

CHAPTER 20. EVALUATION OF THE NEW ZEALAND SUSTAINABLE FARMING FUND: A WORK IN PROGRESS

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Abstract

This paper describes two evaluations that have been completed on the Sustainable Farming Fund (SFF).² The particular shape of the SFF requires an evaluation methodology that takes into account the complex nature of the supported projects. An adaptation of the Bennett's Hierarchy was used. Experience with these two evaluations shows that to be effective, the methodology will need to continue to adapt as the SFF proceeds through time – the methodology used in the early-stage evaluation was further adapted in Evaluation 2004. Evaluation is then a work in progress. Evaluation 2004 indicated that:

- The benefits within individual projects are multi-dimensional with economic, environment and social benefits in many cases being generated.*
- Potential economic return to GDP (or farm-gate production) from a selected group of projects is in the range of NZD 330 million to NZD 530 million per annum, if all potential developments proceed.*
- The project groups have also contributed actual and potential environmental benefits. Many of these can be quantified, though not necessarily monetised.*
- The realisation of these benefits will require further investments and other resources to enable or facilitate adoption.*

Background

The purpose of the SFF is to support projects that will contribute to improving the financial and environmental performance of the land-based productive sectors. The SFF was introduced in the 2000/01 Budget, is sponsored by the Minister of Agriculture and administered by the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). Funding is by specific appropriation.

Project-based grant funding is provided to assist the land-based primary production sectors solve problems and take up opportunities to overcome barriers to economic, social and environmental viability. Projects must be producer-led and representative of a community of interest – most projects have strong science or consultant support. It is expected that grant funded projects will lead to

1. Sustainable Farming Fund, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, New Zealand.
2. Information on the Sustainable Farming Fund can be found at www.maf.govt.nz/sff.

management and behaviour changes in the medium to long term to make a positive difference to the identified and targeted issues and opportunities.

Monitoring and review systems have been in place since the first group of projects began in January-February 2001. Project teams are required to report progress against agreed work programmes – this reporting provides the basis for the verification of grant payment requests.

By mid-2002, experience, along with clear anecdotal evidence, suggested that the SFF was working well. Even so, systematic evaluation was required to appraise and judge the worth, or otherwise, of the public investment in approved projects. The selection of an evaluation method required cognisance of a number of factors including:

- The contribution to government's key goals and programmes;
- Linkages with industry and sector programmes and priorities;
- Participation in the projects/programme;
- Effectiveness in the communication of project results;
- Ability to effect change in practices and behaviours (within target groups and consequences for society);
- The temporal distance between project completion and management and behaviour change; and
- Management and administration processes and systems.

Another consideration in the selection of an appropriate evaluation method was the early stage of the SFF's life. This created difficulties in the assessment of behavioural change among project participants and society in general resulting from the projects.

A model for evaluation

Bennett's Hierarchy³ provided the framework for developing an evaluation methodology to assess the performance, future direction, design and approach to the operation of the SFF. The core concept of Bennett's Hierarchy is that any project or programme, aimed at changing behaviour through a learning or training process, may be planned and evaluated by viewing the process as a hierarchy. Figure 1 demonstrates the application of the Hierarchy as an evaluation framework for the SFF.

