New Zealand Veterinary Journal

Te Hautaka Tākuta Kararehe o Aotearoa

ISSN: 0048-0169 (Print) 1176-0710 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tnzv20

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To cite this article: D Gardner, B Schauer & J Benschop (04 Feb 2026): A review of the Vets on Farm Programme: supporting veterinarians and farmers following the 2023 North Island weather events in Aotearoa New Zealand, New Zealand Veterinary Journal, DOI: 10.1080/00480169.2026.2614561

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2026.2614561

NEW ZEALAND VETERINARY JOURNAL
https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2026.2614561

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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A review of the Vets on Farm Programme: supporting veterinarians and farmers following the 2023 North Island weather events in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To review the Vets on Farm (VoF) programme, provided to support veterinarians and farmers after New Zealand's North Island weather events of early 2023, by interviewing participating veterinarians and farmers about their experiences with the programme, and to use their responses to develop recommendations to optimise support following future natural hazard events.

Methods: Within the VoF programme, veterinarians had conducted multiple on-farm visits to provide services (farm systems review, feed budgeting, disease management) and collect diagnostic samples.

Subsequently, between October 2024 and January 2025, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating veterinarians and farmers. Interviews covered background information about the respondent, delivery of and services offered/received via VoF, effects and outcomes of VoF, support, and suggestions for future support programmes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and sub-themes, based on which recommendations were developed.

Results: Nine veterinarians and seven farmers from six regions in the North Island were interviewed. Themes were identified in relation to the following topics: benefits and challenges for veterinarians, benefits and challenges for farmers, programme design, and management. Benefits reported by veterinarians included improved relationships with farmer clients, better knowledge of their needs, opportunities to offer clients an expanded range of resources, and satisfaction at being able to help. Challenges included increased demands on time and workload, lack of guidance on selection of participating farmers, and ending the programme without appearing to abruptly withdraw support. Benefits for farmers included strong engagement with their veterinarian, relevant and timely advice on farm management, information from diagnostic test results, and social support. Challenges included workload, stress, and some mismatches between farmer needs and the services available. The general principle of the VoF support was well received.

Conclusions: The in-depth interviews provided rich information and a high level of agreement between veterinarians and farmers. The framework of VoF, including its templates, systems, resourcing and communications, may provide a valuable resource basis for future programmes; however, greater flexibility around allocation of money per farm, testing and services would have allowed better tailoring to farm-specific needs. Follow-up evaluation of farm performance would provide valuable information on the effectiveness of interventions and emerging needs.

Clinical relevance: Veterinary work with clients following extreme events includes providing social support. Training and supervision for veterinarians' social support role needs consideration.

Abbreviations: MPI: Ministry for Primary Industries; NIWE: North Island weather events; VCNZ: Veterinary Council of New Zealand; VoF: Vets on Farm

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 28 July 2025
Accepted 6 January 2026

KEYWORDS
Disaster response; support; programme review

Introduction

In the first 2 months of 2023, a series of unprecedented major weather events hit the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, including Cyclone Hale, Cyclone Gabrielle, and severe flooding in the Auckland region. These North Island weather events (NIWE) predominantly impacted the northern and eastern regions of the North Island. Eleven people lost their lives, and nearly 2,000 people were injured, figures which do not take into account the stress faced by people with damaged homes and livelihoods (Wilson *et al.* 2023). In May 2023, Beef + Lamb New Zealand

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2026.2614561.

estimated the impact of these events on commercial sheep and beef farms in the North Island as between $NZ367 and $NZ422 million (French *et al.* 2023). Immediate impacts were largely due to flooding, silt deposits, and landslip damage, in some regions exacerbated by the movement of woody forestry debris or "slash" (Goode *et al.* 2025). Impacts included loss of livestock, damage to pastures, fences, and tracks as well as damage to buildings, bridges, roads, dams, culverts, and other infrastructure (French *et al.* 2023). Dairy farms were impacted by the loss of electricity and road access (Wilson *et al.* 2023). Longer-term impacts included animal health and welfare issues due to feed shortages, containment issues due to fence damage, and financial instability. The immediate impact on farms was expected to lead to a wider impact on associated businesses, including veterinary practices. Due to the extent of the damage, it was expected that rebuilding would take years. The report by Beef + Lamb New Zealand concluded that farmers needed help in planning how to rebuild, match feed supply and demand, and manage livestock (e.g. renewing fencing), to ensure that farmers could continue to contribute to the economy. Such support would minimise knock-on effects to the wider community and national economy.

Support for people affected by a disaster is extremely important to minimise physical and psychological harm. Social support includes a sense of being reliably connected to others via interpersonal interactions that provide assistance and caring social relationships that are seen to be available in times of need (Kaniasty *et al.* 2019). Post-disaster sources of support include friends, family, neighbours, co-workers, professional providers, and agencies. Support can include emotional support (the sense of being surrounded by others who are caring and understanding); informational support, which provides relevant resources; and tangible support with solutions to specific problems. However, while there are often multiple sources of support immediately following a disaster as others step in to rescue, protect, and help, this support eventually fades to be replaced by feelings of distress, fatigue, and isolation (Kaniasty *et al.* 2019).

