

Horticulture NZ - Auckland Stakeholder Perception Audit

16 December 2015

Horticulture NZ's natural resources team represents growers on a range of increasingly complex and intertwined issues including water access and quality, RMA and access to land. Nowhere are these issues more evident than in Pukekohe and surrounds where the region's significant growing community is experiencing first-hand the effects of encroaching urban development as Auckland moves south.

To help Horticulture NZ better understand how growers perceive the development and its challenges, opportunities and trade-offs, Ideas Shop interviewed 14 growers in South Auckland.

The purpose of the audit was to ultimately provide a snapshot of how growers feel about development in the region, in order to inform Horticulture NZ's approach to advocacy and programming in the region.

Purpose and methodology

Ideas Shop conducted interviews with 14 growers based in South Auckland one-on-one by telephone (9) and face-to-face (5) in November. We invited 20 to take part; two declined, one didn't return our messages and three agreed to participate but we were unable to find a suitable time to talk.

The purpose of the interviews was to understand;

- growers' views of the impact of the interrelated issues of water and housing intensification on their businesses and the region
- their assessment of how effectively representatives including Horticulture NZ are representing their interests on these issues
- what expectations, if any, they have of Horticulture NZ advocating on these issues over and above what it's already doing

The interviews were (20-30 minutes) long and asked questions probing:

- their views on the development of the South Auckland region
- the opportunities and challenges for growers
- specific challenges relating to land and water
- satisfaction with Horticulture NZ's advocacy for grower interests and communication with its members

Horticulture NZ was interested in obtaining a representative view of growers' perceptions of the organisation's work programme. On that basis, Horticulture NZ provided Ideas Shop with a list of 30 growers who had varying degrees of engagement with Horticulture NZ; interests in water; business scale and those with a strong succession plan and not (as that would likely influence their perceptions about housing development on grower land). Given the small sample size and the fact that the respondents were

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not chosen randomly, this survey only provides a snapshot of the issues and the findings cannot be regarded as statistically significant. However we believe it does give a strong insight into the views of growers in the region.

A copy of the discussion guide is included as Appendix A.

Summary of findings

- Growers generally accept that Auckland needs to grow and recognise this is going to change how they operate
- Most growers could see at least some positives from the increased development in their area, but are sceptical of the long-term planning process
- Access to water and (to a lesser extent) land availability for growers were major concerns. About half of growers felt that their 'right to grow' is being eroded by their new neighbours
- Growers felt there was a lack of recognition for the unique soil and growing conditions in the area
- Authoritative information and spokespeople were hard to come by, and they are frustrated with the water-related consent process for their individual farms
- Adapting to their new circumstances is going to be necessary and growers recognise the need to embrace new technology
- Horticulture NZ is generally doing a good job but could do with more resources

Detailed Findings

Below are the key themes from the interviews supported with quotes from growers themselves.

GROWTH IS INEVITABLE

Generally, there was an acceptance that the Auckland's growth southward was inevitable:

"Development has to happen for a number of reasons. Population is growing at an extraordinary rate and Auckland needs more housing and different types and in different places to meet the need."

"I encourage development. I have no issues with that. You can't stop progress; you just need to manage it. It impacts how we work – means we might need to change."

"We realise that they need more space for housing and are starting to build."

"There is some good land being eaten up that one day will be a concern, but it will happen anyway. It doesn't worry me too much. I'd be happier seeing second and third grade land used up for housing. But the housing development is following the main roads – and we can't control that."

BUT WITH NO OVERALL STRATEGY

There was a concern that the development taking place was ad-hoc and there didn't seem to be any overarching strategy from the Council or the Government for the region:

"There is not really a clear strategy and it doesn't appear anyone is looking at the big picture - the 30-year vision. There is no real consultation with people development would affect most."

"With an ad hoc approach to development, it will negatively affect our operations. If it's done well, it could be good for everyone. As growers we need to think about the opportunities that come with an increase in consumption that will come from the growth of Auckland."

BRINGING SOME OPPORTUNITIES

Most growers could see at least some positives with increased development in the region:

"Land values will likely increase, which is good."

"Increased consumption that comes from a growing population is big opportunity."

"Development is a necessary evil. However, if you control well it can be a positive."

"Diversification – it's a platform for growth, opportunities outside of horticulture."

"The opportunity is the proximity to the market. For us, the awareness of organic food is growing, which gives us a future."

BUT ALSO MANY CHALLENGES... LAND AVAILABILITY

Availability of land for horticulture was a worry for many growers:

"Land access will be a challenge with Auckland moving south so quickly. Once the express way is finished a hell of a lot of people will be commuting and more people will find it attractive to live here."

"Availability of land close to our packing bases is a challenge – most land suitable for cropping has gone, there's no new land available, you have to go further out which increases costs."