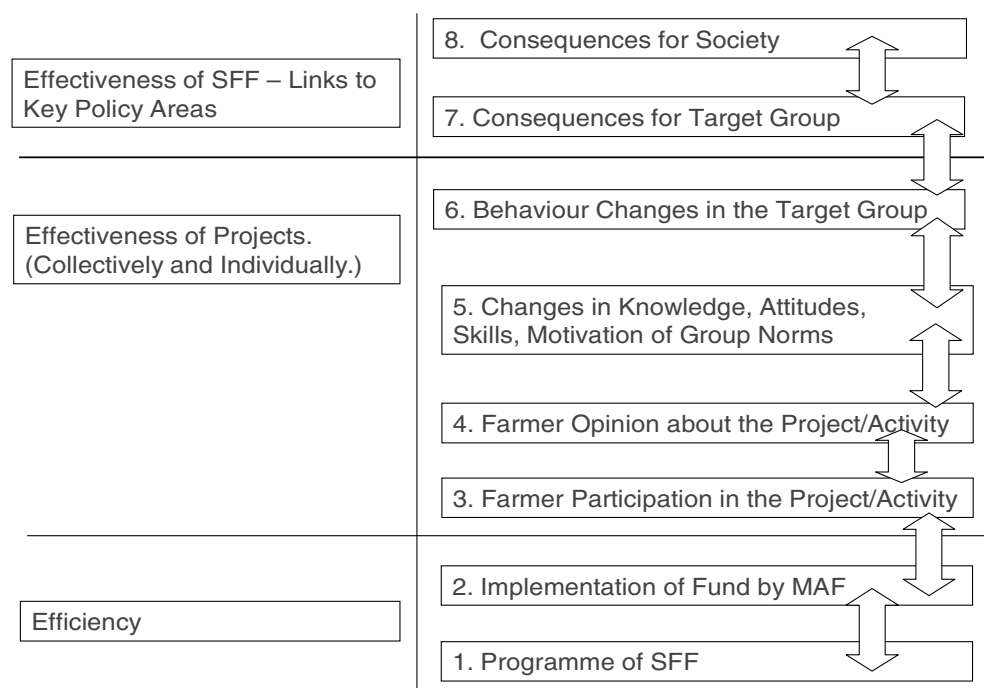
3. Bennett's Hierarchy is a model for the evaluation of agricultural extension and environmental programmes developed in the USDA and used widely in Australia.

Early-stage evaluation⁴

Methodology

An early-stage evaluation was completed in September-October 2002. This evaluation was completed by a team that was independent of both grant funded projects and MAF Policy to ensure a robust and critical review. MAF Internal Audit completed a thorough administration and assurance systems review which provided for assessment at Level 1 (Systems) and Level 2 (SFF Implementation) in the hierarchy for evaluation described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hierarchy for evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund (SFF) projects



External consultants carried out third-party questionnaire-based interviews with project managers and project sponsors representing 33 projects (28%) that had been selected to receive grant-support through the first years of the SFF's operation. The projects selected for review were stratified to ensure the sample was generally representative of the grant-funded project portfolio. The results of these interviews provided assessment against Level 3 (Farmer Participation) and Level 4 (Farmer Opinion). Interviews with key industry and sector organisation personnel and local government managers also provided input at these levels.⁵ The interview process also provided limited opportunity for assessment against Level 5 (Changes in Knowledge, Attitude, Skills, etc.), Level 6 (Management Behaviour Change), and Levels 7 and 8 (Consequences for Groups/Society). The very recently, or yet

4. *Evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund (SFF) Programme* prepared by Clare Barton (Environments by Design Limited, Palmerston North) and Ron Sutherland (Property and Land Management Services Ltd, Blenheim).

5. Interviews with project personnel were, for the most part, completed by phone while those with sector/industry organisation personnel were, for the most part, completed in person.

to be, completed nature of the selected projects along with inherent challenges in measuring these factors meant that the resulting assessment was preliminary.

Key findings

The interview process provided a substantial amount of information specific to project work programmes and the direct application and consequent benefit of early project results. It, along with the systems review, provided considerable feedback from project managers about the administration and management of the Fund. In particular, the review process provided input to the ongoing and further improvement of the financial, management and reporting systems.

The interviews, particularly with key industry and sector organisation personnel and local government managers, also provided information regarding benefits and effects accruing to organisational collaboration and technology transfer associated both with the individual projects and the SFF as a whole. Such benefits and effects ranged from tangible and foreseen to intangible and unforeseen.

The conclusion of both the evaluation team and MAF personnel was that the methodology, built around Bennett's Hierarchy, was appropriate for the purpose of the Early-Stage Evaluation. This conclusion was qualified to recognise the difficulties associated with the quantifiable measurement and assessment effects at the higher levels of Bennett's Hierarchy of costs and benefits. It was also concluded that while the method had established benchmarks for on-going periodic evaluation further refinement and development would be required to accommodate these higher levels.

