

Forestry is no threat to farming

By: Minister of Agriculture, Damien O'Connor

There's some agitation out there at the moment about farming being under threat from forestry.

In my opinion, much of what's circulating is based on misinformation so it's time to lay out the facts.

It is my understanding that we have 12.1m hectares of farmland in this country and 1.7m hectares of forestry.

Under the One Billion Trees target the amount of forestry land would increase to 2 million hectares by 2028 and help us meet our climate change objectives.

We had 2 million hectares of forest land in 2002, this would be a gradual redistribution that brings us back to that.

There is no Government policy that encourages high-value pastoral land to be planted in pine trees and there is no evidence of this happening.

The latest Overseas Investment Office statistics show about 8,800 hectares of farmland has been converted to forestry under the new special benefits test – that's one thousandth of New Zealand's total sheep and beef land.

The Government is not subsidising whole farm conversions or allowing foreign carbon speculators to buy up farms and plant permanent forests for carbon credits.

The streamlined rules for offshore investors only apply to production forests so talk that the rules are being gamed by offshore carbon speculators is wrong.

The purpose of the One Billion Trees Fund is to help farmers integrate trees onto their properties, which helps diversify their incomes while improving environmental outcomes.

We want the "right tree in the right place, for the right purpose".

The Government provides higher grant rates for native species over pine. Two thirds of the trees established through the Fund will be natives.

Despite what some might say, the Government doesn't "hate" farmers and we're not interested in destroying rural communities.

This Government is extremely proud of the ongoing high performance of our primary sector and we're backing farming for the long term.

We're committed to working alongside farmers to get more value for what they do and step away from a volume focused approach that the last Government pushed.

We're investing in the future of farming in this country.

The \$229 million sustainable land use Budget package is being used to boost farm extension and advisory services.

We're working with and for farmers as shown by our recent agreement on agricultural emissions, our just released skills work plan developed with the sector to attract the workers it requires, our \$40 million of funding for projects to reduce emissions and improve farm practice, our efforts to eradicate Mycoplasma Bovis and our support of farm catchment groups to do the work they need to improve water quality and sustainability.

The Farm Debt Mediation and NAIT Bills aim to provide a safety net from farmers against financial problems and biosecurity outbreaks and we're supporting farmer wellbeing by more than doubling funding for the Rural Support Trust.

We've also progressed trade deals that open up the world's largest economies to our primary exports.

We're not just talking about supporting our farmers to succeed – we're doing it.

We need a balance of farming and forestry to meet our long-term challenges and we all need to support our thriving primary sector.

- Damien O'Connor is the Minister of Agriculture, Minister of State for Trade and Export Growth and Minister for Biosecurity, Food Safety and Rural Communities.

Source: NZ Herald