



MPI study of New Zealand lifestyle blocks and animal welfare

Summary of findings

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1 Introduction

Over recent years there has been a steady increase in people purchasing small block holdings or 'lifestyle blocks' and, as part of the experience, purchasing and caring for a range of animals. Lifestyle block cases are heavily represented in animal welfare complaints received by MPI and the SPCA. About 30% of complaints to MPI and 80% of those involving livestock to the SPCA are for lifestyle or small block holdings.

Based on this, MPI's Safeguarding our Animals, Safeguarding our Reputation (Safeguarding) team established a project to better understand New Zealand's lifestyle block sector and its animal welfare challenges. It also set out to identify ways to engage and, if needed, educate this group. This paper is a summary of what was learnt during the project through a mix of surveys, interviews and case file analysis.

2 Lifestyle blocks in New Zealand

In a 2004 Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry study 60,213 lifestyle blocks (between 0.4ha – 30ha) were identified in AgriBase and approximately 6,800 new lifestyle blocks were registered in the valuation roll annually. In the intervening years, if that level of lifestyle development had remained constant, there was estimated to be 128,213 lifestyle blocks by 2014. Data available from FarmsOnLine October 2015 indicated there was a total of 140,000 lifestyle blocks nationwide, with 101,000 properties in the North Island, and 39,000 in the South Island.

An article in 'The Country' (30 Nov 2016) noted the increasing demand for lifestyle blocks is continuing. A shortage of urban housing in desirable areas and a growing interest of people wanting a more rural lifestyle with access to urban amenities has fuelled this demand.

The areas of most interest are the Waikato, Bay of Plenty/Taupo, Canterbury and Otago. The article notes that demand is being driven by buyers from Auckland and Christchurch, indicating a change in dynamic from previous years, where retired farmers were the main purchasers. Buyers tend to be a mix of baby boomers keen to exit Auckland before they are too old to enjoy a larger block of land, and younger families who may have been fortunate enough to own a house early, enjoy the capital gain, and have now decided to exit city life while the family is still young.

2.1 VALUE OF LIFESTYLE BLOCKS

The value of lifestyle blocks to New Zealand is difficult to measure. Many animals kept on lifestyle blocks have no commercial value for the farmer. While some of the stock reared is for home kill or are pets, the majority of beef cattle are reared to be sold¹. At meat processing plants a 250kg steer earns \$1,275. (<https://www.interest.co.nz/rural/beef/steer-p2>)

A 2014 survey carried out by the Lifestyle Block (LSB) website indicated around 60% of lifestyle blocks have beef cattle. If there was an average of two 250kg steers per lifestyle block (140,000 blocks), that would equate to \$357 million nationally.

¹As per 2017 prices at <https://www.interest.co.nz/rural/beef/steer-p2>

Compare this to the value of the New Zealand commercial deer industry, or pork and poultry exports. As reported in the 'Compendium of New Zealand Farm Facts 2016', for the year ended Sept 2015, total deer industry exports were \$255 million while pork and poultry exports were \$235.3 million combined. Unlike the lifestyle block sector, these industries have industry groups to support them, promote their interests and disseminate information to and for them, i.e. Deer Industry New Zealand (DINZ), NZPork, Poultry Industry Association of New Zealand (PIANZ). Additionally, this gives them a contact point for government consultation and a relationship with the relevant Minister.

Lifestyle blocks deliver other value to New Zealand. A lot of QEII/conservation land is held on lifestyle blocks and farmers undertake pest control and tree planting work. Lifestyle blocks also play a role in helping to breach the urban-rural divide, which is becoming more pronounced in New Zealand. Many heritage breeds of animals and plants are also only farmed on lifestyle blocks.

3 Animal welfare challenges in the lifestyle block sector

3.1 VETERINARY SURVEY

In July 2016, MPI and the SPCA carried out an online survey of veterinarians with lifestyle block clients. The survey was emailed directly to approximately 2,800 New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) members, and provided as a link in their regular email newsletter.

The survey comprised 15 questions targeting veterinarians who visit lifestyle farmer clients, to identify:

- the main species of animals and animal health or welfare issues treated on lifestyle farms;
- perceptions of their lifestyle farmer clients' knowledge, attitudes, and barriers in addressing animal health and welfare issues; and
- likely sources of information their lifestyle farmer clients would find useful for finding out about animal health and welfare.

There were 199 respondents. 83% of respondents (approximately 165 veterinarians) saw lifestyle block clients more than five times per month.

