



UPFRONT  
MPI



# MPI refreshes strategy

*The Ministry for Primary Industries is trying to get all New Zealanders onside with promoting the success of the agriculture sector. **Phil Edmonds** reports.*

**W**hile primary sector revenue growth is almost exclusively determined by consumers in countries with little or no interest in what New Zealanders think of their own industries, the Government has decided growth will be compromised without improving the domestic reputation of farming. As a result, the Ministry for Primary Industries is now trying to get all New Zealanders onside, reflected in a significant change to its objectives.

Last October MPI released its Strategic Intentions 2018-2023, a follow up five-year plan from its previous 2015-2020 document. The strategy refresh sets out four key outcomes, three familiar from the last edition – ensuring New

Zealand's natural resources are sustainable, protecting the country from biological risk and growing the value of primary sector exports.

The fourth is a new concept, 'participation'. This outcome is about ensuring New Zealanders participate in the success of the primary industries.

In framing the strategy refresh, then director-general Martyn Dunne said MPI is having to respect new demands for primary sector exports that meet ethical welfare requirements, adapt to the challenges of climate change and deal with unprecedented threats to biosecurity systems. MPI could no longer meet these challenges on its own and would need to collaborate more widely with partners, communities and New Zealanders.

On one level MPI's shift towards being a more overt champion and promoter of agriculture could be viewed as simply evolutionary and a pragmatic acceptance that it needs to continue adding strings to its bow to enable the sector to flourish. Some others might see this as a departure from what has historically been its core business – essentially as an administrator of the primary industries.

An MPI spokesperson told *Dairy Exporter* the participation outcome was developed because now more than ever, its ability to continue to deliver for New Zealanders requires the public to be more deeply engaged.

MPI says while engaging the public is expected to improve MPI's role as



Mike Petersen.

‘protector’ through helping to detect and eradicate pests and diseases, ensuring animals are treated well, and ensuring NZ has a sustainable and enduring environment, it also believes a more prosperous sector will help to strengthen the public’s perception of the primary industries.

NZ’s Special Agricultural Trade Envoy Mike Petersen believes the change in focus is evolutionary.

“The inclusion of participation in the new strategy is more about an evolution rather than having been deliberately ignored in the past. It’s a continuation of the work started under the previous government although there is definitely more urgency now. There’s no doubt that the Provincial Growth Fund and the Government’s determination to invest in provincial New Zealand has contributed to some greater focus on community engagement.”

Taking on the challenge of changing public perception in the sector as part of core business does appear to have pushed MPI into territory not shared by MPI-equivalent organisations in other markets. Neither Australia’s Department for Agriculture and Water Resources, nor Ireland’s Department of

Agriculture, Food and the Marine for example have within their remit the challenge of encouraging active, informed and engaged communities.

Petersen isn’t aware of any other countries where their primary sector’s governmental arm is placing importance

on public perception like MPI now is.

“We do tend to lead, and we are at the cutting edge of the people issues. Ireland’s Origin Green for example, doesn’t have that focus – it’s very much around sustainability and is product-focused.”

He says the preoccupation is unique to NZ. “But what we have to remember is that agriculture is such a huge part of the fabric of society here, which is why it matters more to New Zealand than anybody else.”

## Long overdue

MPI becoming an active ‘champion’ has plenty of support within the sector where there is a clear sense a vacuum needed to be filled. Some of this is born from a frustration around challenges to agriculture’s domestic reputation but also a sense that NZ has not adequately addressed the need to project a unique primary sector story to overseas markets.

St John Craner, managing director of rural marketing company Agrarian says MPI’s proactivity reflects a legacy of leadership deficit.

“A lot of organisations have been scrambling to try and tell the agricultural story. The shift is a very noble and worthwhile cause. And it is long overdue.

“We all know that there is an increasing divide and misunderstanding in communication between rural and urban New Zealand. We do need to close that gap, improve understanding, improve communication and someone has to lead that.”

Petersen agrees and notes events have contributed to MPI’s decision to broaden its reach. While there has been residual concerns about MPI sticking to its knitting, engaging the public has become MPI’s knitting.

“To some extent their hands have been forced by a whole lot of biosecurity incursions that they’ve had to get on top of. They’ve had to

reach out.”

As well as the wider public, Federated Farmers chief executive Terry Copeland is particularly pleased MPI’s adoption of participation is benefiting farming communities.

“We’re delighted about the change.

MPI now has a positive attitude towards collaboration and working together with others.”

Copeland has also seen a greater emphasis on openness which has been evident through new director-general Ray Smith’s willingness to meet and engage with farmers.

More generally, Copeland says “The image of agriculture needs to improve. There’s no doubt about that. We don’t get a lot of cut through in urban media and the action being taken by MPI can only help with this.”



St John Craner

## How to measure participation?

The support given to MPI’s refocus is not necessarily unqualified, however. With the increase in investment MPI is clearly giving to participation, those who remain more concerned with MPI getting the basics right are curious to know what effective participation looks like and how it will be measured.

Craner has some concerns over how success will be evaluated.