Continuation of the SFF

The results of the evaluation demonstrated that the SFF was achieving its intended purpose of supporting rural sustainability through community-driven projects aimed at improving financial and environmental performance of the land-based sectors. The evaluation results supported a Government Budget decision to continue the SFF for a further three years. This decision also provided an expansion of the administration and operational budget.⁶

The decision included a requirement for a further formal evaluation of progress with the extended SFF at the end of the 2003/4 financial year (1 July 2003-30 June 2004). The results of this further evaluation would provide a basis for further consideration of whether, or not, the SFF should continue as a baseline programme and provide advice on an appropriate level of grant funding.

Evaluation 2004⁷

A much more comprehensive group of projects was available for assessment at this stage of the Fund. That is, some 120 project teams had completed their full work programmes while a further 62 would be substantially through the agreed work programmes.⁸ This provided the opportunity for a much more substantive review and evaluation of the extension and application of results and their

6. Prior to the continuation decision the SFF was administered by a dedicated team of 2 FTE plus limited support from MAF Policy Regional Offices. Consequent to the continuation decision the dedicated team is now 5.6 FTE plus support from the Regional Offices.

7. BERL (2004), *Evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund*, BERL, Wellington, www.berl.co.nz.

8. A further 81 projects will have completed the first year of their work programmes.

contribution to building sustainability within the rural sector than was possible with the early-stage evaluation.

Evaluation 2004 required an expanded method, providing for both project and programme levels. Groups of projects addressing similar topics can be regarded as a programme. The collective portfolio of grant-funded projects also constitutes a programme. There was a need to develop a method for providing adequate assessment at:

- Level 5 (Changes in Knowledge, Attitude, Skills, etc.);
- Level 6 (Management Behaviour Change);
- Level 7 (Consequences for Groups); and
- Level 8 (Consequences for Society).

Quantifiable assessment while inherently challenging at these higher levels was required. In particular, an assessment was organised of the probability of project work programmes delivering, in the medium and longer terms, behaviour and management responses that achieve real benefits for the sustainability (economic, environmental and social) of both individual projects and the SFF programme as a whole. The overall assessment for both individual projects and the programme also needed to provide for the challenges associated with measuring and assessing the complexity of:

- foreseen and unforeseen costs and benefits;
- tangible (quantifiable) and intangible (unquantifiable) effects ; and
- known and assumed benefits.

Methodology

Evaluation 2004 was completed in August-September 2004. The evaluation was led by the consultant company Business and Economic Research Limited (BERL) with input from the MAF SFF team and the MAF Corporate Assurance and Risk Directorate. BERL's considerable experience in economic assessment and forecasting and project analysis and evaluation informed their work.

The adopted approach recognised that commonly applied evaluation methods, including cost benefit analysis, could not deliver a fully measurable analysis of the contribution of the SFF to Government's policy objectives. Recently developed assessment techniques provide for the interaction between economic development and social impacts. These approaches adopt a hybrid cost benefit approach where, as far as is practicable, market value analysis is supported by other quantifiable but non-market information. The methodology developed further adapts Bennett's Hierarchy to achieve this. Figure 2 reinterprets the higher levels of Bennett's hierarchy to encompass the particular areas of interest in this evaluation.

Level 5 of Bennett's Hierarchy refers to *knowledge* creation and its *application* and *transfer*. These categories are the functions of grant funded projects, and make up three sequential steps in the overall process from creating knowledge to generating benefits from that knowledge.

Knowledge projects are those that predominantly involve the development of new knowledge, often by experimentation and innovation on-farm. The knowledge is usually based in, and refined by, the physical and social sciences.

