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Governing Sustainable Agriculture: A case study of the farming of highly erodible hill country in the Manawatu-Whanganui region of New Zealand

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Abstract

The sustainability of agriculture and what constitutes sustainable agriculture is the focus of ongoing challenge and debate in New Zealand. In particular, the sustainability of current farming practices are targeted for criticism and demands made for fundamental changes in farming. This research adds to the debate by providing insights into how an aspect of farming that has environmental implications is governed. The farming of highly erodible hill country (HEHC) in the Manawatu-Whanganui region is the single qualitative case studied and how the farming of HEHC is governed and the reasons why it is governed in this way are the research questions answered. Foucault's governmentality theory is the basis of the theoretical framework which is expanded to include the concept of farming knowledge-culture to recognise and capture farming as a form of government. Results are structured into a national, regional and farm level phase and are based on data drawn from semi structured interviews and documents.

This research provides an example of the difficulties farmers face, in balancing the diverse and conflicting demands placed on them to farm sustainably. This research illustrates the complex contradictory and inconsistent demands brought to bear on farmers' management of HEHC through the governing by central government and the regional council of HEHC specifically, but of farming generally, also. Farmers are encouraged to be, both, competitively-productive and financially profitable, and socially responsible in managing the impact of farming on the environment. Accepted farming practices maintain and enhance, as well as constrain and compromise, the environmental sustainability of natural resources.

The farming of HEHC in the Manawatu-Whanganui region is governed by an interwoven multi-scale of governing by central government, the regional council and farming. There is no coherent or deliberate governing of the farming of HEHC or sustainable agriculture. However, aspects of sustainable agriculture are governed across central government programmes but the sustainability outcomes are incidental to broader economic and trade outcomes sought by central government. The main agenda for agriculture advanced by central government is one of competitive productivism through the facilitation of market-led governing.

The significant role that regional level government in New Zealand can, and do have in governing farmers use and impact on natural resources is revealed in this research. The regional council are advancing competitive productivism in farming moderated by sustainability objectives.

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Finally, I acknowledge Sir Winston Churchill, whose words have bolstered me:

Never give in, never, never, never...

If you are going through hell, keep going.

Come Meg.... walk.

¹ The Institute of Natural Resources became the Institute of Agriculture and Environment on 1 January 2013.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xi
Abbreviations	xii
Chapter One: The Challenge of Sustainable Agriculture	1
The Research Context	1
Research Aim and Research Question	5
Accelerated hill country soil erosion	6
Positioning the researcher	8
Thesis structure	10
Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework	11
Introduction.....	11
An overview of the theoretical framework: governmentality and beyond.....	11
Governmentality: a form of rule and government	14
Government as representation and intervention.....	16
Resistance in government	18
Farming knowledge culture as a form of government	19
The analytic of government	20
Regimes of practice and programmes of government.....	21
Technologies of government.....	22
Conclusion	24
Chapter Three: Literature Review	27
Introduction.....	27
Neo-liberalism: a rationality of rule in New Zealand agriculture	28
Characteristics of neo-liberalism	29
Neo-liberalism: inconsistent and hybrid forms of rule	32
Conceptualisations of agricultural and rural change: ideals and reality.....	34

The productivist/post-productivist dualism	35
Multi-functionality	38
Neo-productivism: a new conceptualisation for agriculture	40
Governing sustainable agriculture	41
Rationalities of rule and environmental impacts	42
Farmer resistance and the governing of sustainable agriculture	48
Conclusion	53
Chapter Four: Research Design	57
Introduction	57
The research paradigm	57
Qualitative case study research	59
Selecting the case for study	61
Research integrity	63
Integrity and research participants	63
Case study methods	64
Semi-structured interviews	65
Regional and national level interviews	66
Farm level interviews	69
Data analysis	71
Conclusion	71
Chapter Five: Historical Context	73
Introduction	73
Accelerated soil erosion: cultural interference in a young country	74
A rocky road – The Soil Conservation and River Control Act 1941	75
The Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council and Catchment Boards	78
Agriculture and soil conservators: uneasy bedfellows	79
Soil and water conservation: the act expanded	79
Agricultural production versus soil conservation	80
The drive for agricultural productivity: 1950s-1980s	81
1980s central government reforms: implications for farming	84
Agricultural productivity in the sheep and beef sector: post 1980s reforms and today	85
Integrative sustainable land management policy	85
A beginning: 1970s	85
The 1980s reforms: implications for soil conservation	86

Resource management and local government reforms: The RMA 1991 and regional councils	88
Adverse events assistance reviewed	90
Sustainable agriculture and sustainable land management: 1990s.....	90
A central government strategy for sustainable land management.....	93
On-Farm soil conservation: implementation.....	93
Soil Classification: the land use capability classification scheme	94
Conclusion	97
Chapter Six: National-Level Governing	99
Introduction.....	99
Adverse events and the helping hand of government	100
Assisting farming: a ‘tricky’ and contested policy area.....	102
Self- reliance and sustainable land management	103
Soil conservation: a renaissance.....	105
Sustainable land management – central government’s response	106
Science and SLM-HCE Programme	114
Climate change policies	115
Climate change policies and HEHC.....	116
A vision for a sustainable New Zealand	118
The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry: at the top table	120
Putting MAF back at the top table	122
Information and data shaping policy.....	123
Ministry for the Environment: crisis and recovery	124
MfE and sustainable land management.....	125
Ministry for the Environment environmental reporting.....	126
Environmental science: review and reinvestment.....	128
Federated Farmers of New Zealand (Inc)	129
The Federation’s work and policy stance.....	130
Relations with central government	132
Beef+Lamb New Zealand	133
Policy and role in environmental management.....	134
The Red Meat Sector Strategy: a vision for the Sector 2011	135
Conclusion	137

