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### **Farmers' 'freedom to farm' faces fresh challenges**

Farmers need to lift their game in demonstrating self-management of nutrient losses from their farms, or more regulation could follow, warns Ballance Agri-Nutrients' top scientist.

Warwick Catto, the fertiliser co-operative's Head of Agro-Sciences, was responding to a suggestion that the latest Environment Waikato (EW) draft regional policy statement would seek to add the Waikato River catchment to its area of restricted activities.

'The written draft, released last month, does not appear to go that far, but it does put the issue into the public arena, and farmers should be aware that other regional councils are having similar thoughts,' says Mr Catto.

'EW has led the move in this area by targeting the Lake Taupo catchment, but the Horizons Regional Council is following close behind. On the West Coast, regulatory controls are proposed for the Lake Brunner catchment to stipulate the types of phosphate fertiliser that can be used there.'

The EW response for Lake Taupo introduced a cap (limit) on nitrogen losses from farm systems based on the way the land was used between 2001 and 2005 and a requirement for a controlled activity resource consent to farm from next year onwards. However, farmers wishing to exceed that limit may purchase nitrogen credits from another Lake Taupo landowner. EW was aware that about 90 percent of the manageable load of nitrogen entering the lake was from farming, largely as a result of intensification.

Meanwhile, Horizons is proposing that 'intensive farming' activities will require a controlled activity resource consent to farm in certain priority catchments. This means farmers will have to manage the application of fertiliser within strict conditions of their consents which aim to limit the amount of nitrogen that is lost from the farm system.

Horizons already has regulations controlling the aerial topdressing of hill country, with permits necessary before such fertiliser application. Now it is aiming to keep fertiliser out of all waterways, which is a challenge for the topdressing industry requiring tracking, GPS and proof of placement.

Mr Catto says Ballance advocates a self-management approach that could avoid the need for regulations. Farmers can use the fertiliser codes of use, nutrient management plans and other measures to demonstrate improvements.

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'A key condition is nitrogen management, and Ballance is ready to help farmers with advice and planning in this area.'

Mr Catto says farmers are also missing out on the self-managing aspects of their carbon footprint and water use, and should look to become more proactive when it comes to state of the environment reporting.

'From 1 January 2012 manufacturers and processors of key farming activities such as milk or meat production and fertiliser application are required to provide mandatory reporting of greenhouse gas emissions under the Emissions Trading Scheme.

'This means the costs will be passed on to all farmers, regardless of their efforts to mitigate their greenhouse gas emissions to air. They have little chance of controlling those costs.'

However, Mr Catto says the regulations under the ETS legislation are yet to be developed with regard to the technical detail that can provide for on-farm accountability and management.

'It all comes back to proactive and involved management of the environmental components of their farm systems. This includes fertiliser and stock management that monitors and seeks to reduce losses and emissions to both water and air.

'Farmers could well become more engaged in this area, and lobby to put pressure back on the manufacturers and processors to give them more self-determination regarding costs.'

There is also the issue of water allocation, with freshwater management becoming a limiting factor in some areas, particularly Canterbury. Farmers are now facing the prospect of charges for using water and having to demonstrate efficiencies.

'There is evidence that the challenges to each farmer's "freedom to farm" are growing, and as long as farmers continue to look the other way they will miss out on opportunities to show they can self-manage these issues without regulations.'