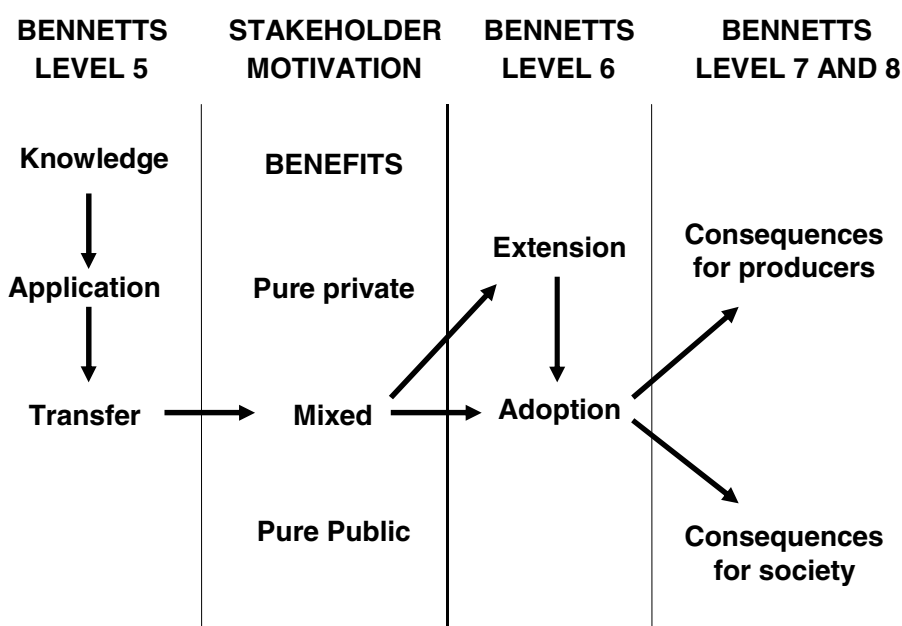
Application projects predominantly involve the testing of new knowledge in an on-farm situation, in one or a number of locations.

Transfer projects are those that generate tools and processes that make the application of the knowledge accessible and potentially available to all relevant producers, growers, or farmers.

Stakeholder motivation is required to proceed from Level 5 (with tools available to transfer knowledge) to Level 6 (where that knowledge can be adopted into producers' behaviour). The figure indicates that the nature and extent of the potential benefits will determine whether the new applied knowledge will be adopted or not.

The potential benefits may not all be purely private benefits to the producer. Where this is the case, public involvement will be required to achieve adoption. Public bodies therefore need to be motivated to support projects by providing resources and probably *via* extension in order for adoption to occur.

Figure 2. Bennett's hierarchy and the innovation cycle



Source: BERL (2004), *Evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund*, BERL, Wellington, www.berl.co.nz.

Level 6 refers to behaviour changes in the Target Group or stakeholders (*i.e.* the producers and communities). This includes adoption or uptake of the project outcomes.

Extension occurs after the completion of transfer projects where the tools for wider adoption are accessible and available. Level 5 outputs are taken up and reworked or developed further by stakeholders, and stakeholder motivation is converted into action.

Adoption is finally the uptake of the knowledge and application generated by the project, encompassed in the transfer tools. This is motivated by the stakeholder benefits, and where necessary, the adoption stimulated further by extension. The level of acceptance by producers is shown by the adoption rate.

Levels 7 and 8 encompass the consequences for both the Target Group and for society resulting from the project. Evaluation occurs by measuring the benefits from adoption, extension and development of the knowledge and applications made available by the project.

To be effective and meaningful, Evaluation 2004 required the assessment of a large body of information. This body of information was complicated by the need to consider individual projects by stakeholder, predominant outcome, range and type of benefits and stage of completion. This assessment was achieved by organising and categorising each project work programme by stakeholder, predominant outcome, range and type of benefits.

With the individual elements organised and categorised, the information was then subject to matrix analysis to identify groups of projects with generally similar benefits. Groups of projects were then selected for more detailed analysis to quantify benefits. Individual case studies were then extrapolated across similar groupings to determine the potential contribution to GDP.

Project stakeholders 2000-03

A classification of stakeholders in the projects was established to determine the incidence of the SFF projects across the primary industries, the downstream processing and distribution industries, and the rural communities (Table 1). The distribution is quite broad including projects directed at smaller industries, but also balanced in the sense that larger industries tend to have attracted more projects. There are also a reasonably surprising number of projects that have inter-industry and community stakeholders. This ensures inclusion of a large numbers of stakeholders from the primary sector and rural communities.