Farming communities can face stressors due to social and geographic isolation, financial stress, workload, time pressures, and animal disease; all exacerbated following a disaster. There is increasing recognition that informal networks are important for wellbeing within farming communities. While seldom trained in formal counselling roles, professionals who have regular contact with farmer clients, such as farm advisors, accountants, and veterinarians, can play a vital role in providing support (Wheeler *et al.* 2025). The Recovery Advice Funds programme, from the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), supported farmers impacted by adverse events in 2016–2020 (Kaikōura earthquake, *Mycoplasma bovis* outbreak, and drought) with access to professional advice. Interviews with farmers and farm advisors to evaluate this programme found that support prompted proactive and strategic thinking, planning for future events, financial planning, and improved farming practices, and that it reduced stress (Payne *et al.* 2021). There is, however, a need for further information on how best to support farmers affected by disasters. Following the NIWE, a series of support packages were released as part of the NIWE Response and Recovery Funding for affected areas (MPI 2023). In 2023, MPI provided $NZ2.6 million for the initiative "Vets on Farm – supporting your recovery" (VCNZ 2023), which is subsequently referred to as the Vets on Farm (VoF) programme and is the focus of this paper.

The VoF programme covered the entire east coast of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. The Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ) facilitated the programme. Veterinary practices registered with the VCNZ were eligible to enrol in the programme and offer funded services, including on-farm advice and support to production animal farmers in regions recovering from the NIWE. The aim was to "help animal farmers following the extreme climate issues they faced in 2023, ensuring they have healthy animals and a plan for their continued welfare and productivity" (VCNZ 2023). A media release was published by VCNZ on 6 December 2023 outlining the aims, funding, and approach of the programme. Veterinarians were then able to recruit expressions of interest from farmers and submit applications to the VCNZ during December 2023. Services could be implemented between 1 January and 31 March 2024.

Once veterinarians received information about the programme, they needed to decide how to convey it to farmers and which farmers to inform. Communication methods included calling clients, sending emails, or organising information meetings about the programme. The programme was also announced by VCNZ via social media. Veterinarians reported that interest was greater than the number of farmers that could be supported so they needed a selection process that was seen as fair.

According to veterinary participants, the list of supported services was prescribed by VCNZ. Testing included services such as faecal egg counting and assessment of drench resistance in sheep, trace element status in sheep and cattle, and disease surveillance in sheep and cattle. The latter focused on bovine viral diarrhoea, while leptospirosis and salmonellosis could be tested for if there was clinical evidence. One veterinary practice also gained approval from VCNZ to test for mastitis, which was thought to be related to the cyclone. Consultancy services covered a farm systems review and the preparation of an animal health plan and a feed budget.

Farm visits comprised the following phases: (1) initial visit where veterinarians gathered farm data (farm size,

number of stock units, infrastructure, stock reconciliation, system, type, farm recording), identified areas that the farmers were struggling with or risk areas, and formulated a plan around sampling; (2) sample collection requiring one or two (if faecal egg count reduction testing was carried out) visits; and (3) consultancy/reporting consisting of 1–3 visits for discussion of test results, feed budgeting and animal health planning.

The research objective of this study was to review the VoF programme from the perspective of participating veterinarians and farmers and develop recommendations to optimise support following future natural hazard events.

Materials and methods

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to gather qualitative data from veterinarians and farmers who had participated in the VoF programme. A semi-structured interview covers a set of core questions but provides flexibility to explore additional details and perspectives from participants (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2022). Interview guides were developed (Supplementary Material 1 and 2), which included four parts: background information about the respondent (nature of practice or farm, role, age group, ethnicity); delivery of and services offered/received via VoF; effects and outcomes of VoF support; and suggestions for future support programmes. Two information sheets were prepared, one for veterinarians and one for farmers, to introduce the research team, provide background information on the VoF programme, outline the review processes, and invite those who were interested to contact the researchers by email or phone. The programme review was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3 (OM3 24/33).

The VCNZ, which maintains the list of veterinarians who participated in the VoF programme and their contact details, emailed veterinarians about the research in October 2024. The list of veterinarians included 18 veterinary practices, six of which had clinics in multiple locations, resulting in 27 veterinary clinics in total that received support. No information was available on the number of farmers who received VoF support. Initial research recruitment focused on the Wairarapa/Hawkes's Bay region to facilitate in-person interviews. Later recruitment efforts extended to Northland and Coromandel. Veterinarians, whether they wished to be interviewed or not, were asked to forward study information and the information sheet for farmers, to farmers who had received support from VoF. Potential participants were asked to respond to the research team by email or phone. Research team members then called or emailed to arrange interviews between November 2024 and February 2025.

Most respondents were offered either an in-person or an online interview, although veterinarians and farmers in Northland and those who contacted the research team after 23 January 2025 were only offered online interviews due to research resource constraints. Online interviews were conducted via Teams or Zoom. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai (https://otter.ai/transcription).

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method that identifies patterns and meanings within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2022; Finlay 2021). Veterinarian and farmer interviews were analysed separately. Analysis followed the six-phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (2021). (1) Familiarisation with the data was achieved by checking the accuracy of all transcripts with editing to replace all identifiable information (e.g. names) by a number. (2) This was followed by initial coding. Codes are segments of data that capture a single idea or concept relevant to the research question. Each transcript was reviewed, and separate boards were created in Trello software, a web-based list-creation program (https://trello.com). Six main topics were covered with a Trello board for each: benefits for farmers, challenges for farmers, benefits for veterinarians, challenges for veterinarians, programme design, and programme management. Relevant interview content was assigned to topics listed within each board. (3) Subsequently, initial themes were developed within each topic by collating material that represented distinct concepts. (4) Themes and sub-themes were then reviewed, based on discussion within the research team, and further review of transcripts and codes before (5) assignment of a clear definition and name for each theme. Lastly (6), results were reported for each major topic and its associated themes and subthemes.