"We're in Pukekohe and we're alarmed at the rate development has been going ahead at and the amount of productive land that has been taken out of productivity. It's concerning us. We have made submissions in conjunction with Horticulture NZ to try and stem it."

AND IN PARTICULAR GOOD GROWING LAND

A number of growers felt that there wasn't sufficient recognition of unique soil in the area:

"We realise that they need more space for housing and are starting to build, but they are building on elite soils. Once you grow a house on elite soil, you can't grow anything else."

"In areas like Pukekohe it will push growers out. In our region, they're building subdivisions on fertile land. The house doesn't care whether the land is good growing land or a clay base. But once fertile land is gone, it's gone. You're pushing growers further and further out and there just isn't the quality fertile soil elsewhere – it's in short supply."

“We prefer to see the larger tracts of elite soils preserved for farming. The land is unique.”¹

“I think we are losing some beautiful cropping land that is unique, to houses. I don’t think we should have so much development of houses as they don’t provide any economic return. Once they are lost they’re gone. Once the land use is changed that’s it. I’ve seen heated discussions between growers in Pukekohe – the older growers are against protecting land from development, and younger growers are for. Obviously they both have vested interests. If land was locked up and couldn’t be sold for subdivision, it would be cheaper to grow crops – as the start-up cost of buying land would be cheaper. But it goes the other way too- if you want to sell it, your options are limited. People who made very little money out of produce, and used producing business to buy land, are now selling for very good profits – and why wouldn’t they? It’s a difficult issue.”

“We’re losing a lot of high quality land to housing. We’re being left to lower quality land to pasture. The sustainability of the region in 20 years is under threat, at the rate we’re going we won’t have any quality land to grow on as it will have been developed. I don’t know how we can do anything about it. It’s a catch 22. We look over the fence and wish that someone wasn’t selling their land – but if it was us selling the land, we would want the highest price. I don’t know we can change that. There really needs to be some discussion about whether the land can be kept... If you take what’s been lost out West Auckland, Mangere and Franklin, it all adds up. By the time the public and Council realise it, it’s going to be too late!

Although this view is not shared by all growers:

“To say that this is the most productive soil and we can’t use it replaced elsewhere, it’s a fairly precious position. There are risks and those have to be worked through. I think the natural laws play out – people/growers will adjust to circumstances and I think that will continue to happen here. I don’t think we can stop progress. It’s a case of how we influence that. In terms of regional plans, saying urbanisation shouldn’t happen without any thought to anything else is ridiculous.”

WATER CHALLENGES

Access to water, probably even more so than land availability, was considered a real challenge that was only going to get tougher:

“The major problem is getting water right - the competition for water. We can’t develop orchards without water.”

“The number one challenge is water. It seems to be a major thing. For me personally, we’re going all right, we’re not that concerned. But it’s always looming. We have to have the water.”

“Water is a big issue – the council has fully allocated some of the aquifers, you can’t just go and drill bores wherever you want.”

¹ Growers often use ‘elite’ soils and versatile soils interchangeably. They usually mean categories one, two and three soils, not just category one.

“It will definitely change – with the increase in population and urban sprawl, there will be greater demand for water. It’s essential we manage it well. It has to be of a sufficient quality so we can apply it to our crops (and drink it). It has to be managed very carefully.”

“WaterCare is taking a massive take of water. Our irrigation requirements are becoming more and more involved. We can’t grow our crops without it. We need adequate access to water.”

“The major problem is getting water right - the competition for water. We can’t develop orchards without water. Applying for new water rights is too difficult. It requires months of time and there’s hundreds of thousands to jump through hoops. We’ve had to bring on a hydro-geologist.”

“Competition for access to water rights is an enormous issue. And how expensive that is going to be – compliance etc. Where we are we deal with Waikato District Council and Waikato Regional Council – that’s not better or worse than dealing with Auckland Council, it’s just the same, and it’s involved. If we had unlimited resource for water the yield we would get for crops would be fantastic – our business opportunities would be enormous. But that’s not going to happen.”

“Irrigation is the biggest challenge. We wanted to use water for irrigation every day of the season but the people at the consents office didn’t understand what we wanted to do and declined it... Growers have difficulty because we can’t build water storage dams in the region to store water and that is absolutely crazy policy.”

THE RIGHT TO GROW

While most growers accepted the need for new development there was an almost universal concern that the rights of growers were being eroded by their new neighbours:

“Horticulture NZ should be involved in the ‘right to grow’ issues – whether you’re big or small, it’s of common interest. We support Horticulture NZ being more involved. We need them to be challenging more and asking more questions – and if that means on the front page of the paper, that’s okay by us.”

“People who live there won’t want spray drift, or tractors or irrigation tapping away all day and all night. The two have to merge together. Maybe we can have small ‘green belt’ areas between housing developments and growing land – hard to know how to do that, but I’m sure it’s possible.”