The surveyed veterinarians reported that the most common welfare issues seen were; animals with poor body condition, ill health and injuries, and the farmer's lack of basic animal husbandry skills or knowledge. This concurs with the MPI case files (discussed later). The top four species of animals routinely treated on lifestyle farms were sheep (90.3%), cattle (77.58%), goats (60%) and horses (48%).

The most common animal welfare issues veterinarians reported seeing on lifestyle farms relate to:

- poor nutrition (under or over feeding, or inappropriate feeding and supplements);
- parasites;
- lameness;
- flystrike;
- general issues caused by poor animal husbandry, e.g. not shearing, trimming, etc.; and
- failure to diagnose animal health and welfare problems.

Veterinarians reported the most common barriers lifestyle block farmers face, which result in animal welfare issues, are:

- lack of knowledge about general animal health and husbandry;
- lack of knowledge about general farming practices;
- lack of facilities; and
- absence from the property.

They reported their clients were generally highly motivated to care for animals and learn about improving animal health and welfare, but they often needed more veterinary support than other clients.

The surveyed veterinarians listed the following sources of animal health and welfare information they think their farmer clients reference:

- the internet (“Dr Google”)/social media and advice from neighbours (most often);
- the vet’s verbal advice and educational material they provided (often); and
- educational material provided by others and local events or workshops (sometimes).

Seventy veterinarians provided ideas about how MPI and SPCA could enhance their relationship with lifestyle farmers. Most of the ideas focused on ways to better engage and educate. Sixty-five veterinarians provided further feedback and insights about working with their lifestyle farmer clients.

3.1.1 Examples of how veterinarians thought MPI and SPCA could better support the lifestyle block sector

- More resources aimed at lifestyle block farmers. Especially those that cover:
 - early recognition of disease or welfare risk
 - appropriate body condition of animals (at different ages, stages, sex and season)
 - pasture rotation
 - drenching/worming/parasite control
 - stocking rates
 - required facilities
 - the responsibilities that go with having animals (having animals is not a right).
- A lifestyle farmer’s code of welfare that includes the relevant parts of all the codes.
- Promotion of, and funding for, lifestyle block field days or workshops.
- Promote the preventative health role of veterinarians – not ambulance at the bottom of the cliff.
- MPI assume more responsibility for lifestyle block inspections and enforcement in some parts of New Zealand where SPCA may not be the preferred first port of call.
- More oversight and control over animal ownership including:
 - providing online certified learning programmes
 - require certification before owning or selling animals
 - annual monitoring.

3.1.2 Examples of veterinarian insights (comments verbatim) about working with lifestyle farmer clients

“They want to do the right thing but have no idea that they're not doing it.

They vary immensely from excellent (great facilities, knowledge, willingness to work together) to very poor (no knowledge or facilities, language barriers and uncooperative).

Most cases not lack of will but lack of knowledge and not willing to put their effort into treating or preventing disease because they don't feel empowered to do things because of lack of knowledge and facilities, or because they believe it's not worth calling a vet because the animals are just pets and not making money. Of the reasons people don't take vet advice, lack of knowledge is my favourite! Lack of will is much harder.

Many don't prioritise the stock over the 'real' job and are unaware of the time and money commitments involved.

Problem with them getting info from social media is that often it is wrong, misleading or irrelevant to NZ conditions.

I like working with them, it's just usually a while before they ring for the first time!

Generally well intentioned clients, may not always realise an issue exists before it's brought to their attention. Appropriate products are often in pack sizes too large for small block owners, this can often make treatment prohibitively expensive or results in us decanting product.

In my experience lifestyle farmers tend to be at one or other ends of the animal husbandry spectrum either very good (intelligent, informed) or completely hopeless, (uninformed bad facilities and an animal welfare risk) they can be difficult to target from an animal health education point of view as we see them infrequently and average length of property ownership can be short meaning they can be quite transient.

Most care deeply about the animals in their care, thus the reason we see them. However, a small proportion of lifestyle farmers call you as an ambulance at the bottom of a cliff and there is little or nothing you can do to help their animals at that point, often these farmers are poorly educated or feel like they are entitled to keep farm animals regardless of their circumstances.”

Overall, feedback strongly suggests lifestyle farmers are well intentioned, but can lack basic farming and animal husbandry competence. They are unable to detect early warning signs of ill health in their animals or know how to treat it. Some lifestyle blocks do not have farming facilities, sheds, appropriate fencing, shelter or a constant water supply. Veterinarians reported they are often called too late – once an animal has reached a very poor condition. Lifestyle farmers tend to seek free advice from sources such as the internet, neighbours, farm supply retailers etc. before they contact a veterinarian, and additionally, many are time-poor.

Most veterinarians said they would like more support from MPI and SPCA to help engage and educate lifestyle farmers about farming basics such as animal husbandry, preventative health, codes of welfare, five freedoms, seasonal tips, etc.

