

Aidan Bichan has worked hard over the years to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the nitrogen leaching rate on his own farm, Kaiwaiwai Dairies.

Doing what he preaches

Carterton dairy farmer and DairyNZ climate change ambassador Aidan Bichan is doing all he can to help others understand the challenges and environmental regulations so they can leave the land in a better state for future generations. **Gerald Piddock** reports.

CARTERTON dairy farmer Aidan Bichan is a man with many hats.

He is a member of Federated Farmers, a Fonterra supplier, a registered farm consultant, DairyNZ climate change ambassador, dairy environment leader and member of Forest and Bird.

He is also heavily involved with local catchment groups for the past 18 years and was recently appointed to the freshwater leaders group involved with the Government's freshwater proposals.

Being engaged and involved in so many organisations reflects his desire to leave the land in a better state than when he arrived on it, he told farmers at Limestone Downs Station's recent annual field day near Port Waikato.

Other farmers need to get involved in discussions to influence policy makers with 11 pieces of legislation emerging since February last year that in some way affect the industry. That involves attending meetings, getting informed and, most importantly, engaging in the process, he says.

When it comes making submissions, like the one recently finished for the freshwater reforms, farmers need to get weight of numbers.

"It's a pain in the arse but we need to do it.

"Attend meetings, do submissions and tell your stories – the stories that have come through in the Essential Fresh Water and the highly productive land policy from farmers have been really good."

Farmers need to showcase their industry to the public and tell people good stories.

When he speaks to Government policy people Bichan tells them if he gets good policy he will be innovative in achieving or exceeding its objectives. If the rules are bad he will find a way to bypass them.

"If we're involved and have a say in it you've got an opportunity to influence it."

Farmers risk being screwed over if they are disconnected.

"No action means no choices."

The son of a Presbyterian minister and doctor, he was born in Wellington but grew up in several places including Mangakino and Cannons Creek in Porirua.

Members of his wider family were involved in farming so he spent time on farms before settling on sheep and beef farming. However, while studying at Massey University for an agriculture degree he changed his mind and decided to go into the dairy sector.

He spent 12 years working as a

consulting officer for the Dairy Board (now DairyNZ). He worked in the Farmwise team for about eight years before setting up his own consultancy business.

In the early 1990s he was the supervising consultant on a Wairarapa dairy farm owned by several Taranaki farmers and an accountant. As parcels of shares became available he would find replacement investors.

"Over the years more and more local farmers took on those shareholdings and today there is only one original shareholder left."

He, too, is a shareholder in the syndicate that is Kaiwaiwai Dairies and while the original 1200-cow farm was sold they retain a 900-cow winter milk farm.

He has consulted on a range of topics and to various businesses including farmers, QEII, politicians and regional councils assisting with their environmental plans. He was also involved in cow shed design.

"As a tutor for the DairyNZ Milksmart programme I have a pretty good understanding of shed flow, what works and what doesn't.

"However, after the flurry of conversions there are not a lot of new sheds being built now and certainly not at the level they once were."

Having spent several years involved with catchment management and community groups he believes they are the best people to identify issues in waterways and find a solution.

In his own catchment in South Wairarapa the water quality issues are based largely on legacy issues dating back to a nearby meat processor, which closed in the early 1980s.

"It's still leaching nitrates into the ground water."

Bichan says local government also likes catchment groups because they are more effective than regulations.

When in Wellington he makes sure to wear his Fonterra proud dairy farmer shirt.

"I am a proud Fonterra dairy farmer and I'm proud of the industry having worked 37-odd years now. It's a great industry. We've got to do some things better."

Most of the issues he faces when speaking to non-dairy farmers and urban-based policy makers are caused by a lack of understanding.

His view of the dirty dairying tag is that while it was bloody uncomfortable and harmful it set up the industry well as the environment came under the spotlight.

One challenge he saw was the constant turnover of government policy staff in the Primary Industries and Environment ministries.

"These staff were not nasty, just uninformed," he says.

The new staff are often graduates and Bichan tries to educate them as well as he can on farmer issues.

