

THE POMAHAKA CATCHMENT SOUTH-WEST OTAGO

In the past water quality in the Pomahaka catchment was some of the poorest in Otago, but that's now changing thanks to a farmer-led catchment based approach.

Project Benefits

The farmer-led Pomahaka Water Care Group includes over half the farmers in the catchment which has led to numerous benefits:

- Growing national recognition.
- Ability to promote practical solutions.
- Improved relationships with other stakeholders including the Regional Council.
- More funding options.
- Water quality improvements throughout the catchment.

Background

NZ Landcare Trust coordinated two Sustainable Farming Fund projects in the catchment; a one year scoping project in 2013, and a three year project called Pathway for the Pomahaka which began in 2015. During the first of these projects a series of field visits were organised for catchment farmers and stakeholders to discuss what could be done to improve water quality. The farmers decided the only way water quality was going to be improved was from the bottom up - farmers taking the lead. The group of farmers started working together and in 2014 formed the Pomahaka Water Care Group (PWCG). The Group's aims were to take ownership of the issue, engage with other farmers, identify what the water quality was like throughout the catchment, and promote the positive steps farmers were taking to improve it.

Why take a catchment approach?

The PWCG began testing the water in the catchment's rivers and streams to gain a fuller understanding of the extent of the water quality problem. They found that it wasn't only dairy farms that were having a negative environmental impact, but all farming types. They also discovered that the problem wasn't confined to one area of the catchment - water quality concerns existed at many spots throughout the catchment. It was the cumulative effects of different farming operations which had led to the deterioration in water quality, and therefore a catchment approach was necessary.



Challenges

The Pomahaka catchment faces some unique challenges in respect to the development and adoption of technology and mitigation used in other regions. Farming in the catchment relies on artificial drainage (mostly tile and mole drains). Subsurface drainage has been identified as a significant source of contaminants from grazed pastures to waterways. Winter feed crop grazing on saturated hillside pastures has also been identified as a major issue in the catchment. There are also areas of the catchment with inefficient infrastructure (effluent pond storage and application systems) and there is a need for more efficiency with fertiliser application and placement.

Previously there were relationship challenges between catchment farmers and the Otago Regional Council, Fish and Game and the Department of Conservation, and there was also a lack of knowledge and understanding of Iwi values. Through the Pathway for the Pomahaka project, these relationships have improved and continue to be nurtured.

Keys to success

- A farmer-led approach works by allowing farmers to talk to other farmers, which inspires others to improve their farm management practices.
- The Group has its own vision and goals, which are quite independent of the Regional Council's water quality limits. This gives the Group something to work towards, and allows it to remain separate from debates about limits and whether the numbers are correct or not.
- Ownership is a key pillar of the Group. The Group produces its own data, and this has led to independence, and the unquestionable conclusion that something needs to be done in order to improve the quality of water throughout the catchment.

Changes

The PWCG continues to carry out intensive water quality testing so farmers have independent information in order to understand water quality at different locations throughout the catchment. The PWCG promotes on-farm discharge testing, where farmers test water leaving from their own properties to assess their own environmental impact.

The Group encourages the adoption of good management practices including changing farming practices to protect critical source areas, riparian management and changes to winter grazing strategies. Many farm environment plans have been developed in the catchment, and there have been changes in fertiliser use and application.

The Group also works to promote what is being done in the catchment through the use of social media, newsletters, media articles and other forms of public awareness.

Where to next

From the water testing data generated by farmers in the catchment, the PWCG has identified the need for further work in order to meet the Group's vision and goals, and to meet the Otago Water Plan's discharge thresholds and receiving water limits. The Group have applied for funding to continue to explore ways to improve water quality and meet regulatory requirements. They have identified knowledge gaps in the effectiveness of on-farm scale mitigation measures, such as constructed wetlands, sediment traps and grass filter strips in Otago, and at a scale which will be practical for catchment farmers.

The Group is also helping to facilitate the growth and purchase of riparian plants, which are purchased by land owners, and grown and tended to by community groups. This initiative will encourage farmers to build stronger relationships with the local community, and will result in more native plants in the catchment.

The PWCG also hopes to eventually set up an environmental hotline, to enable any issues to be dealt with quickly and efficiently with a team of locals – farmers helping farmers.

For more information

About the Pomahaka catchment contact NZ Landcare Trust Regional Coordinator Craig Simpson

craig.simpson@landcare.org.nz
027 286 4611



© NZ Landcare Trust 2017

This resource is one of two information sheets about catchment management generated as part of NZ Landcare Trust's partnership with MfE.