Wai Kōkopu Chairs Annual Report

For Year ended 31 March 2025
18 November 2025

There have been a significant number of challenges over the past year around our ability to fund various programmes that can make a difference in our catchment rohe. Some catchment farmers have continued to make significant progress in farm environmental outcomes while maintaining their livelihoods and have been able to showcase their farm operations to wider groups. Given Wai Kōkopu's intergenerational focus in its vision and programmes of work, it is important that we maintain momentum on improving catchment outcomes.

This annual report covers the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. It is my fourth report as Chair of Wai Kōkopu and the fifth for Wai Kōkopu as an organisation and this annual report provides details of our work over the past year while highlighting settings around what we do and how we can do it.

Our Goals

It is important to remind ourselves of our goals and key measures which are intergenerational. The Wai Kōkopu Catchment Group aims to achieve restoration of the estuary, fresh waterbodies, land, communities and biodiversity in the 34,500 ha catchment. The catchment spans land from Lakes Rotoiti, and Rotoehu, via three rivers (Pongakawa, Wharere, and Kaikōkopu) down to the Little Waihi Estuary at Pukehina. This estuary is one of the most degraded in New Zealand, at the base of an intensively farmed catchment. To achieve catchment restoration, the following have been identified which are our three pou of reducing sedimentation; reducing total nitrogen (by 66%); lowering phosphorus (by 30%) and bringing E coli down (by at least 50%).

Our Setting

Last year I reported that Wai Kōkopu is reliant on the ongoing support of catchment landowners and managers, funders, the Wai Kōkopu team including contractors, board members and volunteers and the wider community. To make a difference we need to ensure that we all have a strong commitment to the kaupapa of working together over the next generation to restore and replenish the Waihī estuary; Pongakawa, Kaikōkopu and Wharere rivers and surrounding lands, contributing waters and associated biodiversity.

This year has been a year of ongoing focus to ensure we can meet our commitments to producing environmental plans, enabling the retirement of sensitive land, enhancing fish passageways in our streams and working towards the enhancement of the catchment. We have endeavoured to ensure that this work has a strong public profile through field days, newsletters, presentations, forums and more recently films. I want to acknowledge all here today and those that have supported Wai Kōkopu over the past year and in particular, our funders, lighthouse farmers, fellow board members and our team of contractors that have committed to the ongoing work of Wai Kōkopu. In particular thanks to Bay Trust and TECT for their support.

There are a number of highlights over the past year including field days, another agricultural forum and something that has been quite low key which is the release of our evaluation of five catchment lighthouse farms and the findings from that project. This provides an evidential basis of how developing positive solutions can ensure that farms, communities and nature can flourish.

Lighthouse Farms

Our lighthouse farm project has been a major body of work. This has had a focus on working with farmers to provide evidence through on farm individual assessments and communication of potential solutions, to achieve widespread shift in land management practices. This year an evaluation report was released which summarised five years of

work, including a follow up to the three year Lighthouse Farm Project. The initial three year project aimed to identify and increase understanding of and ways to improve land management systems. The report showed that using a holistic systems approach to assessing performance has shown that there are opportunities for farmers to reduce or reverse ecosystem decline. The assessments included modelling and measuring the impact of changes to these activities based on a selection of KPI's.

Not all farms were inclined to or felt it was the right time to take on suggested changes. Land retirement, change of land use, diversifying pasture species, reducing herd numbers or reducing synthetic nitrogen applications are examples of some recommendations. Some farms were constrained in their options by land type, while others made land use changes and achieved great improvements.

The initial assessment of these farms showed that there are very different starting points on the journey of aligning land use to land class and optimising farm systems for lower environmental impact. Each farm business has widely differing settings whether that be staffing, land and soil type, as well as divergent perspectives or values around farming. All of these influence the decision making process within any primary, in this case dairy business.

In addition to factors on farm, outside the farm gate there have been major disruptions with intense global instability, market volatility, political and social instability, and adverse weather events.

Some key observations that the evaluation showed were:

