

## NZIAHS Forum

**“Where do we want our dairy industry to be in 20 years time?”  
Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2010 – Lincoln University**

### **Why don't the mainstream media recognize the importance of our biggest industry?**

By Tim Fulton, Editor  
NZX Farmers' Weekly

Inductions have been on the dairy farming consciousness for 10 to 15 years but only this year did we have an explosive public debate on the issue and the news media sniffing at the cow's backsides for their latest droppings of controversy. I will start with that to frame today's discussion.

I did have my qualms about my contribution because by implication I was being asked to criticize some of my colleagues in the mainstream media and their treatment of the dairy industry. For those who are not familiar with the dynamics of how New Zealand journalism works we have daily media, such as the Dominion Post and The Press, we have magazines like the Listener and North & South, and we have publications with which farmers are well familiar, such as Straight Furrow and NZ Farmers Weekly, that land accessibly in rural mail boxes every week.

A letter to the editor of Straight Furrow about three weeks ago summed up some of the criticism that the media attract. “Information is no longer a requisite for reporting. That standard has been replaced by opinion, inference, comment, supposition and increasing sensationalism.” You can almost feel the blood boiling.

“Consequently the written media word is steadily losing the stability and credibility enjoyed by the readers of past decades. Indeed most but not necessarily all publications in the rural mailbox will not be bothered with if they required a subscription for their placement in the mailbox.” That is the sort of thing that really gets an editor excited. Sometimes we reply and in the spirit of fairness we publish and let ourselves be damned.

*Farmers Weekly* columnist Steve Wood-Harris recently ran his ruler over a *New Zealand Listener* feature on dairying that jumped at us with the headline “Milk is export gold but the damage to our land and waterways is causing alarm”. He said the article was thoughtful, balanced and managed to avoid sensationalizing the industry's impact on the environment, no doubt barricading his house against militant dairy farming neighbours soon after emailing the editor. The Listener left the inescapable feeling that people are inclined to see dairying as a polluting, money-grubbing industry would be unlikely to see past the emotive writing,

although – as Wood-Harris pointed out – New Zealand is ranked 15<sup>th</sup> as the cleanest country on an environmental index published by Harvard University.

My own view is that The Listener article will have been driven by journalism's requirement for a hook, or an angle, which is code for a sensational attention grabber. Detail followed dutifully behind. The formula works well enough for media with regular deadlines. If their stories are found wanting, journalists can soon add a variety of further comments and perspectives. But when it comes to complex subjects like agriculture, demand for the sensational hook tends to pitch-fork coverage from one colourful viewpoint to the next, putting more emphasis on commentary than on investigation. Important detail is no longer just secondary, it is lost altogether.

I can cite another example. *The Press* a year or so ago published an article on the Central Plains water scheme. That story, more than any other, has shaped the views of the Canterbury constituency. It raises the question: how many people's opinions on dairying integrity have been shaped by a single article referring to unsubstantiated research, or to one thread of research, or one particular person cited in one particular story?

The reality is that reporting multi-layered stories like these require time, money and an intense amount of experience. Unfortunately for editors and publishers there is often no guarantee the readers or viewers will be appropriately captivated by the effort invested. As a consequence mainstream media coverage of New Zealand farming is perpetuating a gulf of misunderstanding between farmers who consume specialist media and non farmers who see agriculture through a prism of the dairy cow. We are all the poorer for this.

Until about May 2008 *New Zealand Farmers Weekly* was published by a small publishing company, CountryWide, in Feilding. The stable includes the *Dairy Exporter*, which came on board around the same time as NZX becoming our new owner, *Young Country*, which deserves a plug for presenting a positive upbeat magazine-style view of New Zealand agriculture, and the *Deer Farmer*. The stable includes *Agrifax*, and other information services that help provide us with a credible source of data and analysis to feed into our stories. In more recent times, NZX has added *Clear Grain Exchange*, an outlet for farmers to readily and easily sell their arable products on what is still a developing market, and similar farm information businesses, such as *ProFarmer*, a weekly briefing service, *Australian Crop Forecasts* and *Callum Downs*, which also serves the arable sector.

The mainstream dairy landscape is covered by the New Zealand Herald and Fairfax newspapers and then there are other rural media. So we operate in a diverse field. But it doesn't matter what sort of masthead or title journalists are working for, they need to publish a balanced range of views, opinions and analysis. Analysis is critical and for credible analysis we need to be able to back up our statements.

Some of the statements made here today have been unreferenced and unsubstantiated. Cr Williams, for example, would have much better served us by coming here to present credible information. I raise that not as a personal criticism but the fact is we have people here from various bodies who can wield enormous clout in political and business circles. So these messages must be accurate and timely and they must be balanced. We deserve to know where information is coming from and whether it is correct.

More generally, regarding the town/country divide, we have talked about the lack of understanding about how agriculture actually operates. Some information was presented by DairyNZ showing the typical understanding and empathy towards agriculture. The work they are doing in and around promoting dairy farming is interesting. I quote a comment from a former colleague, Andrea Fox, who is now working for the Fairfax group. She was talking to Tim Mackle, of DairyNZ, and his colleague, Rick Treadmore, and asked if the promotion was pushback against growing public criticism this year of dirty dairying and the practice of inducing pregnant cows to bring on calving. Dr Mackle said a cynical response was to be expected, but planning had started a year earlier. The industry was seeking a social licence to operate.

That is a very telling phrase because the environment in which the media operate is very much a community one. We are influenced by every conference we go to, by every presentation made to us, and by every representation made to us by people in the community.

If the dairy industry can't be successful and secure a social license, then it doesn't matter how many powerpoint presentations are put up here today or how much complex data are presented to show the economic benefits of dairying to the community. Dairy just won't be accepted, particularly intensive dairy farming as it is called.

Dr Mackle said the promotion is trying to build tolerance in the community. I think the only way to build tolerance in the community is to actually build understanding and we in the media have to do our darnedest to make sure we present the relevant information in a fair, responsible and accurate way.