Table 1. Number of projects by stakeholder classification

	Knowledge	Application	Transfer	Total	% Total
Livestock farming	3	14	23	40	16%
Dairy farming	4	10	6	20	8%
Arable farming	3	12	3	18	7%
Fruit growing	6	12	11	29	11%
Other horticulture	7	10	9	26	10%
Bee-keeping	2	1	1	4	2%
Forestry	1	1	4	6	2%
Inter-industry	6	13	23	42	16%
Wool sector	2	0	0	2	1%
Horticultural sector	2	0	0	5	2%
Organic sector	2	4	6	12	5%
Cross-sector	5	0	2	7	3%
Community	16	8	22	46	18%
TOTAL	59	86	112	257	100%

Source: BERL (2004), *Evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund*, BERL, Wellington, www.berl.co.nz.

The shape of project outcomes

Projects were classified according to their predominant outcome, namely knowledge, application or transfer (Table 2). The pattern of projects funded has evolved or matured since 2000, beginning with a predominance of projects creating tools to transfer knowledge and applications that already were in the marketplace. In 2000, two-thirds of the projects were of this “transfer” nature.

Table 2. Annual number of projects by type

	Knowledge		Application		Transfer		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
2000	4	13	7	22	21	66%	32
2001	15	18	29	35	38	46%	82
2002	15	23	20	31	30	46%	65
2003	25	32	30	38	23	29%	78
TOTAL	59	23	86	33	112	44%	257

Source: BERL (2004), *Evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund*, BERL, Wellington, www.berl.co.nz.

Because the opportunities to create tools for transferring existing knowledge/application were taken up in the early years of operation, the SFF’s emphasis has evolved to an across-the-board balance of project types. By 2003, there were about one-third of projects in each of these project types, representing a maturing of the SFF and the types of projects it funds.

Profile of benefits

The projects supported by the SFF have generated, or could potentially generate, a range of benefits to the target group as well as for society. These are alternatively described as consequences in Levels 7 and 8 of Bennett’s Hierarchy. The benefits have been classified into the three main groups consistent with common notions of “sustainability” and therefore reflecting the overarching objective of the Fund. The three benefit types are: economic, environmental and social capital.

Table 3 breaks down the multiple class benefits from projects funded over the four years 2000-03. Of the 257 projects, 84 projects (about one-third) were classified to have one main class of benefit – either pure economic, pure environment, or pure social. About half, 128 projects, were classified to have two classes of benefit. One-sixth, 45 projects, had benefits in all three classes.

The table also shows the distribution of these multiple-benefit projects occurring between the functions of creating knowledge (59), testing application of knowledge (86), and generating tools to transfer the application of knowledge (112). For example, the functions of the Economic benefit projects were: 31 creating knowledge; 70 working on application of knowledge; and 57 projects generating tools for transfer of applications and knowledge. A sound balance of benefits to each of the “Triple Bottom Lines” has been achieved by the Fund.

Table 3. Summary of benefit classes by project type

	Knowledge	Application	Transfer	Sub-total	Total
Pure economic	11	16	3	30	
Pure environment	8	2	3	13	
Pure social	2	4	35	41	84
Economic-environment	5	16	4	25	
Economic-social	7	18	35	60	
Environment-social	17	10	16	43	128
All three classes	9	20	16	45	45
TOTAL	59	86	112		257

Source: BERL (2004), *Evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund*, BERL, Wellington, www.berl.co.nz.

Detailed classification of benefits from SFF projects

To determine more closely the likely effects and potential benefits from SFF projects, classifications were developed to allow the identification of the main groups of projects to be identified. In an interactive process with the SFF Team, BERL generated the following detailed classification of benefit types in each of the three main classes (Figure 3).

With this classification of benefits, and the earlier classification of stakeholders, projects were then further classified in terms of the main benefit sub-class in each of the three main benefit classes. A number of projects (if not most) are expected to generate benefits in a number of different sub-classes of Environmental benefits. However, in order to make the sorting process manageable, the most significant expected environmental benefit sub-class was selected. The same process was applied separately in the Social Capital and Economic benefit classes.

Figure 3. Detailed types of benefits

ENVIRONMENT	SOCIAL CAPITAL	ECONOMIC
Resource Usage	Capability	Production Costs
Water	Producers	
Land	Community	Output
Energy		Capacity, potential, actual
Resource Protection	Cohesion	
Biosecurity	Community	Market Connectivity
Biodiversity		Market access
Production Residuals		Market demand
Leachates		
Solid waste		

Source: BERL (2004), *Evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund*, BERL, Wellington, www.berl.co.nz.