Participants

The initial approach, in which veterinarians were asked to email information to farmers, did not result in any farmer participants. Accordingly, veterinary interviewees were asked by the researchers to contact their farmer clients about the study. Veterinarians reported that they had provided information about the study to farmers face-to-face during on-farm visits, by email, or during scheduled meetings with farmer groups. Veterinarians who had not participated in the study were emailed again by the researchers in January 2025 and reminded to forward information on the study to farmer clients.

Results

Nine interviews were undertaken with veterinarians and seven with farmers. Two participants (one veterinarian and one farmer) initially agreed but withdrew due to other time commitments. Despite the smaller numbers than planned, the in-depth interviews provided rich and sufficient study information and a high level of agreement. Table 1 provides information on participant demographics. All veterinarians worked in mixed practices with 2–5 species or production types mentioned (mainly beef, sheep and dairy). Five veterinarians had worked in their current practice for > 10 years. All but one participant (consultant) were clinical veterinarians. Five were the owner or director of the practice, one was a board member and two were the lead veterinarians.

On farms, the total number of animals ranged from 1,170 to over 4,000. The farmer with the highest number of stock (4,500–8,500 depending on the season) was a trader, with most stock on the farm for < 9 months. All seven farms were commercial sheep and beef farms. One of these also farmed deer, and another provided grazing support for dairy. Four participating farmers owned the farm, two managed the farm, and one operated the farm.

The following sections will outline the main findings from the thematic analysis for each of the main topics. Table 2 provides an overview of topics, themes, and sub-themes.

Benefits for veterinarians

Five themes were identified: financial support, improved relationships with farmers, information and data, opportunities for business development, and satisfaction at being able to help.

Financial support

There was a clear financial benefit for engaging in the programme. Several veterinarians mentioned the benefits of extra financial support at a slow time of year, as the economic pressures on the farming sector had flow-on effects to other services.

Table 1. Number of veterinarians and farmers interviewed in a study of the Vets on Farm programme, by gender, age group, and ethnicity.

Variable and category	Veterinarians (n = 9)	Farmers (n = 7)
Gender		
Male	5	6
Female	4	1
Age group (years)		
30–39	1	2
40–49	2	2
50–59	0	2
≥60	1	1
Not stated	5	0
Ethnicity		
New Zealand European	8	7
European	1	0
Māori	0	0

Improved relationships with farmers

Two sub-themes were apparent under this theme: more time communicating, and better mutual understanding and trust. Veterinarians reported that before VoF, they could not always spend a great deal of time with their farmer clients due to time and cost constraints. Often, prior interactions with farmers had been seen as transactional, with veterinarians providing products and free advice but often without deeper engagement and understanding of their clients' needs. The support from VoF enabled veterinarians to pay multiple visits to each participating farmer and discuss their issues and concerns in depth. While some felt that they already knew their clients well, others felt that they had been making assumptions, not always correctly, about what their clients wanted. For example, Veterinarian 5 reported that *"all of a sudden I realised that they [farmer clients] do want more progressive services"*. The on-farm visits built a better understanding of their clients and a stronger interpersonal relationship. Veterinarian 1 noted: *"I think the general principle was great. … I think it actually creates a great relationship between the vet and the farmer"*. Increased communication could help veterinarians and farmers move away from *"just doing it because you've always done it that way"* or a *"tick box"* approach to drenching or supplementing (Veterinarian 1) and could lead to *"farming a lot better"* (Veterinarian 2). Communication could also include setting up or continuing groups of farmers for sharing information about, for instance, parasite management and farm systems, which could include information from VoF supported testing.

The increased engagement was seen as building trust and creating opportunities for farmers to speak freely about their concerns. Having seen how farmers appreciated knowing more about what veterinarians could offer, several veterinarians wanted to continue the increased engagement with farmers and to offer extended services once the programme had ended. As well as supporting the sustainability of veterinary businesses, this could mean a proactive way to uncover animal health issues before they became severe and, therefore, more expensive to address. Veterinarian 4 commented that *"it set an example of what's achievable"* and Veterinarian 1 noted that *"farmers actually see you as a trusted advisor … you're adding value to the relationship"*. Veterinarians were hopeful that this increased trust, communication, and expanded use of veterinary services would continue, but recognised that clients were alert to the cost–benefit of services and needed to see tangible financial or performance outcomes.

Table 2. Topics, themes, and sub-themes derived from thematic analysis of interviews with veterinarians and farms regarding the Vets on Farm programme.

