

Drought support not needed?

By CHERIE HOWIE - The Marlborough Express



SCOTT HAMMOND/The Marlborough Express

THE BIG DRY: Marlborough monitor farmer Greg Harris, who farms in the lower Awatere Valley, is concerned the region has not been declared an official drought zone.

Marlborough is now on the Government's official drought watch, but regional farming leaders are resisting calls from some in the industry to push for drought zone status.

Some of the driest conditions in recent history have plagued parts of Marlborough, with Marlborough District Council rural rain gauges recording levels around half their long-term average every month since November. The big dry is also being felt in town, with just 7.2 millimetres of rain falling in Blenheim last month – a paltry 14 per cent of its long-term average of 53mm. Low rainfall puts a stranglehold on grass growth, resulting in feed shortages and forcing some pastoral farmers to cut stock numbers.

Marlborough's lack of inclusion in a clutch of regions, including Northland, Waikato and Otago, declared drought zones led to questions from some farmers last week.

Drought zone status is conferred by Agriculture Minister David Carter on the advice of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). Mr Carter's spokeswoman, Vanessa Rawson, said yesterday that the minister was receiving regular briefings on the situation in Marlborough.

MAF North Island regions policy group manager Phil Journeaux reiterated earlier comments that while the ministry was monitoring the situation in Marlborough closely, any push for drought status – which could be limited to part of a region – needed to come from local farmers. "MAF can't just go running around the country [telling people] 'you're in a drought'," he said.

Any request would likely come from Federated Farmers or the Marlborough District Council, but neither had sought drought status, he said. Council regulatory manager Hans Versteegh said the council was happy to work with Federated Farmers on a drought zone request, but no help had been sought. Federated Farmers Marlborough president Geoff Evans said he was keeping a close eye on the situation, but did not see any benefit from Marlborough becoming a drought zone.

Most of the help made available to farmers as part of official drought assistance was already available, such as tax relief, income support and counselling. "[Drought status] is a bit of a toothless tiger." Marlborough farmers were used to dry weather and were better able to farm around it than those in other regions, Mr Evans said. A bigger problem for farmers was the high New Zealand dollar, he said. "Poor returns have more impact on farmers than the weather."

Top of the South Rural Support Trust field officer Ian Blair said Mr Evans was right to hold off on seeking drought relief. If National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (Niwa) predictions of continued dry weather for the next 15 days were accurate the region would be in a "serious situation" in the weeks to come, he said.

However, Mr Blair, a former MAF farm consultant, has been keeping an eye on growth-vital soil moisture levels and said, for now, these were about normal. "It's been a dry few months, but before that we had good rainfall." Grass growth was behind, but that could change quickly, and the most important season for rainfall – winter – had yet to arrive, he said. Winter rainfall is vital for spring growth and Niwa predictions were for a wetter and warmer winter than normal in Marlborough, Mr Blair said.

Marlborough monitor farmer Greg Harris said he was surprised and disappointed Federated Farmers Marlborough was not pushing for drought status in the region. Mr Harris said last week he had no significant winter feed, knew of others reducing stock numbers and questioned why Marlborough was not considered drought stricken. Saying nothing would be gained from a status change was missing the point, Mr Harris said last night. "It's [about] recognition. I don't want to be seen as a farmer moaning ... but I think there's farmers out there suffering." He encouraged farmers to get behind any efforts to have Marlborough declared drought affected.

Ask for help

Stressed-out farmers feeling the pressure from Marlborough's months-long dry spell are being told not to be afraid to ask for help if they need it. Top of the South Rural Support Trust field officer Ian Blair said some farmers were struggling and he urged them to seek support.

Mr Blair said his role at the trust, an independent support group for the rural community, meant he had many useful contacts, such as with Work and Income or health agencies.

Any request for help would be completely confidential, he said. He urged anyone concerned about another person to contact him.

Farmers, particularly men, were often too proud to ask for help.

Males particularly don't network, they're more likely to try and solve a problem themselves ... if people suspect someone, like their neighbours, are under incredible stress then please pass it on because there is help available."

Mr Blair can be contacted on 578 9923.