A matrix of project stakeholders by project benefits was generated. This resulted in distribution of the 469 class-benefits from the 257 projects resulted. The detail of this distribution allowed projects to be clustered into groups for a more detailed analysis of benefits.

Analysis by groups

The broad range of project initiatives were classified by the type of stakeholder (industries, communities, or sectors), and by the expected type of benefits to social capital, the economy and the environment. The classification analysis enabled seven groups of projects to be selected for a detailed evaluation of benefits. Two of these groups (the irrigation feasibility studies and the sustainable land management pastoral projects) had significant previous studies undertaken on their potential impacts. For these two groups, the original parameters generated by the studies were adopted, carrying out any additional analyses as necessary. The impacts of the other five groups were determined through a case study approach to assess and extrapolate likely and potential benefits.

Table 4 lists the seven project groups, and shows that these groups in total contained 106 of the 257 projects funded in 2000-03. These 106 projects obtained approximately one-half of the approved funding allocated. The table shows for each project group the SFF funding, the total project funding (including money from other sources) and the actual or potential outcomes expected if the projects are successful.

The third dimension of social capital creation is not included. This is because virtually all projects have created some form of social capital either in the sense of increased producer and community capability or community cohesion. This in turn can be available to assist the adoption or extension of these projects.

Table 4. Summary of identified benefits

Project Group	No. of projects	SFF (m)	Total funding (m)	Potential economic benefits	Potential environmental benefits
				Contribution to GDP or farmgate value (m / annum)	Possible quantifiable measures
project groups					
irrigation feasibility	13	\$1.5	\$2.9	\$150 - \$300	water usage, water quality
irrigation design and efficiency	3	\$0.4	\$0.8	\$80	Irrigation uniformity, scheduling; water 'wastage'
sustainable land management (pastoral)	7	\$0.8	\$1.7	\$43	soil eroded, soil structure, water quality, shade & shelter
systems of land management (arable)	8	\$1.6	\$2.9	\$2 - \$25	soil structure, soil eroded, fuel use / GHGs
reducing leachates in dairying	23	\$4.2	\$8.8	\$50-\$80	Leached nitrate, P, K; nitrous oxide GHG emission
community learning from sustainable successes	41	\$5.4	\$12.7	<i>np</i>	Soil quality, water quality etc.
prod'n practices to reduce costs, retain markets	11	\$1.2	\$2.8	\$6.5-\$7	Reduced production residuals; market perceptions
total of seven project groups	106	\$15.1	\$32.6	\$331 - \$535 p.a.	multiple
<i>other projects</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>\$17.2</i>	<i>\$32.2</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>
All Projects	257	\$32.3	\$64.8	na	na

Notes:

na – not applicable.

np – not possible to determine as types and extent of benefits are too diverse.

Source: BERL (2004), *Evaluation of the Sustainable Farming Fund*, BERL, Wellington, www.berl.co.nz.

The potential economic developments made possible by the seven project groups could eventually result in an increase in GDP (or farm-gate production) in the range of NZD 330 million to NZD 530 million per annum, if all potential developments proceed. Clearly the realisation of these potentials will require further investments and other resources. However, the SFF process and approach, which requires significant community and stakeholder involvement, has often resulted in social cohesion and capability that increase the likelihood of these developments proceeding.

Conclusions

The purpose of Evaluation 2004 was to provide an independent evaluation of the SFF. The evaluation will be used to further inform the Minister of Agriculture as to the broad scope and scale of the benefits that are being, or could potentially be, generated from grant funded projects. The results will inform future Budget appropriation decisions.

