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## SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS AND HILL COUNTRY PRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

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More than twenty papers have been delivered at this 1981 New Zealand Grassland Association meeting and almost all have dealt with two aspects of farming — how to grow more feed for livestock and how to convert this feed into production. All of the participants and speakers here must at some stage, whether in the research centre or in the field, have wondered how much of this information was going to hit where it counted. Would it end up being preached to the converted again, played with by the farmer 'guinea pigs', scoffed at by many as more impractical academic garbage? Just how much impact on farming production and development will your findings and recommendations have? Could it be, like a seagull on top of a lighthouse, your earnest calls will be largely drowned out by the forces of the elements?

There is no shortage of cynics in our community, and plenty under the label of farmers. But the mere fact of having a discussion on socio-economic effects on hill country production and development confirms growing awareness over the past few years that other factors than farming technology may be inhibiting growth on these farms.

### THE SITUATION TO 1979

Stock levels on farms in the East Taranaki hill country I am acquainted with are no higher than they were fifteen years ago, and lambing percentages have altered little. Many thousands of hectares are either under utilised, lowly stocked or covered in scrub and fern.

It could well be asked — where is the return in such hill country areas as East Taranaki for the millions spent over the years on the findings and application of research programmes? Have the attitudes and policies through the seventies concentrated too much on production per farmer, at the expense of per acre or hectare? And have these policies of survival for the individual put severe strain on social services and communities in these outer areas with the dwindling populations? In East Taranaki, I have no doubt of this. No doubt, also, that more concentration on improving the socio-economic factors beyond the 'half hour fringe' of service towns to attract and retain people to capitalise on the farming potential more intensively will mean far more fertile ground for ideas and techniques emanating from such a conference as N.Z. Grassland Association. Any discussion on social factors affecting productivity hinges around several basic issues — *do* socio-economic factors inhibit productivity, *how* do they, *what* can be done to

minimise this effect, and *by whom*.

My interest in this field was heightened when presenting a thesis for the 1979 Kelloggs Rural Leadership Course entitled 'Farming and Social Patterns on the Whangamomona Riding of the Stratford County Council'. Briefly, this survey covered 83 farm units in East Taranaki, and the communities they were based on. The study covered trends in land tenure, productivity, farm labour, potential, social aspects, services, population and so on. The area supported around  $\frac{1}{4}$  million stock units, with an average of 3000 per farm of 600 ha. size. Seventy of the 83 were owner/ farmers, and 10 absentee owned, while 40% of the farms had been enlarged since 1945. Since 1961 the population of the area had dropped 60% — from 870 to 380. For each five habitable houses in the area, two were empty. The main reasons for population dropping were smaller families, farm mergers (none of the merged farms employed permanent married labour) and loss or reduction in services; e.g. N.Z.P., N.Z.F.S., Stratford County, N.Z.E.D., Police, Health, etc.

Great emphasis in the thesis was given to local input through a postal survey to try and ascertain the views on social factors and their effect on productivity. Roothing was listed as the chief problem affecting farming problems and social conditions, while farmers identified the major reasons for labour not staying in the areas as being the remoteness, lack of services and no income for the wife. Those responding to the survey (55%) listed the taxation system as the most common reason for not increasing production. The overall conclusion from the survey was that much agricultural potential still lies untapped in this area, and that socio-economic conditions, including land tenure and taxation have a significant influence on realising this potential.

From the survey it became apparent that there was no consistent pattern existing between the productivity of a farm and the farmer's age, time he had farmed the property and whether the property had been owned by his forebears. Another factor to emerge was that larger farms generally had more undeveloped land and were less intensively farmed than smaller units. Other units less effectively farmed were those, generally speaking, with poor road access, absentee owners, and owners with other occupations off the farm.

That then, very briefly, is the situation as it was two years ago in this back country area. Other surveys done in areas such as Banks Peninsula, Mangamahū, Wairarapa, Northland, Akitio, Hunterville etc., vary in some respects but all have a familiar theme — depopulation, some socio-economic disadvantages, and potential for productivity increases.

## THE PAST TWO YEARS

What has happened in the intervening two years since the Whangamomona report? Here I can report several changes, some of which give signs of optimism for the future.