- Farm efficiency gains that lead to more resilient farm systems are varied, with each business having unique opportunities and with some more constrained in terms of change than others. For further change there may need to be incentives or support required.
- During the study period, increased input costs, adverse weather, staffing challenges impacted many businesses, including these five farms. The impact of this volatility did not affect all farms equally; however, all experienced a large reduction in pasture harvest and profitability in the 2022-23 season.
- The study showed that there is likely to be a number of landowners in the catchment that are positioned and open to taking opportunities for significant land use changes.
- A number of farms showed that intensification over past years has failed to flow through to profitability increases. On such farms deintensifying is likely to benefit the environment by reducing nutrient and gaseous losses while avoiding detrimental economic impacts.
- Sharemilkers have a significant impact on the decision making. Due to the nature of borrowing, the herd being their main asset, 50/50 sharemilkers are not likely to want to reduce their herd size. This project found that all of them were resistant to de-intensification of the farm system via reducing cow numbers. This means other incentives will likely need to be provided if de-intensification is the ideal option for the farm.
- Synthetic phosphorus fertiliser is extremely oversubscribed in the catchment. The use of this reduced on all the farms (four out of five) that had over optimum soil levels. This is a clear win-win opportunity to reduce phosphorus loss.
- Successful catchment remediation will cater to the complexities of farm businesses and social factors of adaptation to change. It is likely that those with higher debt and/or sharemilkers will choose to remain intensive and will need to invest in mitigations. Others will be positioned to de-intensify, and retire steep land, particularly where advice and support are available.
- It would be beneficial to continue to monitor these farms. With a focus on the farms that have implemented environmental improvements and farm system changes.

- The use of mixed species pastures was recommended during this study as a way to improve pasture and animal performance with the positive effects also flowing on to nitrogen loss (and recently proven GHG reduction). Only one farm introduced plantain across the majority of the dairy platform and one farm is using chicory as a summer rotation.

The Lighthouse farm review process provides opportunities to reflect into the future around the success of achieving enhanced environmental, animal husbandry, work life balance outcomes while still enhancing a profitable farming operation. As with previous work undertaken, future work could continue to assess farm systems including:

- Studying the systems and processes of each individual business enterprise using some modelling, combined with on farm assessments to provide baseline data.
- Discussing the values and aspirations of farmers, challenge beliefs or traditions where they may be limiting improved outcomes.
- Reflecting on the results. What are the indicators for this farm with respect to nature, social and economic factors?
- Identifying and optimising current farm strengths.
- Mitigating risks, planning over time to do this in a financially manageable and timely way.
- Reassessing performance to show progress and encourage more actions to be initiated and completed.
- Using the review process to identify areas for further changes.

Specifically with the Lighthouse farm project we would be extremely challenged to achieve much without significant support from TECT, BayTrust and MPI and the close working relationships with our lighthouse farmers, BoP Regional Council and our wider community.

The National Setting

Catchment collective approaches are still an emerging force that is developing at scale across the country. We note that this is a very different approach from regulation and market-led programmes, but MPI - like all of us - is still in the process of understanding catchment group cultures and dynamics and learning how to work with and support catchment groups effectively. We can't overemphasise how important this is with the range of catchment groups, their areas of focus and the scale and resources that underpin their work. It is important that we collaborate to build shared understandings and collective rural land-management cultures in our communities. Key areas of focus are:

1. Supporting individual catchment liaison work.
2. Providing capacity/bandwidth to effectively inform and shape national policy and resource allocation models.
3. Learning and sharing insights from catchment groups around the country and passing those learnings on to catchment groups on the ground.

If we can't sustain some of the momentum that has been generated, we risk losing the expertise, familiarity and understanding of our catchment groups and the expectations in our communities around this work.

Our Work Programme

Our work over the past year has been a combination of programmes of delivery, education and working with others. I have also highlighted recurring areas of focus from previous AGMs and areas where we have not been successful in our ambitions (eg, formulating an overall Catchment Model for the 34,000 ha catchment). The areas of focus and programmes of work over the past year have included:

1. Producing newsletters and enhancing our online presence to tell the stories about the work that we are doing. Not surprisingly, the majority of our

supporters are located in the Bay of Plenty Region with most aged between 25 and 65. Each month we have had a series of posts in areas covering our activities such as revegetation and planting and wider updates that would likely benefit land management such as technology, waste water systems and other enablers that reduce environmental impacts. Over time, our communications have shown increased levels of engagement through distinct types of advertising, use of LinkedIn and Facebook. We note that a lot of feedback is being generated on LinkedIn, which may have good value for our supporters. We have also produced more short-term videos and covered off local events such as plantings at Pongakawa School. On a success area we note that WKI/AgVice won further awards in the 24/25 period.