Chapter Seven: Regional-Level Governing.....	141
Introduction	141
The regional council: finding its core business	142
The 2004 storm: winds of change.....	143
The birth of SLUI: community leaders workshop.....	150
The Sustainable Land Use Initiative takes shape	154
Organisational change and commitment	157
Decisions: regulation (yes or no) and who will pay?	159
The role of science and a scientist.....	161
Selling SLUI: the good, the not so good and the bad.....	166
Central government governing	170
The One Plan process and farmer reaction.....	173
Regulation? Well, maybe	176
Reshaping the One Plan: farmer resistance	178
Conclusion.....	181
Chapter Eight: Farm-Level Governing.....	183
Introduction	183
Regional council mechanisms	184
Whole farm plans: making farms visible.....	185
A farming tradition of soil conservation.....	190
On-farm soil erosion in context.....	193
The issue of erosion for farmers	194
Farmers' management of HEHC on-farm	195
Ongoing one-on-one input.....	199
Gorse and scrub: good or bad farming?.....	201
'Good' farming.....	203
Conclusion.....	205
Chapter Nine: Discussion.....	207
Introduction	207
A New Zealand variant of neo-liberal rule.....	208
Central government governing: a contradictory and inconsistent hybrid variant of neo-liberal rule.....	208
Central government: facilitating market-led governing and competitive productivism in the sheep and beef sector.....	210

Central government governing the regional council.....	212
Regional council governing: a mixed variant of rule.....	213
The Sustainable Land Use Initiative: a hybrid form of rule.....	213
Whole farm plans: a competitive-productivist agenda for farming	214
The One Plan: a new regional rationality of rule for governing farming.....	216
Farming and farmers: shaping how farming is governed by the regional council	217
Defining good and bad farming	218
Soil Conservation: a loose network of government	221
Conclusion	222
Chapter Ten: Conclusions.....	225
Research conclusions and contributions	225
Future Research	230
References.....	231
Appendices.....	253
Appendix One.....	254
Information sheet	254
Participant consent form	256
Appendix Two	257
Documented Sources of Data.....	257
Appendix Three.....	259
Interview Topic Schedule for Senior Manager MAF Wellington.....	259
Interview schedule: Chief Executive Manawatu-Whanganui regional council	260
Interview schedule: Farmers	262
Appendix Four	263
Time line of sustainable land management and agricultural policy.....	263
New Zealand Government timeline from 1984	263
Events relevant to agriculture and soil conservation at a national level	264
Manawatu-Whanganui regional council timeline	270

List of Figures

Figure 1:	Satellite photograph of landslide damage in the Ridge Road area Pohangina Valley, Manawatu.....	8
Figure 2:	Summary map of landsliding in storm 2004.	9
Figure 3:	Photo accompanying an article entitled ‘The Balance of Nature’, published in the New Zealand Farmer Weekly 1939.	77
Figure 4:	‘Productivity Re-established’ — Soil Conservation and Rivers Control council advertisement published in the New Zealand Farmer March 3, 1960	82
Figure 5:	The impact of the Manawatu Storm as presented in the exhibition and in the book accompanying the exhibition under the title ‘the facts collated as the effects of the storm became apparent’	147
Figure 6:	Flooding of Tangimoana Township.....	148
Figure 7:	Landslides resulting from the 2004 storm with dramatic comparison between forested and non-forested hill country	148
Figure 8:	The map of highly erodible land included as Figure A:1 Schedule A in the 2007 notified version of the Proposed One Plan.....	164
Figure 9:	An example map differentiating the farm on the basis of LUC classes	187
Figure 10:	Hill country farming landscape in the Pohangina Valley, Manawatu July 2011 ...	191
Figure 11:	Gorse re-growth on hill country on a farm at Ashhurst, Manawatu.	201
Figure 12:	Scrub re-growth on a hill country farm in the Pohangina Valley.	202

List of Tables

Table 1: Research participants interviewed as part national and regional level of the research data collection.	68
Table 2: Hill country farmer research participants.....	70
Table 3: Key performance indicators for Kinross Farming Partnership, sourced from the SLUI whole farm plan completed for the farm	188

Abbreviations

AES	Agri-environmental scheme
AGS	Afforestation Grant Scheme
ARGOS	Agriculture Research Group on Sustainability
BSE	Bovine spongiform encephalopathy
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CE	Chief Executive
DPMC	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
ECFP	East Coast Forestry Programme
EMA	Environmental management area
EMO	Environmental Management Officer
ETS	Emissions Trading Scheme
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNS	Institute of Geological & Nuclear Sciences Limited
Ha	hectares
HEHC	Highly erodible hill country
HEL	Highly Erodible Land
LEP	Land Environment Plan
LUC	Land Use Capability
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MfE	Ministry for the Environment
MPI	Ministry Primary Industries
MWRC	Manawatu Whanganui Regional Council
NIWA	National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research
NRAC	National Research Advisory Council
NZLRI	New Zealand Land Resource Inventory
NWASCA	National Water and Soil Conservation Authority
PCE	Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
PFSI	Permanent Forestry Sinks Initiative
PM	Prime Minister
RMA	Resource Management Act
SCRC Act	Soil Conservation and River Control Act
SCRCC	Soil Conservation and River Control Council
SFF	Sustainable Farming Fund
SLM	Sustainable land management
SLMCC	Sustainable Land Management and Climate Change
SLM-HCE	Sustainable Land Management – Hill Country Erosion
SLUI	Sustainable Land Use Initiative
SLURI	Sustainable Land Use Research Initiative
UAC	Uniform Annual Charge