Good farming practices to improve water quality

In a number of areas of New Zealand, including Canterbury, farmers and growers using irrigation must have a Farm Environment Plan. Farming leaders also want to see every farm adopt a Farm Environment Plan in the future.

The actions in a Farm Environment Plan are different from one farm to another and designed to reduce environmental risks specific to that farm. The plans are independently audited. Farm Environment Plans cover these actions:

Waterway protection

In intensively stocked areas, waterways must be fenced off from stock. Planting around waterways is also often carried out to reduce erosion and reduce pollutants in waterways and provide shade which benefits fish.

Irrigation efficiency

Farmers have to have water meters installed to check water use, schedule their irrigation and operate their systems efficiently. Here a bucket test is being carried out to check whether the irrigator is applying water evenly.

Effluent management

Farmers must demonstrate they are meeting their effluent consent requirements, and show they are operating their effluent systems efficiently. This includes building storage so they can avoid applying effluent to the soil when it is saturated.

Nutrient management

Farmers must apply fertiliser using calibrated equipment and carefully manage their nutrient use. Many regions also require farmers to reduce their nutrient losses.

Cultivation

Farmers have to take steps to ensure sediment doesn't enter waterways and they avoid compacting the soil when cultivating. Leaving a buffer (rough grass strip) between the waterway and the crop, and avoiding cultivating after heavy rain are two strategies that have been commonly adopted.

Auditing

Farmers must prepare their Farm Environment Plans setting out the actions they will take and when to manage environmental risks on their farms. The plans and their activities are audited by independent auditors regularly and farms are graded on their results.