“Ultimately, unless it turns up in higher prices for sheep and beef farmers or dairy farmers in New Zealand then how do you determine its success? There does need to be a commercial outcome.”

And while supportive of the direction being taken, Copeland says measuring successful participation will be tricky, and it is not immediately obvious how this will be done.

In its 2018 Annual report, MPI noted key indicators for measuring progress on participation include those that reflect increasing public trust in primary sector systems through a greater willingness to share MPI information, more public confidence in systems MPI leads to regulate, and the opinion of the primary sector among the NZ public is increasingly positive.

MPI points to fewer biosecurity incidents

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and generating more interest in primary sector jobs as outcomes where its work on public perception of the sector could be judged.

Projects underway include the strategy to build a biosecurity team of 4.7 million, which is involving partnerships with businesses, communities, organisations, Maori, and central, local and regional government.

A new independent biosecurity brand 'Ko Tatou This Is Us' was launched last year to support this movement. Ko Tatou This Is Us emphasises that biosecurity helps to protect everything that shapes our way of life, from the food we enjoy eating, the outdoor environment where we fish, hunt, farm and explore to the beautiful fauna and flora Aotearoa provides.

"We also encourage public participation in biosecurity through marketing and behaviour change programmes. This includes keeping watch and reporting any suspicious looking pests and diseases. An example of this is the Brown Marmorated Stink bug, which we run annual awareness campaigns on," an MPI spokesperson said.

MPI's campaign to boost primary sector skills and capability has involved working closely with other government departments, industry organisations and industry education organisations to promote the diversity of primary careers and attract the next generation of workers.

MPI has also taken the step to champion good employers in the sector – no doubt in response to perceptions that working

conditions are tougher and are an impediment to people being drawn to primary sector jobs. In partnership with AGMARDT, MPI launched and has held the inaugural Primary Industries Good Employer Awards. These awards recognise and reward primary industry employers who are demonstrating exceptionally good employment practices.

MPI concludes that "All of these efforts help to build the reputation of the primary industries, in terms of the contribution they make to New Zealanders, including our rural communities, and our wider economy."

## But will it lead to higher export prices?

It is the benefits of participation to the wider economy that perhaps unsurprisingly generates the most interest from close observers and industry participants. More specifically, the lingering questions are to what extent an improved domestic public perception of farming will translate into primary sector export growth, and what role MPI should play in projecting the perception of NZ agriculture in overseas markets.

Copeland thinks there is a link between

## THE MANDATED FUNCTION OF MPI AND INTERNATIONAL EQUALS:

### NZ: Ministry for Primary Industries:

- Ensure New Zealand's natural resources are sustainable in the primary sector
- Protect New Zealand from biological risk and ensure products are safe for all consumers.
- Grow the value of food and primary sector exports
- Ensure New Zealanders participate in the success of the primary industries

### Australia: Department of Agriculture and Water Resources

- Build successful primary industries
- Expand agriculture, fisheries and forestry exports
- Sustain water and other natural resources
- Manage biosecurity and imported food risk

### Ireland: Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine

- Promote and safeguard public, animal and plant health and animal welfare
- Provide income and market supports to underpin the rural economy
- Provide the policy framework for the sustainable development of the agri-food sector





Terry Copeland

an improved image of agriculture within NZ and growing primary sector exports.

“The more we can be seen to be doing the right thing, the greater potential we have of reaching more markets.”

MPI’s focus on building the reputation of NZ’s primary sector as good employers and dedicated to animal welfare certainly chime with attributes identified as important to consumers in both NZ and in high value markets overseas.

Petersen and Craner are however both clear that while MPI might be well-placed to build a positive image of agriculture within the country, it shouldn’t be MPI’s job to project that to consumers of our products in other markets.

“I don’t think it is MPI’s job to lead that,” Petersen says. “MPI can enable it but the sector needs to lead it. It is much better if the companies that are procuring and processing and marketing the products actually lead the brand story of New Zealand – but with MPI’s close engagement and close support.”

Craner agrees.



“Countries are defined by their companies, not their governments. For example, Germany is defined by reputation and attributes associated with Mercedes, BMW and Audi, Sweden is defined by Volvo and Switzerland by Tissot watches. So you should really let the private sector tell their story rather than rely on a top-down approach.”

Craner is also wary about believing an improved perception of farming and agriculture among New Zealanders translates into an equally improved respect for our products in overseas markets.

“The person who ultimately decides the value of products is the one who consumes them. If you are talking to a domestic market of course you need a mandate

from that audience. But if you are talking to an international market do you need a mandate from New Zealanders? Did the Flight of the Conchords suffer from not having a mandate when they went to the US and HBO picked them up because TVNZ snubbed them? No.”

MPI’s participation strategy doesn’t directly speak to international audiences. It is a first-things-first approach where the focus is in some respects reactive, addressing the primary sector’s immediate concerns of ensuring it continues to have a social licence to operate and produce within NZ. Nevertheless, success here should at least create more confidence for the sector to boast about its virtues offshore.



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