4 MPI case files

In addition to the veterinary survey MPI case file data was analysed. Data was used from cases recorded between February 2015 and July 2016, which at the time of analysis had 254 records. A random number generator (random.org) was used to identify 50 lifestyle block cases for analysis.

No animal welfare issues were found in 18 of the cases investigated and were closed.

For the purposes of this project we were interested in the cases where actual animal welfare issues were found, or where there was a potential risk to an animal's welfare.

In the 31 cases where welfare issues or risks were found, verbal advice was often sufficient to rectify the problems (20 cases). In three cases a written educational letter was sent and in seven cases a section 130 notice was used to stipulate exactly what needed to be done. In at least 25 of the 31 cases, the Person in Charge (PIC) was cooperative and responsive to the advice and direction of the animal welfare inspector. In 25 of the 31 cases, the PIC was male.

The cases were spread out around New Zealand with Canterbury, Wairarapa and Otago having the most animal welfare issue/risk cases reported to MPI. Interestingly, in a survey of lifestyle block farmers undertaken by the LSB website, the most populous regions for lifestyle blocks were Northland, Canterbury and the Waikato.

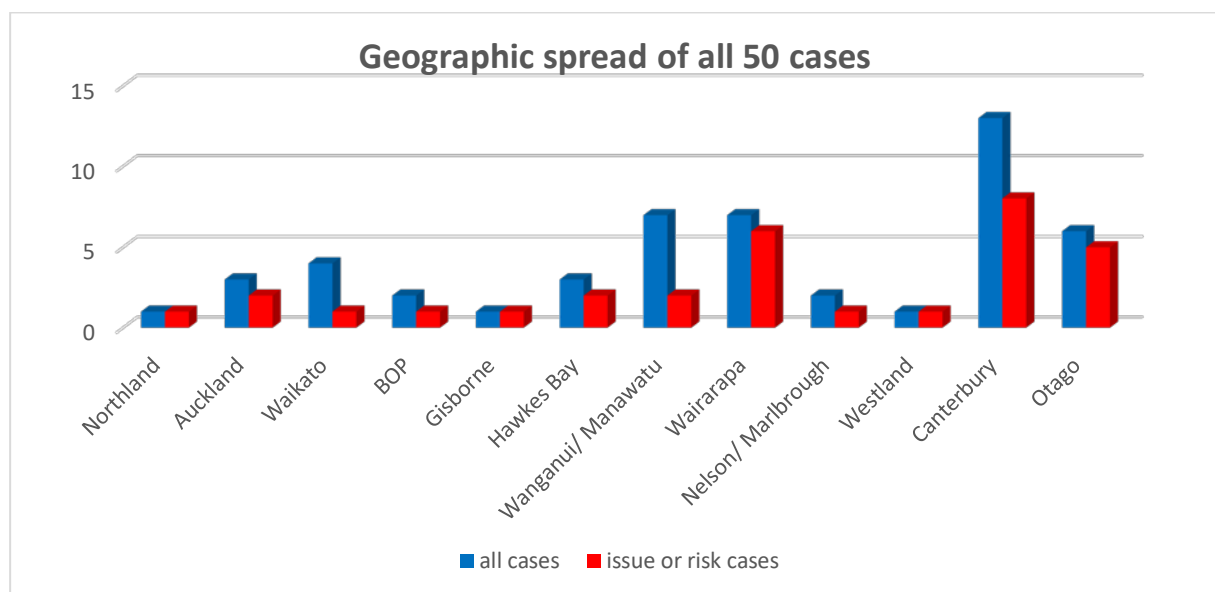


Figure 1: Geographic spread of all 50 cases

For the three top animal welfare issue or risk case regions, the species of animal involved were as follows:

Species	Canterbury	Wairarapa	Otago
Beef cattle	5	4	2
Sheep	2	3	4
Goats	1	1	1
Horses	2	1	

Table 1: Species breakdown by location of all 50 cases

Most cases involved sheep and beef cattle. Across the 31 cases 256 sheep, 157 beef cattle, 53 pigs, 25 alpacas, 22 goats and 19 horses had welfare issues or risks. A total of 532 animals.

Twenty-four of the welfare issue/risk case files recorded the total number of animals on the property. There was a total of 732 animals on the 24 properties. The range was from 2 – 140 animals. The average was 30 animals.

In the majority of cases the animal welfare issue or risk arose from insufficient or inappropriate food and water available, or a lack of basic animal husbandry practices, such as drenching or foot trimming.