"We host a group a week on farm in some form or another to try to get that education going."

New Zealand's environment has been heavily modified since colonisation and he doubts farmers had much understanding of the implications of what



Carterton farmer Aidan Bichan says farmers should attend meetings so they are better informed and can have their say in policy discussions.

they were doing when they made the modifications, particularly over the past 40-50 years.

"These days we do realise that a lot more," he says.

Bichan is also a part of the Freshwater Leaders Group and in 2018 was selected to become a Dairy Industry Climate Change Ambassador. That group of 15 helps dairy farmers understand the challenge of climate change, new scientific research and environmental changes they can make on their farms. They also work on a range of initiatives including improving water quality, reviewing their farm system to reduce its environmental footprint and working at a grassroots level with their community to achieve better outcomes for the environment and farming.

"I totally believe communities will make much better decisions and get better outcomes than central Government-driven rules and regulations," he says.

He has worked hard over the years to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and his nitrogen leaching rate on his farm.

The 618 hectare farm's nitrogen leaching rate is about 15kg of nitrogen a hectare, largely thanks to the sizable wetland on the farm. The region averages around 33kg of nitrogen a hectare and nationally it is 36kg.

His biological greenhouse gas emissions sit about 6.3 tonnes a hectare, down from 9.9 tonnes eight years ago.

The 0.75ha constructed wetland was

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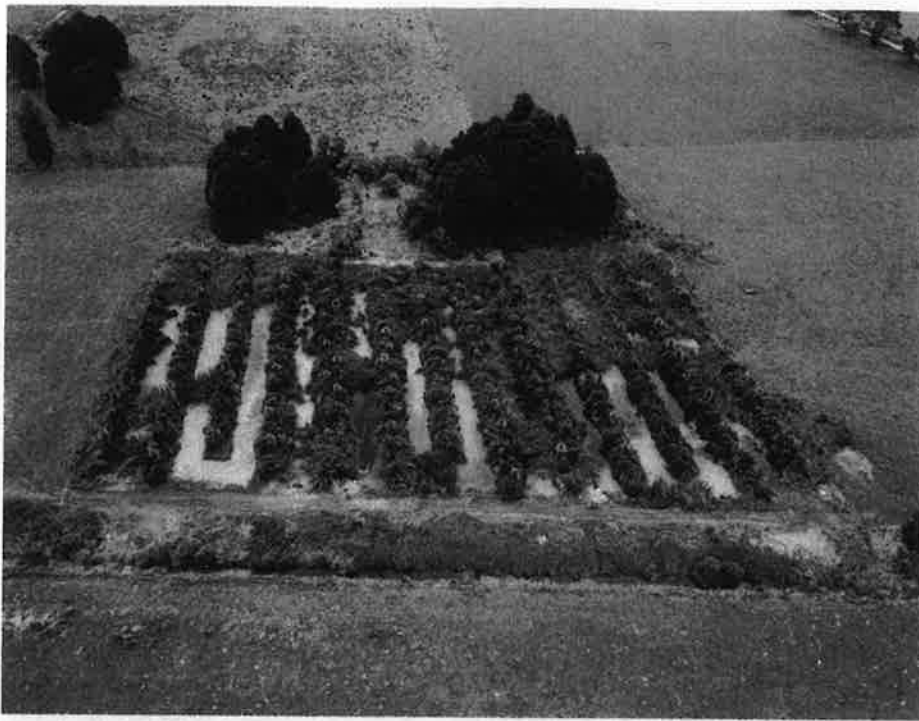
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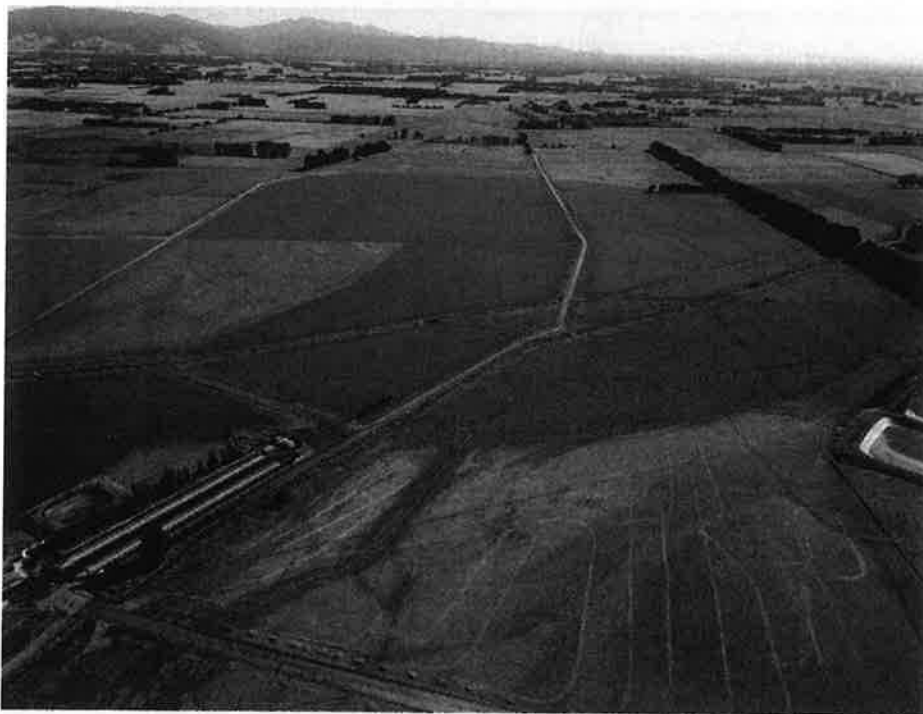
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The 0.75ha constructed wetland built four years ago takes out about 680kg of nitrogen a year including 35ha of Bichan's farm as well as 200ha from other neighbouring farms.