There has been little change in population, and the recent census confirmed the large drop up to the 1979 report. The Land Development Encouragement Loan and Livestock Incentive Scheme and more favourable income levels have triggered resumption of land development, though two wet summers

have left many acres of felled scrub unburnt, and far from realising a return on the initial investment. The Government this season will ballot four farms from the Mt Damper development block on the far east fringe of the area. As well, the decision to re-develop reverted farmland in the Aotuhia Valley made by the Lands Settlement Board, has led to roading and land development being started. Estimated stock units for the block is around 30,000. The Minister of Lands has also instigated a survey in the Taranaki area of other crown land suitable for development blocks. The recent budget included parts of Northland, King Country, East Coast of the North Island and West Coast of the South Island as Rural Research Development Zones. This area of East Taranaki Hill Country should surely qualify for this extra assistance for loan finances, particularly in view of the clear possibility of areas of land cleared from scrub recently again under threat of re-reversion through lack of finance for sufficient stocking, fencing, fertilisation. Action initiated by the Stratford County Council is seeking to have this area included in such zones. Road access to Whangamomona has at last seen significant improvement with the start to sealing of the 8km saddle. This should be completed this season, ending a prolonged battle with decision makers for years to have this physical barrier to servicing around 50 farms minimised.

Land sales in the study area since 1979 make an interesting but non-conclusive study. Of the nine farms sold, 11% of total, only three have been transferred to incoming farmers as such. Another has been bought by a member of a local farming family, one by the Lands and Survey to help service the Aotuhia development block, one by an outside farmer who has put a manager on. One farm sold in two separate blocks has been bought by separate farmers, while another unit subdivided has been bought partly by a neighbour and the balance by an incoming farmer. Only one unit has been directly bought up by a neighbour as a merger. Land values in the area are at least double the levels of two years ago. The units sold represent a far higher level of turnover than in recent years, and several other blocks are being quoted.

Several of the changes have enacted recommendations made in the Whangamomona report, and along with incentives, product prices and growing awareness of the agricultural potential in the area that the Aotuhia report has helped highlight, the area could be on the threshold of big production increases.

## THE FUTURE

One of the factors that will influence these increases is the socio-economic barrier. Which leads us back to the two vital questions — *what* can be done to minimise these barriers, and *by whom*.

More people are both desirable and necessary to bring about these production increases — indeed in this political climate investment capital likely to create more jobs should have priority. These people, families, to be attracted and retained, need good road communications, educational, recreational and social facilities.

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Much comment has been made in recent years on the need for more flexible town and country planning criteria, and influx of smallholders, cottage industries, etc., to aid rural resettlement. While not decrying these aims, I believe quite firmly that areas as isolated as Whangamomona must rely on greater realisation of its agricultural potential through more intensive pastoral farming to retain and built up its communities. Many people in New Zealand today are concerned with the urban drift and subsequent social problems created by depleted rural communities and crowded urban suburbs. The last five years have seen great changes in attitudes; the Land Use Advisory Council seminar on Rural Depopulation and Resettlement of May 1980 in Christchurch, probably hosted the widest and most eminent spectrum of community and departmental leaders involved in rural New Zealand ever brought together — excepting politicians. The degree of unanimity on the scope of the problems was evident the solutions put forward came from farmers, planners, activists, environmentalists, agriculturalists, sociologists, educationalists, county councillors and clerics.

On a wider front, many of our institutions have become concerned with the socio-economic climate of rural New Zealand. Government departments have changed their fixed attitudes to planning; rural planners and rural sociologists have become recognised. But what has happened to the succession of ideas, reports, words, recommendations and pleas for recognition of the social needs of remoter rural New Zealand? Have the energies of activists, planners and sociologists been wasted? Was the L.U.A.C. seminar wasted effort?

**I don't** really think so. Though progress has been nothing like as fast as is needed, and though politicians try to minimise these concerns, I am certain there is a growing awareness that something must be done to arrest these trends in imbalance of our population. There have been some gains made, but they only go part of the way. This slight momentum of action must be carried forward, in a more coordinated manner. Local authorities, Federated Farmers, W.D.F.F., M.A.F., M.O.W., Regional Development Councils, other government departments and universities and rural activists each battle away in differing styles with varying effect. Perhaps more often they should get together to promote and coordinate their effort to convince the decision-makers. The future of rural New Zealand is too important to be left to reactionary palliatives, particularly when so much potential overseas exchange and so many job opportunities are at stake.

Your organisation is in a position of influence in rural New Zealand. I hope you realise that socio-economic factors are minimising this influence in some hill country regions, and that the important work you are doing will become far more effective when some of the social barriers to living in the back country are removed.