

SMALL CHANGES, BIG DIFFERENCES.

2020

John and Catherine Ford
Highlands Station – Rotorua

“I think, as a farmer, you just realise you have to do something to be able to keep on farming sustainably” says John Ford, a sheep and beef farmer from Highlands Station, in Rotorua.

Small changes can grow to make big differences, says John. It all started on John and his wife Catherine’s farm Highlands Station, based within the Lake Tarawera and Lake Rotokakaahi

catchments, on the Southern side of Rotorua generations before the couple took over the land from John’s parents.

Both John’s dad and grandfather had taken care of this land. Harry Ford and Allan Ford had taken steps to preserve the beauty and health of the land – including ensuring a large area of natural bush was placed under a QEII covenant, while Allan forged ahead during his time on the land and started to create retention bunds.

These small dam-like creations are used to capture rainwaters into small ponds, helping to hold the nutrients in and on the land rather than washing them further down the catchment and eventually into the lakes. The bunds were a new and different technique back in those days, and as the couple took over the farm, they delved into it more, and started to increase how many were created on the right spots on the farm.



Photo: John Ford

Now, John thinks he probably has more than 300 bunds on the farm in all shapes and sizes.

“This is our contribution to the land, following on from what my dad started. He started them because of the economic benefits they can provide – more water on the farm for the stock and such – but now, this is about the external effect this land can have on the surrounding catchments,” John says.

“It is part of the social licence to farm in my eyes. They have become more popular recently and there have been projects

that show the success of larger retention bunds and the decrease in nutrients in the water running through the catchments,” John says.

John says for him, creating the bunds are a fun exercise as he has his own digger which enables him to carry out the work, as and when needed – often over the dryer summer months so grass seed can be grown back over the soil, strengthening its structure over time and enabling the area to be grazed.

What is a retention bund

Retention Bunds can be a range of sizes and are made by creating a dam-like structure in an area where water naturally pools on the land, so as it drains through a narrow PVC pipe. The nutrients are captured in the bottom section of the water which largely drains back onto the farm land rather than downstream into the catchment.

These bunds can be created through the use of a digger while the land is dry, and planted with seed to strengthen the hold of the soil over the area. By the time the rainy, winter months roll around, the bunds should be able to hold their own and serve their purpose.