Kaiwairai Dairies is a System 4 operation with 25-30% of the herd's diet from supplementary feed including kale undersown with plantain for the winter milking herd.

built four years ago. It was funded in part by the Kickstart for Freshwater project as well as with help from Niwa, his regional council and others.

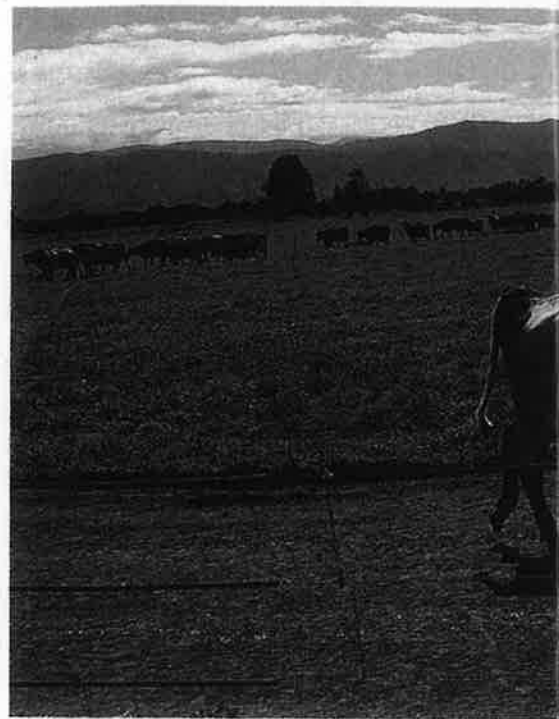
The wetland takes out about 680kg of nitrogen a year including 35ha of Bichan's farm as well as 200ha from other neighbouring farms. The wetland also acts as a buffer for the nearby 9000ha Wairarapa Moana wetland.

"The more nutrient we can keep out of that the better."

Bichan said the construction of the wetland did not cost a lot. The farm budget includes \$8000-\$10,000 set aside for environmental work.

The wetland meant losing around \$25,000 of land on the farm and cost an estimated \$55,000 in total. Of that, \$27,000 was funded to build the wetland.

The farm is run as an equity partnership with six partners, peak milking 900 cows.



It is run as a System 4 operation with 25-30% of the herd's diet from supplementary feed including about 60 tonnes of palm kernel fed over winter. The farm also grows fodder beet, maize, kale and oats.