Topics	Themes	Sub-themes
Benefits for veterinarians	Financial support	
	Improved relationships with farmers	More time communicating
		Mutual understanding and trust
	Information and data	
	Opportunities for business development	Demonstrate value and extend the scope of services
		Workforce skill development and better use of team resources
	Satisfaction at being able to help	
Challenges for veterinarians	Time and workload	Service delivery within a tight time frame
		Increased workload
	Selection of farms	Communicating the opportunity to farmers
		Maintaining a fair process
	Ending the programme	
Benefits for farmers	Stronger engagement with the veterinarian	
	Information	Improved management of on-farm issues
		Benchmarking
		Education/learning
	Social support	Through the veterinarian
		Through the community
	Financial support	
Challenges for farmers	Workload and stress	
	Variability in services	
	Laboratory capacity	
Programme design	Value of support	
	Flexibility	Allocation of money per farm
		Flexibility in services
	Impact assessment	
Programme delivery and management	Planning	Initial consultation
		Verifying capacity
	Timing	Faster rollout
		Longer lead-in time
		Time of the year
		Duration of programme
	Administration	Templates and guidance
		Transparency about allocation of farms
	Communication and dissemination	Clarity of communication
		Communication tools
		Dissemination

Information and data

Knowing more about farmer clients' needs and the use of farm-specific data allowed veterinarians to better tailor services to the individual farm. There was some discussion about how to best collate the data and keep it current. Some veterinarians used tools such as FARMAX (https://www.farmax.co.nz/), while others had purpose-built spreadsheets. The importance of good record-keeping and communicating findings to farmers was recognised and seen as a motivation for continuing the increased collaborative approach with their farmer clients. Good farm-specific data was seen as supporting tailored advice and plans for farms *"in a more formal way"* (Veterinarian 4).

Opportunities for business development

Sub-themes under this theme were: demonstrating value and extending the scope of services; and workforce skill development and better use of team resources. VoF allowed veterinarians to demonstrate the value of their services, especially when there had previously been only limited engagement with some clients. VoF was reported to have supported "modernising" the business, from reactive problem solving to offering more professional and advisory services (Veterinarian 5), and to have provided a springboard on which to capitalise, with the aim of getting away from *"giving free advice and selling product"* (Veterinarian 1). Other veterinarians saw an opportunity to set up annual subscription-based plans for farmers, to provide ongoing services in a cost-effective way. Where veterinarians said they were not planning to extend their services, it was because they had already been offering these services, so they felt no change was needed.

Participants also discussed workforce skill development and team resources. For example, some veterinarian participants reported that their teams gained skills in emergency management, farm systems, biosecurity, FARMAX and parasitology. In contrast, others reported that they already had relevant skills and felt that they were doing work they would usually be doing, or that it was *"just run of the mill everyday vet work"* (Veterinarian 9). Participants reported that the increased workload created opportunities for

younger veterinarians to do more of the work that senior veterinarians would usually carry out, gaining experience and confidence by doing so, which contributed to their career development. There were also opportunities to engage the wider team, for example, by using staff skills to develop spreadsheets and visuals to communicate with farmers. The time and workload pressures of the programme may have been an incentive to build increased teamwork and to develop more efficient ways of working and team-building, with increased collaboration across the team helping to *"deliver an awesome service to our clients in a time of need"* (Veterinarian 3).

Satisfaction at being able to help

Veterinarians reported a sense of achievement, well-being and satisfaction that came from being able to help their clients. Some of this satisfaction came from the opportunity to work directly with farmers, for example it was *"very rewarding to be able to have that level of interaction with farmers"* (Veterinarian 2) and *"[it] reinforced how much joy I get talking to farmers and helping them solve their problems"* (Veterinarian 9). There was also a sense of professional achievement and growth. Being able to help others created satisfaction and appreciation for the rewarding work*:*

> It was fantastic to be able to reach those clients in need and help them in a time when they just needed their trusted advisor beside them … the positive reinforcement we got from our farmers, and our clients was worth it. (Veterinarian 3)

Challenges for veterinarians

Three themes were identified: time and workload, selection of farms, and ending the programme.

Time and workload

Sub-themes were around service delivery within a tight time frame as well as increased workload and stress. Veterinarians reported that they had been informed of the start of the programme in early December and had to obtain expressions of interest from farmers and submit applications by mid-December. Participants reported that implementation from January to March meant that at the start some staff and farmers were on leave, increasing workloads for those remaining. Hence, most of the planning, scheduling meetings with farmers, and delivery of the additional services took place over 2 months, which was tight.

The additional workload for VoF was described as *"huge"* (Veterinarian 4) and *"a challenge … a strain"* (Veterinarian 5). When a single veterinarian undertook all of the VoF service delivery while colleagues managed the routine work, this was reported to create overwhelming workloads and stress. The extent to which the programme increased workload for veterinarians did, however, depend on the number of supported farms and how the work was managed within practices. Pressure was less where fewer farmers were being supported and where the additional work was shared among veterinarians within the practice (Veterinarian 3).

Selection of farms

Two sub-themes were focused on communicating the opportunity to farmers and maintaining a fair process. Once veterinarians had received information about the programme, they needed to decide how to convey it to farmers and which farmers to inform. Four veterinarians sent the information to all of their farmer clients, while five contacted farmers they knew to have been severely affected. One veterinarian contacted farmer clients they felt were the most progressive and likely to be interested in the programme. Only one veterinarian also approached farmers who were not clients.

