decade of careful planning and experimentation to bring about a change of direction.

It would be prudent to activate this change as soon as possible. A change to organic farming will reduce farm greenhouse emissions by about 20%.