“And it will be a challenge for growers doing business – water, spraying, tractors etc. It’s not too bad with only a few wanting to know everything you’re doing.”

“There are more negatives with development – the right to carry on normal operations is changing. Noise and chemicals are becoming an issue. Our right to farm needs to be respected.”

“We’re also encountering new issues with neighbours who are worried about chemicals, vehicles, and even mud on the roads.”

“The town people are coming to the country and treat it like it’s a holiday place, like there wasn’t anything going on. Actually we were here first, leave us alone. I think there needs to

be more done in telling people 'look, that's how it's always been, that's how it should carry on, you can't change things without having an impact on the economy and local food production.'

AND THE NEED TO ADAPT

Many acknowledged the industry needed to adapt to their new circumstances and that technology in particular could bring new opportunities:

"I encourage development. I have no issues with that. You can't stop progress, you just need to manage it. It impacts how we work – means we might need to change."

"How do you improve your productive system to come up with a different way of delivering on that? The glasshouse tomato industry is a model in that respect – their entire production approach has changed significantly, they've reinvented themselves."

"With telemetry devices, there could be more water available – because it's too simplistic how they allocate it now, lots of people get it but don't use it. So that should free up for neighbours or someone further down the road to use it. With the new advances in technology they can manage water more efficiently."

"How we apply water is going to change – technology will see us group activity e.g. store water, save it and allocate it. But that requires management – and growers won't do that as it's not their core competency"

LACK OF AUTHORITATIVE INFORMATION ON WATER WITHIN COUNCILS

Several growers felt that the authorities did not have the expertise to communicate effectively with growers and there didn't appear to be an agreed understanding of what was going on:

"There are wide opinions on how much water is available in aquifers – Auckland and Waikato say not much. Our engineers say there is plenty. The policy concerning levy and rate are also dysfunctional."

"There are conflicting views on the amount of water available underground. Auckland Council and Waikato District Council are quite conservative."

"I showed up at a regional council meeting and the officials said they aren't experts, they're just working through a process. It doesn't give me confidence in the process or their ability to optimise within the framework they've been given and, as a result, they probably won't deliver very well – to our detriment."

"It seems like the Government agencies and Council don't understand our perspective or have much tolerance for us."

HORTICULTURE NZ IS DOING A GOOD JOB, NEED MORE RESOURCES & SHOULD FOCUS ON WATER

Growers generally felt that Horticulture NZ was doing a good job representing grower's interests but could do with more resources:

"Within the resources available to us they're doing a great job."

"Consultation with Council is obviously vital. The likes of Chris Keenan – he's doing a marvellous job representing us."

“They’re doing quite well relative to the resource available and the cost. There’s always room for improvement.”

“Chris is fantastic at what he does. He has limited resource. He gets all pulled in different directions.”

There was a concern however that there might be too much reliance on Chris:

“It’s highly exposed if Chris leaves – because the systems and structures aren’t yet in place.”

Not all feedback was positive about Horticulture NZ and there were outlier perspectives:

“As commercial growers, I’d put us at a 2 (out of 5). The dairy industry has a much more powerful hand than we do because of their size – that’s a concern to us. We need a much bigger imprint before our concerns as an industry will be heard.”

“I’ve seen a bit of change in Horticulture NZ. The environment is very toxic. The offices aren’t laid out well for people to work as a team. Horticulture NZ used to be a large part of the vegetable industry but now it’s less – because product groups are doing far more. I’ve seen potatoes moved, and tomatoes and onions have looked at that. There’s nothing wrong with that. But it’s important Horticulture NZ doesn’t detach itself too much from those product groups, that needs to be addressed; they need to document and have adequate understanding of who’s doing what to best manage resources. We only have small resources/budgets to work with and we’re trying to achieve a lot. I have no issues with having a higher levy – and then having some real work done achieving measurable outcomes.”

Horticulture NZs advocacy for water issues was perceived slightly more favourably (scored an average of 3.5 out of 5) than for land issues (3.4 out of 5). Generally growers were more concerned with water issues and wanted Horticulture NZ to be more focused on water issues:

“It’s probably a 2 as far as people (i.e. decision makers) taking notice of our interests. It seems to be that the places like the steel mill down the road from us have a higher priority. The ability of growers to influence is lower – we come second to any other industry.”

“We need more of Horticulture NZ’s help in this area – e.g. to manage water.”

“Scientific evidence to define the amount water that’s available. Independent evaluation. Advocacy to confront the discrepancies in water measurements between government and growers.” (When asked what Horticulture NZ could do more of)

“If we got word in a couple of years’ time that water consent was going to change significantly and we’d lose our water rights, we’d want Horticulture NZ to yell from the roof tops. But if that was to happen in 25 years’ time we would want their help adjusting our business for how we cope with that.”