Veterinarian participants were concerned about maintaining a fair process in selecting farmers to support as they could not support all of those who had expressed interest in the programme. They needed a selection process that was seen as fair, but the programme provided little guidance on how to do this. Selecting the subset of farmers who could be supported was therefore difficult. Veterinarians found creative ways to address these issues, from "out of a hat" random selection of those who had expressed interest to offering the programme only to those they thought would benefit most, although the short lead-in time made it difficult to assess this.

Ending the programme

The deadline for the programme closure was 31 March 2024. There was little flexibility. This left veterinarians feeling concerned about how suddenly withdrawing the funded support would affect their clients: *"You can't just be free on the 30th of March and expensive on the second of April"* (Veterinarian 9). Veterinarians looked for ways to continue to engage with and support their clients. Some set up ongoing workshops and discussions or continued to engage with existing discussion groups, some offered free contact for 12 months, while others were looking to offer packages of ongoing services.

Benefits for farmers

Four themes were found: stronger engagement with the veterinarian and appreciation of veterinary services, information, social support and financial support.

Stronger engagement with the veterinarian and appreciation of veterinary services

Stronger engagement between the farmer and the veterinarian emerged as a common theme, both in farmer and veterinarian interviews, which generated a greater mutual understanding. Farmers and veterinarians alike noted that the relationships between farmers and veterinarians could change as a result of the in-depth engagement and discussions. While farmers who reported that they already had a strong relationship with the veterinarian did not perceive any changes in this area, they reported that they still valued the on-farm time, which provided social as well as practical support. A stronger relationship between farmer and veterinarian could increase trust, with farmers being more willing to share information or approach the veterinarian in the future:

> I didn't actually realise that you could talk to a vet without them charging you an arm and a leg just to get a little bit of advice, which I was completely wrong about because we didn't have a close relationship with them. (Farmer 7)

Veterinarians paid multiple visits to participating farms, and this provided support and reassurance for farmers. The in-depth services and undivided veterinary time also demonstrated to farmers what a veterinarian can offer, while veterinarians gained a deeper understanding of the farm situation, which enabled more farm-specific advice. Benefits were expected, by farmers and veterinarians, to continue beyond the duration of the programme. Improved engagement and mutual understanding were seen as a long-term asset with both the veterinarian and farmer working together to *"optimise farm performance"* (Farmer 7).

Information

Sub-themes related to information included improved management of on-farm issues such as animal health, farm management, benchmarking, and learning.

Farmers reported that they had learned more about how veterinary professional services could contribute to farming success and that they were making good use of this information. Some did not need much help but valued confirmation that their current approaches were appropriate. Others learned a great deal from talking about their concerns and farm management practices, and discussing the results of testing, feed budgeting, and farm planning. Farmers reported that testing enabled them to make evidence-based decisions regarding the purchase/sale of stock, change existing or take up new products, and supplementation of feed. Informed decision-making and changes in farm management were seen as enhancing animal health, e.g. through feed budgeting, more effective drenches, supplementation with trace elements, prevention, and control measures for infectious diseases, all of which provided tools they could continue to use after the end of the programme. Feed budgeting was seen as especially useful, both during business as usual and in situations where farmers had lost grazing land. Human health also benefited, especially when leptospirosis was detected on the farm, which led to enhanced awareness for the farmer and farm staff and more caution when visitors were in contact with stock. Some farmers also noted that the information allowed them to carry out some limited benchmarking, or comparisons with other farms. Given the short period for which the programme was funded and available, testing was done within a short time frame so results could be comparable across farms. One farmer emphasised the value received from an informational meeting where the veterinarian reported on results from other participating farmers.

Farmers also reported that VoF supported learning and increased knowledge. Most veterinarians dedicated a 2–3-hour visit to go through the test results and the report, explained how to interpret the results and translated this information into management decisions. Farmer 5 reported that their veterinarian had encouraged the farmer to buy their own microscope and provided training on how to use it to monitor worms, allowing for both more frequent information and a greater sense of control over on-farm issues.

Social support

Support received directly from the veterinarian and from increased engagement with other affected farmers was valued, especially amongst farmers who were badly affected. While on-farm conversations appear to have focused on practical farm management issues, they also included reassurance and normalisation of farm practices and personal responses to flooding. Farmers found it helpful to have someone to talk to, offload and share their stresses and concerns. For example, Farmer 3 stated *"things were a little bit overwhelming. To have professionals coming in beside you and offering support … really helped,"* and Farmer 1 said: *"You've got someone who can give you good advice, someone who can listen. … It helps mentally."* Ongoing meetings organised as a follow-on to VoF also helped with building support networks when farmers wanted to connect with others and share information and experiences. Four veterinarians had organised meetings or workshops at the end of the programme for participating farmers or all farmer clients, which provided farmers not just with information but also with non-technical peer support.

Financial support

The VoF programme provided funding at a difficult time and prompted farmers to spend time on testing and veterinary services, which they might not have done otherwise or might have delayed due to financial pressures. The test results alerted farmers to problems that they may have otherwise only found out about later, such as off-farm infection sources: *"We didn't understand how badly it was affecting our youngest stock"* (Farmer 6), and also reassurance, when specific problems (theileriosis, leptospirosis, bovine viral diarrhoea) were tested for and not found. Participating farmers reported that the resulting management changes likely contributed to better production outcomes and greater returns: *"Our lamb weights went up because they are being drenched for something that works"* (Farmer 7).