2. We received funding from Bay Trust for a film – Restoring and Protecting the Bay – Cost Effectively. Funding was received in this 24/25 financial year with a limited release in the current financial year (25/26). The aim is to show the learnings from the Wai Kōkopu experiences utilising learnings from plot trials, Scion research showing smaller seedlings on tough areas work just as well as larger plants, and spray trials. We expect the film observations can be extended to bay wide catchment groups to enhance cost savings and utilisation of money saved to go to more pest and weed control initiatives. Note that following this AGM the film will be available for viewing on YouTube.
3. While we have completed much of the retirement of land in the catchment previously, this year the focus has been on maintenance with the completion of release spraying, succession tree planning, keeping a watching brief on animal pest/stock incursions and advice to farmers on forestry related matters. Wai Kōkopu has been a strong advocate for the Timata planting method as we believe it can produce effective revegetation outcomes in sensitive catchment areas at lower costs than other planting methods. We have done this through advocacy and information and there is a video and technical report to support the Timata method. This work and our advocacy around the Timata (Low-cost native establishment) Plot Method shows comparative growth performance to canopy closure, and the cost savings (1/3 of cost of conventional native establishment) if we were to scale up over the Bay and potentially across other parts of the country.
4. Holding field days and seminars and presenting to the Monitoring and Operations Committee of BoP Regional Council. The field day on the catchment constructed wetlands was a great example of many farmers and others synthesizing the information presented. A key project for Wai Kōkopu was the opening of the Outdoor Classroom at Pongakawa School on 19 June 2024 which is a facility for the school developed by Wai Kōkopu and funded by Bay Trust which will be an enduring legacy facility for the community. We also supported other organisations such as the BoP Farm Forestry Association around their events in the catchment to provide information on what good practice looks like. These provide the tools and confidence for farmers to make changes in farm, horticulture and land management practices. Our major public facing activity was a Vision for the Bay - Our Farming Future held on 3rd July 2024. This event was well attended, with Damien O Connor, Rachel Depree, Andrew Kempson (Fonterra), Graham West, and Chris Brennan (Moxi) all presenting. John Burke and Alison Dewes from Wai Kōkopu facilitated the speakers and discussion throughout the programme. We had around 70 attend the event and Doug Leeder and staff (eg, planners and land managers) from Bay of Plenty Regional Council also attended. The presentations from the day are on our website.
5. We provided ongoing information to farmers around a range of matters such as effluent treatment ponds and consent renewal reports which were produced for farms. These showed an assessment of the current situation and what good management looks like to avoid future challenges and how a warrant of fitness approach will assist farmers over the next few years. The reports were

very comprehensive and covered areas such as descriptions of current effluent systems, consent action summary, things to improve on and good effluent infrastructure. Detailed elements of the reports included risk areas, assessed effluent capacity, soils, an effluent storage calculator and requirements to ensure system compliance. Other areas of support to landowners included information on restoration via native plantings, encouraging action before regulation and advice on nutrient management and land environment plans etc.

6. We also leased our lab equipment to GNS Science on a long term basis for the two pieces of laboratory equipment (an ST-50G Autoclave and an IB-11E incubator) from Wai Kōkopu.
7. The formulation and adoption of a pest and weed strategy and the ability to join with others around implementation of this. This has been a significant piece of work which is ongoing. Meetings and workshops have been held and our team has been actively engaging with parties around funding the delivery of the strategy, albeit likely in a series of components. The project includes active involvement with BoPRC, Iwi, WBoPDC, Transit, NZ Rail, NGOs and ag sectors. Key elements that will determine success are engagement, education and awareness, strategic weed management containment and exclusion zones, rare weeds and nursery biosecurity controls.
8. We endeavoured to get a full Catchment Model built which could assist in deciding on the most economic and effective remediations in the catchment. This would have provided further information on Building Catchment Resilience (BCR) and could have created a world-first catchment decision-support tool to address the complex, inter-connected needs of people, land and water. We went some way to explore this project which developed an optimisation tool to support catchment planning in the context of where mitigation actions are undertaken, and costs involved. The actions are focused mostly on hillslope revegetation, gully remediation, wetland establishment and riparian management. The tool uses a procedure known as multi-objective simulated annealing, which supports complex decision making in the context of trade-offs among different variables (eg, cost, nitrogen and sediment). This process enables multiple optimised solutions to be compared, the constraints to be discussed, and good investment decisions to be made with an overarching plan in mind. I have highlighted this as this is something that may come back to be explored in the future if funding and wider support provided for it. While we were not successful in endeavouring to fund it, the purpose would still be of benefit as a catchment model attempts to show the range of mitigations that both satisfy the council approach (ie, need to meet NPSFM etc.), while also guiding farmers as to the wider benefit of any mitigations they might do on their farm, in a cumulative manner, to help assist contaminant runoff. For example, if they retire LUC 6e-7-8 or exclude stock from steep slopes and change land use to natives or exotics this would provide carbon income, constrain the pastoral area and reduce both GHG and contaminants. It would have provided a visual, science-based approach at a catchment level, which demonstrates what needs to be done to both inspire farmers (that what they do at a spatial and systems level will have cumulative benefit) and also meet cumulative catchment contaminant limits, while also enhancing ecological outcomes, (of where should have natives vs exotics and include biodiversity corridors where required). Another benefit of this catchment plan, is that it is a larger form of a farm plan that joins up council's drivers with farmers drivers, and ecological requirements in a manner that community can engage in.
9. In addition to our current contractors, we also appointed a Rural Connector contractor to encourage improved and lower footprint farming systems by working alongside farmers who are passionate about making change for good. This position is working with our contractors across all of our programmes to

deliver primary sector projects that accelerate landowners towards a sustainable future.