It has a small amount of irrigation that grows about 17 tonnes of drymatter feed.

It operates an autumn calving system with 300 of the herd calving now.

Bichan and the rest of the partners also do riparian planting and bush restoration on the property.

Races are sloped away from drains to prevent runoff spilling into them. It runs back into the pasture so it filters in the paddock rather than in the water.

The farm is an open gates host for Fonterra's yearly open days when about 1200 people, mostly from Wellington visited the farm.

Bichan has used Overseer since its inception and uses the tool intensively to monitor the farm's emissions and experiment with what would happen if he changes the farm's system or adds inputs or infrastructure. In the process he learned that reducing his emissions also reduced his nitrogen input.

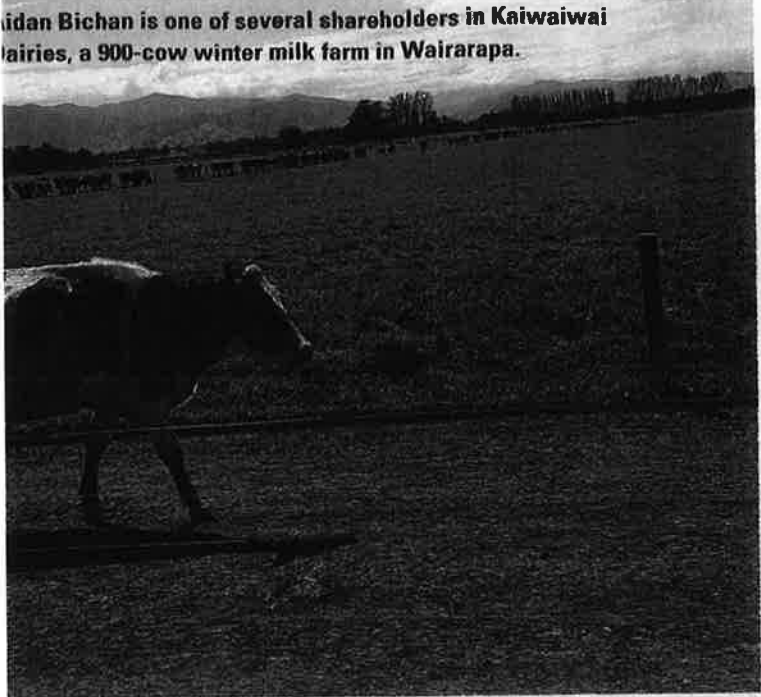
"What was good for the environment in terms of nitrogen leaching was actually really good for our GHG footprint."

He believes he was able to reduce his emissions by switching from ploughing to direct drilling.

He has also halved his water use by better using green wash.

"A typical dairy farm uses 70l a cow through the farm dairy. We're running at the moment at 36l. Our target's 25l."

He says farmers needed to keep up the



idan Bichan is one of several shareholders in Kaiwaiwai dairies, a 900-cow winter milk farm in Wairarapa.



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good job they are doing when it comes to environmental mitigation. The industry knows it is headed in the right direction but does not have the data to back it up.

"The rural sector in the last 10-15 years has really ramped up its effort and one of the challenges we have got is that we are not yet seeing all of that data coming through."

To maintain that momentum farmers need to have a farm environmental plan to maintain that momentum.

The 1% of the world Bichan wants to feed are those willing to pay the most for his product. Those customers want a good provenance story around their product, he says.

"A really well documented farm plan is just what you plan to do and I believe they will be compulsory in time and personally I think they should be mandatory."

Meat and dairy processors will make the plans mandatory because those businesses need it for their quality assurance programmes to convince customers their farmers have the best animal welfare and environmental stewardship.

"We need that for our 1% of the market."

He says it is highly likely farm plans are going to be compulsory in the Government's freshwater plans.

"If we don't get in first and have our own, someone else will decide."

Away from the farm he is an active member of the Wairarapa Deerstalkers branch, trained in first aid and is a member of the local search and rescue group though he admits to finding the hills seemingly getting steeper.