Challenges for farmers

Three main challenges were identified: workload and stress, variability in services, and laboratory capacity.

Workload and stress

Farmers reported that arranging on-farm visits and stock testing created challenges. Farmers needed to locate livestock that had strayed or were lost, repair fences, and find sufficient grazing, among other issues, so arranging time for on-farm visits and stock testing created extra work. Scheduling farm visits was a challenge for some, especially when farms had been badly damaged: *"I come from a long line of really fussy farmers, yeah, and it's trashed"* (Farmer 6). Working out how to get to stock and hold them for sample collection presented added challenges, especially where races and yards were still not accessible. In addition, sample collection was time-consuming, especially the faecal egg count reduction tests, which was seen as *"extra work involved when you've got so much to do"* (Farmer 7). Stress was mentioned multiple times. Farmers talked about their experiences as *"a really stressful time"* (Farmer 6), and *"mentally devastating"* (Farmer 7). For some farmers, test results brought bad news, but veterinarians provided ongoing support, advice, and training to help farmers adjust their management practices: *"I cried for a week thinking, what else do we need to get thrown at us? But [the veterinarian] actually turned our business around"* (Farmer 7).

Variability in services

Farmer participants had mixed views on whether the funded services met their needs. Farmer 4 noted that the *"vet was annoyed that they couldn't test for what we were looking for"*; Farmer 1 noted that the testing for drench resistance would have been better at the start of lambing, and other farmers indicated that they were already carrying out some of the functions (feed budgeting, testing) but the VoF support enabled them to do it in more depth. Several farmer participants indicated the need for in-depth initial consultation to ensure that farmers' needs were met.

Laboratory capacity

One veterinarian and two of this veterinarian's farmers reported that a problem with laboratory capacity resulted in lost samples and inaccurate results, which caused frustrations and disappointments for the farmers and their veterinarian: *"They tested for the wrong things, … [samples] got lost and were too late getting there"* (Farmer 2).

Programme design

Three themes were identified by veterinarian and farmer participants: the value of support, flexibility, and impact assessment.

Value of support

Respondents were strongly positive about the general principle of VoF support: *"I think the general principle was great. … I think it actually creates a great relationship between the vet and the farmer"* (Veterinarian 1); *"I think that the format was really good, … I don't think there's anything I'd have changed there"* (Farmer 3). Participants emphasised the value of the programme and the need to offer similar support in future.

Flexibility

Some participants felt that there would be value, in future, in increasing programme flexibility both in terms of the allocation of money per farm and in the services provided. Three veterinarians thought that too much money was allocated per farm and that they would have provided better value if they could have spent less money per farm over more farms. This view was supported by two farmers who commented that it was difficult to spend that much money within the short time frame, as it was *"quite a considerable amount"* (Farmer 2) and *"hard to use it all up, especially on a smaller place"* (Farmer 4). In contrast, one veterinarian thought that the amount was right to make the programme worthwhile.

The VoF programme prescribed the services and testing that could be done. For example, while some farmers highly valued the feed budget, animal health plans or testing, others did not consider them important either because they were already routinely carrying out these processes or there was not seen to be a need at the present time. Some farmers did the testing because it was free, not because they thought it was necessary. On the other hand, cases

were mentioned where farm-specific needs were originally not covered by VoF (e.g. mastitis, Johne's disease) or were only supported if there was evidence (e.g. leptospirosis, salmonellosis).

Impact assessment

The programme did not provide any funding for longer-term follow-up to assess the impact of the programme, and some benefits will only be observed 12 or 18 months later. This has left a lack of information about whether changes in farm practices could, over time, show beneficial outcomes in terms of disease prevalence and production gains, although it did provide a *"snapshot of data at a time"* (Farmer 6), and that longer term tracking of information could allow a learning process to *"collate information and find out disease trends and things that are happening"* (Veterinarian 9).

Programme delivery and management

Veterinarian and farmer participants provided multiple suggestions for improving the programme as well as suggesting strong aspects which should be continued. The themes were: planning, timing, administration, and communication and dissemination.

Planning and consultation

Two aspects were raised about the planning phase: the need for initial consultation, and to verify capacity in advance. Seven of the nine veterinarians reported that they had been consulted before the start of the programme and had been asked to submit proposals on aspects such as how to package the programme, what it would cost, what would be required, and what proportion of the area had been affected. One veterinarian who had not been consulted in advance expressed the need to do so in the future, also emphasising the need to consult with farmers.

Timing

There were several concerns from veterinarians and farmers about the programme timing, including the need for faster post-event rollout, a longer lead-in time, consideration of the time of the year, and the programme duration.

In relation to faster rollout, programme implementation started 10 months after the cyclone. While participants reported that this late roll-out created the potential to focus on farmers with a longer-term need of assistance, they also felt that a faster roll-out after the cyclone could have increased the effectiveness of services such as advisory work and social support, feed budgeting and disease testing (e.g. leptospirosis). However, rolling the programme out too soon after the event may have been hampered by problems accessing stock and getting them into yards, workload and stress pressures on farmers, and farmers placing priorities on immediate repairs. Some veterinary and farmer participants suggested that future programmes should be made available 6 rather than 10 months after the event to enhance the effectiveness of some services, whilst ensuring farmers have the priority and capacity to participate.