10. The Fish Passage Remediation Project has been completed assessing some 374 sites. Of these 107 had barriers identified, 89 barriers were remediated. The last part of the work involved 28 barriers to be completed noting that 15 of these were not checked or remediated due to landowners not giving permission for our teams to access their property.

Wai Kōkopu Society is well placed to continue this work and our specialist team, board members and the community are well placed to build on the work undertaken in decreasing E- coli, Nitrogen and other nutrients impacting on the health of the rivers and estuary in the wider catchment. There is real momentum in our work programme and we are very grateful for the support we have had from MPI, Bay Trust and TECT.

Our kaupapa is an intergenerational project and we note the commitment of those who are prepared to review their practices in the catchment to improve areas such as:

1. Better riparian management such as stock exclusion from riparian zones.
2. Strategic use of N and P and reducing amount applied at any one time and applications not occurring in highly saturated soils.
3. System change (eg, dairy to beef, spring herd to autumn herd, regenerative focus, reducing stocking rates such as dairy cow numbers).
4. Focussing on land class related to the most suitable land use such as retirement of steep country to native or forestry.
5. More effective and resource efficient irrigation and effluent systems.
6. More diverse pasture swards such as over sowing with more resilient species.

These and other processes are leading to farmers having greater knowledge of their properties' characteristics through improved monitoring and data collection and advice. Overall, it is noted that change is one step at a time and ensuring that people have the confidence, information and support to make changes.

Financial Outlook

While our annual financial report shows prudent use of the financial resources, we cannot maintain the same level of delivery in our programmes due to a very low funding base. As reported previously I would invite the community to support us in our endeavours and funders to actively consider support as we move forward. We are prudently stewarding our resources to obtain the most cost effective outcomes for the catchment. As an example the board has not taken any board fee for some time and I have always covered my own expenses associated with Wai Kopkopu's work including all travel the whole time I have been on the board.

Health and Safety

I have not reported on this previously in our annual reports, but health and safety has been a key part of our board reporting and we maintain induction processes, near miss and accident reporting and undertake an annual health and safety review. Over the past year we have had no near misses or accidents.

The Future

In previous reports I have highlighted that change is not easy and when there are multiple challenges to family/whanau livelihoods then it is even more difficult. A key role for Wai Kōkopu is to have a community-led programme to replenish and revitalise

the health of the Waihī Estuary. This is an intergenerational journey and there will be pressures and tensions along the way and it is important to acknowledge those that have stood up and said we must make changes to restore and replenish the Waihi Estuary; Pongakawa, Kai Kōkopu, and Wharere rivers and surrounding lands.

Given we have little resources to continue our work our focus is to ensure the work we have done is available to the community and farmers to build from. The ongoing success of this catchment work is dependent on:

1. Working closely with all of our funders.
2. Collaborating with other community, partner and stakeholder groups that share the same aspirations.
3. Further developing our relationships with iwi and ensuring that we have strong and complementary alignment of work programmes.
4. Ensuring that what we do is public facing in our programme and activities engage and involve all in our communities around our programmes.
5. Strengthening and having closer working relationships with industry groups such as DairyNZ, Fonterra, Zespri, Beef and Lamb and forestry groups.
6. Supporting initiatives that address issues of climate change mitigation and adaptation.
7. Continuing to advocate for approaches that provide for great environmental outcomes at lower costs such as detainment bunds and planting in the upper catchment area.
8. Supporting initiatives that will enhance land use improvements, estuarine rehabilitation, riparian corridor plans, riparian, wetland and ngāhere (forest) restoration and establishment.
9. Connecting landowners, hau kāinga, sector groups, volunteers, and communities to our projects, to our learnings and to each other.
10. Continuing to facilitate the transfer of knowledge.

My thanks to fellow Board members Darryl Jensen, Michael Crawford, John Scrimgeour and Paul Hickson and to our contractors Alison Dewes, June Mobley, John Burke, Hannah Fromont, Stef Kincheff, Guy Wilkins, Brian Sparrow, Debbie Care, Rachel Mudge, Graham West, Geoff Reid and Peter Russell.

Me mahi tahi tatou mo te oranga o te katoa – we must work together for the wellbeing of all!

Nga mihi nui

Deryck Shaw

www.wai-kokopu.org.nz