

## PRESENT PROBLEMS OF HILL COUNTRY' FARMING

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The greatest problem besetting the sheep farming industry in Taranaki is in administration and design of our land laws. They are designed to cover the whole of New Zealand and also to apply to our fattening lands as well as our hill country.

The hill country of Hawke's Bay and Wairarapa needs very different treatment from the hill country of Taranaki.

On the one hand we have a low-rainfall area with frequent droughts and on the other hand, in Taranaki, we have a very high rainfall which leads to quick reversion on the hills. The very rules made to cover our fattening lands must be used for both conditions of our hill lands, and as a result many of our hill country areas have been wrongly administered and are reverting rapidly.

The potential of our hill country is very great indeed. Its fertile soil and high, well spread rainfall and our present knowledge of farming enable us to carry at least three ewe equivalents to each acre.

Under today's costs and rules our  $1\frac{1}{2}$  ewe country has become uneconomic and is reverting at a rapid rate. It is essential that it be brought up to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 ewes. Our best farmers have already managed to get their farms up to this healthy state, but we have many who are not able to do so, and the reversion of these farms is offsetting the good work of development in other parts, giving an overall increase much below what we should have. Our hill country has suffered much through being badly administered over a long period. It starts in Wellington and comes right through to the district boards themselves, who do not understand our problems.

The Land Settlement Board itself consists of departmental men experienced in the detailed settling of farm land and who must carry out Government policy. They have with them two farmers, one with a knowledge of first-class land and the other with a knowledge of hill country.

It would be far better for the Board to meet with two hill country men to work out the hill problems on a different day to that on which the Board's other work is done.

The Government, backed by Federated Farmers, has been striving to settle as many as possible of our land-hungry people. This has resulted in the so-called one-man unit. There is no such thing as a one-man unit on hill country. All they have managed to do so far is to create slum areas with substandard living conditions where the man has to go out to work, or carries on, on very frugal living conditions on his farm. The economic unit has risen from 800 ewes in the post-war years to 1,200 ewes, and farmers on 800-ewe units find themselves unable to refinance. Their only hope now is to sell to their neighbours and get out as best they can.

There will have to be a lot of changed thinking among our rule makers before we will be able to get our hill country on a sound economic basis.

Many are applying for marginal lands assistance to rescue themselves, but it is difficult to see how this can help, as most of the work they want to do is back maintenance, not development. Much of the production has been paid away in income tax. Another source of worry is the recession years, caused in part by overspending by importers in one year. When the banks reduce their overdrafts hill country farmers have to contribute. Development work then deteriorates to the stage where no grass is left and the farmer loses the money already spent on development. On the other hand are the normal price fluctuations of the markets to which the farmer is always subject.

Can anyone here see why a man has to pay 5½ and 6 per cent for marginal land development money to start a home on a hill country farm and to create an asset for the country, when his mate goes into a 40-hour-a-week job and after getting married can get money for home building at 3 per cent?

Our hill country farmers are not getting a fair deal from the taxation angle. Periods of labour shortage, when repairs and maintenance fall in arrears, result in increased tax which is not a fair tax. There should be a deferred maintenance account to allow for these things to be done when it becomes possible to get them done.

I give you one example of how deterioration has set in on our hill lands and the silly laws that help it.

There is an area of approximately 30,000 acres of very good hill country stretching -from my property away past Ohura to Toi Toi. The railway runs through the middle of it with at least three railway stations on it. None of it is being maintained. It is all drifting back to tea tree forest. Some of it is completely without grass, some of it has only scattered tea tree, and I would estimate the number of sheep on this area at no more than 10,000.

This area developed under our present knowledge of farming would carry 90,000 ewes instead of 10,000. Allowing an average return of £3 per ewe in each case, 10,000 return £30,000, and £90,000 would return £270,000, a difference of nearly a quarter of a million pounds. The potential of all the areas over the whole of Taranaki similar to the block referred to is colossal.

Now I must give you an example of the laws that 'help to impede progress: My neighbour worked away to try to make a living from an uneconomic unit, but the farm became a tea tree forest with blackberry and gorse and barberry also flourishing, and he had to sell. None of his other neighbours wanted it, as they could not manage what they have, so he offered it to me. To save my own country from being infested I decided to buy it.

The Land Settlement Committee decided that it would be better to abandon the 330 acres of hill land rather than let me have it to develop. I went to the Minister of Lands, who decided it should come to me and instructed the Land Committee accordingly.

In two years that same farm is carrying 1,000 wethers and 60 head of cattle and will improve a lot more. I am saying this to show how impossible it is to get our hills into production when the laws made are so silly.

One of the most striking things over the past 30 years has been the emphasis on land aggregation and lack of emphasis on utilisation. When a man works hard and intelligently and makes progress he gets more and more people and organisations against him. On the other hand when a man neglects his farm and lets it go out of production he gets more and more sympathy. I -have never known of a case where Federated Farmers have been concerned when a farmer has abused his land-and we have many cases here-but I have heard of their concern when they think a farmer is doing too well.