The programme appeared to have a long development phase, then a short time frame for veterinarians to reach out to farmers, seek expressions of interest, deliver services, receive the results of testing and then provide these results and supporting advice back to farmers. This led to a sudden and intense rush to organise things shortly before Christmas, which caused stress for veterinarians and farmers and may have restricted some farmers from participating: *"we tried as much as we could to plan in a really short space of time the best way to implement the services to ensure that the clients got the best possible outcome … it was really hard"* (Veterinarian 3). A longer time frame was thought to support better programme development, delivery, and follow-up and reduce stress for veterinarians and farmers. Programme implementation took place from January to March (summer/early autumn). Whilst parasite burdens are high in autumn, some farmers felt that springtime testing would have allowed them to implement management decisions before the main production period.

The duration of the programme was also discussed. A longer period for which funding and support were available was suggested by veterinarians as allowing them more time to prepare the report, present the findings to farmers and possibly follow up on recommendations. Given the time pressure, the final farm visit was done at a time when some laboratory findings were not yet fully available. A longer contact period with the farmers would have also strengthened the connection with and reduced the stress for farmers and veterinarians; the programme was said to be "*too condensed*" (Farmer 1), "*very rushed*" (Farmer 2), and that "*3 months are not enough to turn a farm around*" (Veterinarian 3).

Programme administration

Two issues were identified in relation to administration: templates and guidance, and transparency about allocation of farms.

During the programme, VCNZ provided several adjustments to templates, invoicing and guidance. Veterinarians acknowledged that it was a learning process and that adjustments were needed as the programme developed. There were seen to be advantages to a prescribed approach, as applying the same testing approach across all participating farms allowed comparison of results. It also helped ensure that veterinarians were offering the same services to all farms (fairness) and, in some cases, fostered veterinarian

skill development. However, a greater degree of flexibility would have enabled services to be tailored to farm-specific needs, avoiding the need to "*reinvent the wheel*" (Veterinarian 7). The templates, experiences, and lessons learnt were seen as valuable outcomes in themselves, which could be refined for future use. Guidance on what testing could be funded also changed over time, causing problems if additional testing became possible but samples had already been discarded by the laboratory. Invoicing was challenging as veterinarians reported that they were asked to invoice for the work before they went on the farm, which was particularly problematic for farms the veterinarian was not familiar with.

There was also discussion, especially from veterinarians, about the allocation of farms. It was not clear from the interviews how farms were allocated to practices, for example, whether allocation was based on the capacity of the veterinary teams. However, it was noted that it would not be fair to determine the number of supported farms based on the number of submitted applications, as this would not necessarily match the severity of damage experienced in the regions.

Communication and dissemination

Three sub-themes were identified: clarity, communication tools, and dissemination.

In relation to clarity, several veterinarians would have welcomed more guidance on planning (workload, resources) and selection criteria. Veterinarians expressed concern that it was not clear in advance how many farmers could be funded, how best to select the farms to support, and how to ensure that the funding available could be used in ways that matched farmers' needs.

Communication methods between VCNZ, veterinarians and farmers were discussed. Only one veterinarian mentioned that VCNZ had offered two Zoom meetings in early December to inform veterinarians about the programme. The VCNZ also established an online platform to share information and encourage veterinarians to exchange experiences and questions. Uptake of the Zoom meeting and online platform was reported by veterinarians to be low, possibly due to the limited lead-in time and high workloads of veterinarians in general. Veterinarians reported that they had communicated information about the programme with farmers by means of email and phone, which was time-consuming.

Discussion

Following the NIWE, a wide range of support was needed for affected farms and farmers in order to reduce the impacts on animal welfare and the financial, mental, and physical health of farmers and farming communities (Kaniasty *et al.* 2019; BLNZ 2023). The VoF programme provided on-farm advice and support to production animal farmers who had been affected by the NIWE. Interviews with veterinarians and farmers who had participated in the programme identified a range of benefits, challenges and recommendations.

In terms of beneficial outcomes, veterinarians reported that the programme enabled them to spend more time with their farmer clients, gain a better understanding of clients' needs, build ongoing positive relationships, and provide growth opportunities for veterinary practices. Within the practices, the extra work provided opportunities for skill development and learning, especially when younger veterinarians were given active roles to play in the programme. Veterinarians also reported a sense of satisfaction at being able to help affected clients. Farmers reported that the on-farm time with their veterinarian provided practical advice that helped them make informed decisions about farm management, which they felt could improve farm performance. In addition, the testing for disease and parasites provided data that veterinarians and farmers could use to establish feed budgets and animal health plans, an important tool for farmers (Walker 2014). Challenges for veterinarians and farmers included stress and time demands. Veterinarians were required to undertake additional work on top of their business-as-usual roles, while farmers were still grappling with damage to infrastructure, loss of livestock and pasture, and other flood-related issues. Discussions of programme design highlighted that programme timing in relation to the cyclones and flooding did not always match the needs of farmers at that particular point in time (summer/autumn), and the time frame for delivery of programme-supported services (3 months) was seen as very tight. Other issues, which primarily affected veterinarians, were the need to identify farmers who would most benefit from the support, to offer relevant and timely services, and to find cost-effective ways to continue to offer support once VoF funding ended.