“Water yes, because it applies to all. Land no, because that can be represented by regional groups or product groups.” (When asked whether Horticulture NZ should campaign for protection of land and water)

Growers wanted to be upskilled and educated so they could more effectively participate in the public processes:

“It would be good to see them doing more educating growers on these issues so they can realistically participate.”

“Just doing more of what they are. Working with Council has to be the priority and educating growers.”

Some growers wanted Horticulture NZ to take a stronger stance on water issues but done carefully so not to undermine the industry’s reputation:

“Keep doing what it’s doing. Keep raising the profile of water with the grower community. Horticulture NZ should be involved in the ‘right to grow’ issues – whether you’re big or small, it’s of common interests.”

“I don’t think it would hurt to get some media representation – it’s not just about how much water consumers use by flushing their toilet or watering their garden – it’s more complex than that; it all boils down to whether people want to eat imported food or local produce. We need water to be able to supply fresh produce.”

“We could possibly get the media involved, shouting from the roof tops, to explain our plight. I’m not sure it’s necessarily the right thing to do – it can sometimes result in the worst outcome as Councils get upset. I think we’re doing the right thing, dealing with Council quietly as we are. Horticulture NZ is best placed to make that call though - if they think they can get better traction on these issues with politicians by going to the media.”

“(Unprompted) I’d like to see Horticulture NZ taking a public stance on this. I’m in favour of them talking to local and central politicians. It’s a case of raising the discussion – as people just won’t know. The areas of public land – if that was written down and acknowledged it was quality A grade land, people would probably be shocked where it was heading. If you had it on a graph showing how much growing land had been converted in the past 50 years and estimating how much more would be developed in the next 15, it would be powerful, I think people would be surprised... One of the worst things is splitting up 10 acre blocks... If they sell that land, you could limit them to only developing the land the house is already on and an acre around it... We’ll be lucky at the rate we’re going that our farm will exist for my kids.”

Appendix A: Discussion Guide

PREAMBLE

South Auckland is experiencing significant change as a direct result of the growth of Auckland city and the impacts on access to land and water. The water setting limits process may also have significant impacts on growers' access to water over the next decade.

Horticulture NZ wants to better understand what growers think of the impacts of housing development, intensification and water management issues for growers in the region – both now and over the next decade. This information will help inform its work programme and how it should best represent growers' interests in the region. Horticulture NZ has asked Ideas Shop to interview 20 growers in the region to understand their views.

This discussion is confidential. We will write a general report for Horticulture NZ summarising the general themes. Where we do quote people, they will be unattributed.

Do you have any questions about this survey before we begin?

GENERAL

- 1 What are your views of the development of the Auckland region and in particular the South Auckland region?
- 2 What are the biggest opportunities for growers in the region? Biggest challenges? Probe: around growth
- 3 What are the two biggest opportunities in your business right now? Two biggest concerns/challenges?

WATER MANAGEMENT IN THE REGION

- 4 To what extent are you aware of, and involved in, the water setting limits process happening in your catchment? Probe: if ambivalent, why?
- 5 Thinking ahead over the next decade, how do you think water management in your region will change? (Probe for you individually, how to meet needs of wider community who will all have growing demands for water, impacts on supply of fresh vegetables, impacts on local and NZ economy)
- 6 How is this affecting your business currently, if at all? Will that change over the next 10 years?
- 7 On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is poor, 5 is excellent), how well are your interests being represented on water issues in your region? Note respondents may refer to representation by Irrigation NZ, Pukekohe Growers Assoc, Horticulture NZ
- 8 What, if anything, should Horticulture NZ be doing to represent the interests of growers around water management? Is there anything new/different?

LAND ISSUES

- 9 What impacts, if any, do you think housing intensification is having for growers in the region now? In 10 years? Probe: e.g. less access to land so growing region shifts elsewhere; impact on supply of fresh vegetables; if ambivalent, why?

- 10 What impacts, if any, is housing intensification in the area having on your business right now? Do you see that changing in the next 10 years? Note respondents may refer to representation by Pukekohe Growers Assoc, Horticulture NZ
- 11 On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is poor, 5 is excellent), how well is your interests being represented on land issues in your region? Probe: Irrigation NZ, Pukekohe Growers Assoc, Horticulture NZ
- 12 What, if anything, should Horticulture NZ be doing to represent the interests of growers around water management? Is there anything new/different?
- 13 Horticulture NZ is trying to gauge the level of concern on these issues in this region. How critical do you think the issues of water management and the availability of land are? To what extent do you expect Horticulture NZ to campaign for protection of land and water and soil use in your region? Prompt: if so, what would you expect them to do? (e.g. working with councils and developing good planning tools, or would you like them to be more vocal in the media, maybe even advocate in public to highlight this issue?)
- 14 That brings us to the end of our questions. Do you have any other comments you would like to make?