The very few farmers in the Ohura area who have made a success of bringing in their farms would have the greatest difficulty today in getting any further areas of reverted land. Surely there must be something wrong with the set-up which stops the very men who can do the job and hands it to the men who cannot.

Another very real and growing problem is the shortage of skilled labour in the hill country. Nothing has ever been done to try to attract people to this class of land. The land-hungry people of a few years ago have found the barriers at the starting point too high to get in and have turned away. The school-bus problem has driven out of our hills many who otherwise would have stayed and brought up their children there.

The farming industry itself should start a scheme to attract young people to our hill country.

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I have always felt that share farming could be made to play a big part in the farming and developing of our hill lands. It works very well in the dairy industry and I know of no other way of a man getting his own farm more quickly than with share farming. We have, on the one hand, young men keen to go on the land without capital who could be put on a share farming basis with the farm gradually becoming theirs, and on the other hand we have farmers with the land, capital, and stock who are wanting to give up or have come to the end of their working lives. Some of the Lands and Survey development blocks could very well be farmed on a share farming basis to start these young men who cannot measure up to finding £3,000 to get a start and who as a result are lost to the farming industry.

Our agricultural colleges should be able to bring forward a workable scheme to start share farming.

Another trouble with the industry is that there is no starting point for a boy keen to go farming to get on a farm. I have known people in the cities who have boys wanting to see what farming is like to ring the farmers they know, but to find that no one will take a city boy, even for his school holidays. So the boy turns to another occupation where he is more welcome.

The Wool Board has done a good job in promoting shearing and making it attractive. I would recommend a scheme along the same lines for boys wanting to take up farming. We should at least have a list of farmers who would be willing to take boys, during the school holidays. Federated Farmers could have this done without much trouble.

In the setting up of our economic units on hill country in the past not enough notice has been taken of the important part that has been played by cattle both in breaking in the land and keeping it in production. It is by the skilful use of cattle that we are able to keep our hill lands in good order, and a unit that is not able to have the right number and kind of cattle is doomed from the start. A farmer's greatest problem is that half his grass grows in four months of the year and the other half takes eight months to grow. The farmer has to have the necessary cattle to handle this tremendous growth to keep the taller plants from shading out the grass. This is the main reason why farms should be of a sufficiently generous size to enable the farmer to have the right cattle at the right time.

We have two main land tenures, freehold and leasehold, and they have both played their part in land development, but I feel we have now reached the stage with our hill country where we should have a third tenure, and I will call it "usehold". The right person could apply for a Crown Land farm on a usehold basis.

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These farms could be classified and advertised and should come under the management of the Marginal Lands Committee, which would select the most suitable men. They should agree to a programme of development, as is done for marginal-land loans. In this way the farms would not be free and would be developed for the benefit of the farmer and the country as a whole. I feel a scheme like this would get over the high unimproved value on much of the country today.

### **Summing up**

We must have money at reasonable rates of interest. It is also important to have an even flow; not one turned on and then off every year or so. We must have areas of reasonable size to be able to carry the necessary sheep and cattle to keep the holding in proper order.

We should have laws made suitable for our hill country development, and to administer the laws we should have on the district committee men experienced in the development of hill country.

We should change our views of the man who does not try hard to have his farm producing well. We should emphasise that farmers should have their farms in good order all the time. Federated Farmers should emphasise to their members the necessity of full production and they should frown on the lazy ones instead of giving them sympathy. We should encourage those who are able to break in land to go ahead with as much as they can manage.

I feel that income tax at 13s. 10d. in the £ and death duties at 40 per cent under National and 60 per cent under Labour will take good care of land aggregation; but the main thing is to get the land back into healthy production, and we should employ every means we have to this end.

There is already a serious shortage' of store stock, due partly to the development of pumice lands, which are largely fattening lands. Not enough attention is being paid to our breeding lands, which are hill country. Hill and pumice lands should be taken along together to ensure a constant supply of store sheep and cattle. Development of both classes of land should be planned to ensure that one supplies the stock for the other, *or we* will have to breed store stock on our fattening lands, which will have an adverse effect on overall production.

### **DISCUSSION**

Comment (Mr Tebb): The Wool Board acting for the International Wool Secretariat (New Zealand, South Africa and Australia) has imposed the levy to promote the sale of wool and to maintain a stable price in order to compete with synthetics. Mr Tocker has painted a very true

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picture of the problems of hill country, which is more vulnerable than low land sheep farming. Land aggregation and economic units are a real problem but **labour** shortage remains the biggest problem. A National Farm Placement Scheme for young people would be good. I would like to see a National Farm Cadet Scheme organised by the two agricultural colleges to encourage urban parents to place sons on farms. If only 50 per cent of the boys went on farms the scheme would be worth while. In my opinion no taxation relief or other incentive will solve the problem of **labour** shortage.