While on-farm conversations appear to have focused on practical farm management issues, farmers and veterinarians reported that the programme also provided social support, which fostered better farmer mental health. Farmers and rural communities in general can experience poor physical and mental health due to, for example, isolation, financial stress, workload and time pressures, weather and climate change, animal disease, and a stoic identity creating a reluctance to seek help (Wheeler *et al.* 2025). Informal support networks are valuable for farmer wellbeing as farmers are more likely to turn to their own communities than to contact health providers, especially where mental health issues are concerned. Farming peers, friends, family, and business professionals can provide a sense of caring and solidarity through their day-to-day interactions with farmers

(Wheeler *et al.* 2025). This dynamic was evident in the role that veterinarians in the present study were seen to play in providing social support to their farmer clients. Farm advisors and accountants, as well as veterinarians, have been identified as finding themselves in the position of "accidental counsellors" who provide support to farmers despite not being trained for this aspect of their role (Wheeler *et al.* 2025). Veterinarians in the VoF programme were seen to provide information support and practical help, as well as emotional support or the sense of being connected to others who care (Kaniasty *et al.* 2019). Farmer participants reported that they found it helpful to have someone to talk to, to offload and share their stresses and concerns. Sources of support also included discussion groups where farmers could share information about animal health and farm management issues. The benefits of social support for psychological wellbeing and physical health are well established and, in the case of VoF, the veterinarians provided support over a longer time frame than the immediate post-disaster support resources.

Findings from the present study and evaluation of a prior project that provided support to disaster-affected farmers in Aotearoa New Zealand (Payne *et al.* 2021), have identified a range of recommendations related to programme communication, eligibility, tailoring, timing, evaluation, and the inclusion of Māori. Multiple communication methods are needed both for consultation about the programme development and informing veterinarians and farmers about the opportunities for support. Following a disaster, farmers need time to identify their needs, opportunities for support, and eligibility. Help with this could come from peers, accountants, and rural advisors as well as veterinarians. Some channels for communication might include social media, traditional media (rural papers, Fieldays, radio), and industry partners. Communication plans should include ways to reach isolated individuals and communities. Consultation will help ensure that there is capacity for veterinarians to offer the services and for laboratories to support the additional testing. In relation to eligibility, funding opportunities are likely to be over-subscribed. To minimise the risk of inequities, eligibility criteria need to be formalised and clearly communicated. Application processes should be readily accessible and easy to use. Support resources need to be matched to needs, and each disaster or event will have different issues which affect the timing, funding and nature of support needs, the optimal time lag between events and the roll-out of support, and the duration for which funding is available. A balance between programme flexibility and standardisation of services is likely to be required. Advantages of a standardised approach could include standardised analysis and comparison of results, and this could help ensure that veterinarians were offering the same services to all farms (fairness). However, a degree of flexibility would avoid duplication or unnecessary services and allow opportunities to accommodate farm-specific needs.

Veterinarians and others who provide support to farmers need support and training for this aspect of their roles. Issues can include maintaining professional boundaries, managing personal distress, and ensuring personal safety (Wheeler *et al.* 2025). Little information on these issues emerged from this study so these are worth further investigation. Evaluation of the on-farm impact could produce data on the value of extended veterinary services. While no data on farm performance was available for this review, such data would provide a useful basis for future planning, and data sharing between MPI, veterinarians, farmers, and rural advisors may provide valuable learning opportunities. Finally, there is an urgent need for deeper involvement of Māori in emergency management at all levels (Bush International Consulting 2024), especially given the impact of extreme weather events on Māori communities (Goode *et al.* 2025) and the importance of Māori-owned agribusinesses (MPI 2023). Key to effective future programmes will be consultation between programme designers, funders, and participating stakeholders including veterinarians, farmers, iwi, and laboratories providing testing services.

Study strengths and limitations

Participants self-selected into the study, so it is not known whether the sample reflects those with particularly positive experiences, although participants expressed critical views of certain aspects, especially time frames and programme flexibility. In addition, the time lag between programme delivery and the interviews may have affected participant recall of some relevant information. Importantly, as no Māori veterinarians or farmers participated in the study, this perspective is missing. At the time of this research, there was no separate information on the impacts of the NIWE on Māori farmers in the affected regions or on how the veterinary profession can best support Māori emergency management and these will be important gaps to address in future.

Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm that the VoF programme was felt by study participants to be successful in providing valuable services and support for affected farmers and veterinarians. These initial findings suggest that veterinarians can provide valuable support for disaster-affected farmers. Planning for future programmes will require consideration of the practicalities of providing services in a post-disaster context. Our findings indicate a range of benefits, as

veterinarians and farmers gained from increased mutual understanding, social support, farm management and animal welfare information, improved practices, and evidence-informed decisions. Programme administration will require fine-tuning in the future in relation to communication, time frames, flexibility, and follow-up to improve what was seen to be a positive approach.

Acknowledgements

The VoF programme, including this review, was funded by the MPI and facilitated by the VCNZ. The initial plan for this review was discussed with the VCNZ and shared with the MPI project leads to ensure that the questions and methods aligned with MPI needs in terms of the review. The VCNZ and the MPI subsequently had no role in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data or the preparation of the manuscript. We would like to acknowledge the support of VCNZ, MPI and all of the participants who contributed to this report.

Disclosure statement

D Gardner is a member of the *New Zealand Veterinary Journal* Editorial Board, but was recused from all editorial decisions relating to this publication.

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