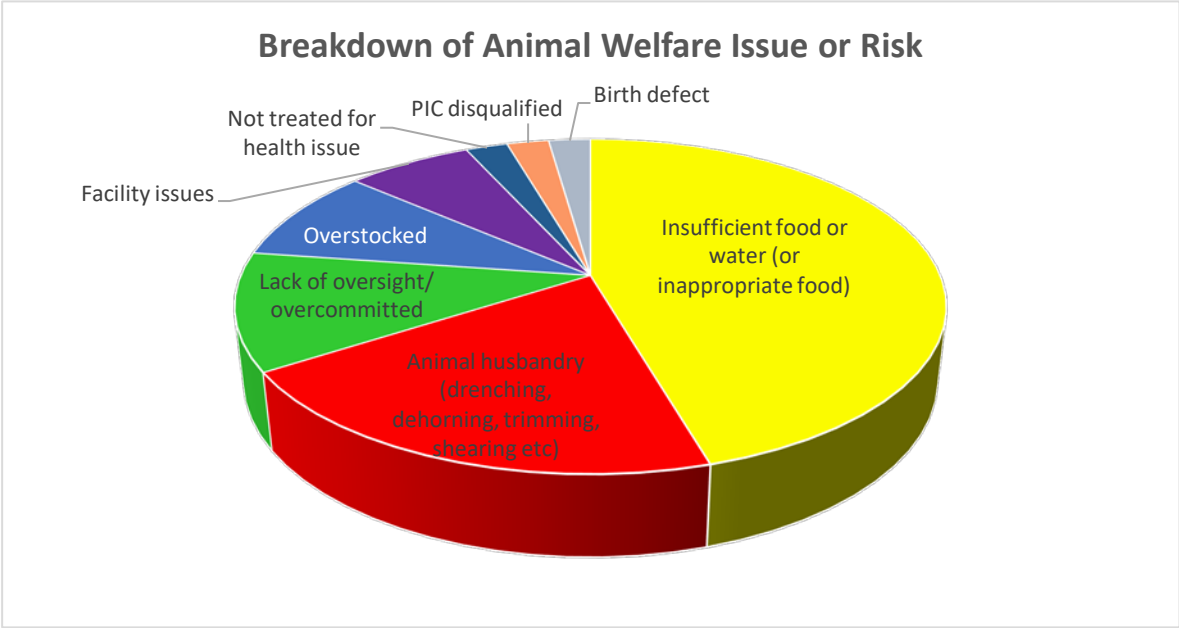


Figure 2: Breakdown of animal welfare issue or risk

Of the 18 cases where the animal welfare inspectors found no animal welfare concern, 11 were initiated by a complaint of lack of food or water and/or poor body condition. These closed cases covered cattle and sheep (7 cases each), horses (5 cases), dairy cows (2 cases), pigs, goats and birds (1 case each). Public complaints initiated 14 of these cases and two were transferred from the SPCA. Clearly the public is concerned about animal welfare, but there is perhaps a lack of awareness of what acceptable welfare looks like.

5 The SPCA

The SPCA is the main animal welfare enforcement agency in New Zealand for lifestyle blocks. In 2015 the SPCA estimated it received 3344 complaints related to lifestyle blocks. The SPCA records how many 'commercial and lifestyle' cases they respond to but do not separate the two. Therefore, the figures in the table below relate to both lifestyle block and commercial farms investigated by the SPCA. However, the SPCA estimates that 80% of these cases were lifestyle block related, and it is likely the dairy cattle cases (being a less common lifestyle block animal) make up the majority of the commercial cases the SPCA investigated.

Animal	Open	No Concern	Closed	Transfer	Verbal Advice	Education Letter	Formal Warning	Court Order	Prosecution	Total
Camelid	1	7	5	1	8	0	1	0	0	23
Cattle - Beef	3	94	90	17	85	8	3	0	3	303
Cattle - Dairy	14	316	46	55	225	7	8	2	3	676
Deer	0	2	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	6
Goat	10	228	59	22	166	16	4	2	1	508
Horse	40	700	230	46	516	33	18	2	1	1586
Pig	2	68	20	5	69	5	3	0	1	173
Poultry - Layer	0	22	15	1	30	4	0	0	1	73
Poultry - Meat	0	5	9	1	5	0	0	0	0	20
Sheep	26	483	125	59	382	18	13	1	0	1107
Total	96	1925	599	210	1487	91	50	7	10	4475

Table 2: Investigation Outcomes

Note: There can be more than one investigation outcome per complaint i.e. education letter + prosecution = two outcomes, hence 3344 complaints have a total of 4475 outcomes.

Interesting figures to note from the table above:

- no welfare concerns were found in 1,925 of the complaints investigated
- like in the MPI-investigated cases, when welfare issues or risks do exist, the majority of the time the most appropriate investigation outcome is verbal advice (education)
- the majority of cases were sheep and horse related
- relatively few cases (10) were taken through to prosecution

6 Engaging with the lifestyle block sector

6.1 ONLINE COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The internet and online community is a key source of information for lifestyle farmers. The Lifestyle Block website www.lifestyleblock.co.nz (known as LSB) is the biggest online channel aimed at lifestyle farmers in New Zealand.

In September 2014 LSB undertook a survey of its members, which found:

- 42% had between 5 and 20 acres of land. 7.8% had over 100 acres.
- The most common animals on lifestyle blocks were poultry (73%), cats (70.1%), dogs (67%), cattle (59.1%) and sheep (57.7%).
- 51% had owned their lifestyle block between two and ten years. 6.5% had owned it for over 20 years.
- 75% were New Zealanders by birth and 18.8% were born in the UK.
- 41.7% lived in the top half of the North Island (Northland, Auckland and Waikato), 16.7% in Wellington/Manawatu, and 23.5% in Canterbury/Otago. A total of 81.9% of the lifestyle farming community are across these three (large) areas.

Facebook is the most well-known social media site. The two lifestyle block related Facebook pages with the largest memberships are NZ Lifestyle Block and NZ Lifestyle Block Farmers.

NZ Lifestyle Block is a closed Facebook group which restricts access. It has 6720 members. The NZ Lifestyle Block Farmers Facebook page is a public group and has 1605 members.

Classification of the posts between 1 October and 11 November 2016 show that animal health and wellbeing is a key topic on both sites. Of the 402 posts across these sites during this time period, 46 (11.5%) were animal health and welfare related. Many of the 'farming advice' posts also had welfare implications (fencing, shelter, drenching etc.), and there were posts on 'how to' shear sheep and treat recumbent animals.

Examples of posts that were animal health and welfare specific include questions about: why animals died unexpectedly, limping sheep, when to wean lambs or calves, appropriate feed types and amounts, infections and allergies.

Other resources for lifestyle block farmers and those supporting them are listed in Appendix 1.

7 Conclusion

Based on the information summarised in this paper, there is a role for MPI staff across the animal welfare system to work with the SPCA, the New Zealand Veterinary Association and the lifestyle block sector to help raise awareness of animal welfare responsibilities and access to resources. Due to the increasing number of lifestyle blocks, and the development of animal welfare regulations relevant to lifestyle farming, it is particularly important to engage with this sector in a timely and coordinated manner.

There is a lot of information already available which lifestyle block farmers would benefit from having access to. As a first step, MPI and SPCA should promote available resources, encourage seeking early veterinary advice, and support groups/organisations that are delivering lifestyle farming specific advice. Within MPI, staff across the animal welfare system can collaborate resources and coordinate how information can be distributed to the lifestyle community. This could be in the form of a targeted pro-active compliance campaign, or by looking at a variety of communications channels for reaching them.

As new animal welfare regulations were issued in early 2018, there is even more of a need to actively communicate with the lifestyle community. This work is already underway. A working group comprised of organisations and individuals across the lifestyle sector will use various forms of communication to inform and educate the lifestyle community. This work will be carried out from around March 2018 and will be ongoing once the regulations come into effect in October 2018.

8 Appendix 1

8.1 OTHER RESOURCES FOR LIFESTYLE BLOCK FARMERS AND THOSE SUPPORTING THEM

Codes of welfare: <http://www.mpi.govt.nz/protection-and-response/animal-welfare/codes-of-welfare>

[Animal welfare regulations](http://www.mpi.govt.nz/animalregs): www.mpi.govt.nz/animalregs

MAF. (1998). Animal Health and Welfare on Small Farms. MAF Quality Management

Fisk, T. (1989). Practical Small Farming in New Zealand. Heinemann Reed

Farmlands Lifestyle Guide: available at Farmlands and online
<https://www.farmlands.co.nz/NewsAndEvents/Promotions/Lifestyle-Guide>

The FMG Lifestyle Block Owner's Manual, copies available at FMG <https://www.fmg.co.nz/lifestyle-manual/>

Real estate magazines, e.g. PGG Wrightson Real Estate Lifestyle Collection

Other rural based magazines and newspapers, e.g. NZ Lifestyle, Organic NZ, Countrywide NZ Farmers Weekly, Rural Living, The Country, etc.

Courses, for example:

- 'Animal Care for Small Block Holders' – course offered by PGG Wrightson
- 'The lifestyle block vet' – online course offered by NZVA in 2017