The methodology developed, and the process of applying it, has provided for the following conclusions:

- The survey of grant-funded project managers and stakeholder consultations undertaken has confirmed that the SFF is highly regarded within the rural community, and production sectors and organisations. This is further reinforced by the financial leveraging that approved projects have attracted and by the active participation of stakeholders in most of the projects.
- The SFF has developed a strong portfolio of projects, and over time this portfolio has evolved or “matured” so that there is a good balance between the project types receiving funding. The SFF is now in a strong position to build on this platform.
- Since its inception in 2000 through to 2003, a portfolio of 257 individual projects has been funded. While it was not possible within the scope of Evaluation 2004 to evaluate the benefits of each of these projects, the analysis confirmed substantial actual and potential benefits arising from these projects.
- The benefits within individual projects are multi-dimensional with economic, environment and social benefits being generated in many cases. This fits logically with the SFF’s goal of improving the financial and environmental performance of the land-based productive sectors of the economy.
- Analysis of seven project groups comprising 106 projects indicates potential economic return to GDP (or farm-gate production) in the range of NZD 330 million to NZD 530 million per annum, if all potential developments proceed.⁹ The realisation of these benefits will require further investments and other resources to enable or facilitate adoption.
- The project groups have also contributed actual and potential environmental benefits. Many of these can be quantified, though not necessarily monetised.
- The SFF’s process and approach – by requiring significant community and stakeholder involvement – has created producer and community capability and cohesion. These factors

9. The 107 projects received a total of NZD 15.1 million in SFF grants out of a total budget of NZD 32.6 million.

increase the likelihood that the project outcomes will be adopted more widely and that developments will continue.

- To fully realise the benefits, some projects will require further investments and other resources. The key challenge ahead for the SFF will be to develop further mechanisms and processes for post-project extension to ensure that the potential benefits of its portfolio of projects are maximised through encouraging adoption and further innovation.

Evaluation: a work in progress

Both evaluation exercises described in this paper, the Early-Stage Evaluation and Evaluation 2004, have provided a strong and robust assessment of the benefits accruing to investment in SFF grant assisted projects. The quantification of benefits in both cases was limited by the relatively early stage of development of the SFF and the progress of project work programmes. In both cases, the benefit conclusions relate largely to potential benefits – the measurement of actual benefits accruing to projects will only be possible when: projects have been completed; the project results have been transformed into knowledge; and applied into improved and routine management in the field.

Many researchers and observers consider that this process, from transformation of results into knowledge and then into routine management decisions, can take up to ten years. For the earliest group of projects completed under the SFF there is still eight years to run to reach this point – evaluation is then a work in progress.

The methodology applied in Evaluation 2004 is repeatable – a further evaluation is expected to be completed in about 3 years. By this time the body of measurable and quantifiable information will have increased, allowing more certain estimates will be possible. Further developments in the literature on evaluation will also be able to be included in the analysis.

Part VII

EVALUATION OF POLICY MIXES

	<i>Page</i>
Key Issues	
<i>John Finn, Teagasc (Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority)</i>	<i>377</i>
Chapter 21. Evaluation of Agri-environmental Policies in Japan	
<i>Yukio Yokoi, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries</i>	<i>381</i>
Chapter 22. Evaluation of the Dutch Manure and Fertiliser Policy, 1998-2002	
<i>Hans van Grinsven, Martha van Eerdt and Jaap Willems, National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM); Francisca Hubeek, Agricultural Economics Research Institute (LEI); and Erik Mulleneers, Ministry of Agriculture Nature and Food Quality (LNV).....</i>	<i>389</i>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
FOREWORD	3
SUMMARY	9
Summary Annex – One-page Summaries of Country Evaluations	15

Part I EVALUATION DESIGN

Key Issues <i>Markku Lehtonen</i>	37
Chapter 1. Evaluating Agri-environmental Policies in the OECD <i>Darryl Jones, OECD Directorate for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries</i>	39
Chapter 2. Building Accountability Structures into Agri-environmental Policy Development <i>Steve Montague, Performance Management Network Inc. and Erwin Allerdings, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada</i>	55
Chapter 3. What Constitutes a Good Agri-environmental Policy Evaluation? <i>David Pearce, University College London</i>	71

Part II EVALUATION OF PAYMENTS - MID-TERM EVALUATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Key Issues <i>David Ervin, Portland State University</i>	101
Chapter 4. Evaluation of Agri-environmental Measures in Flanders, Belgium <i>Koen Carels and Dirk van Gijsegem, Flemish Agriculture Administration</i>	103
Chapter 5. Evaluation of Agri-environmental Policies Implemented in France from 2000 to 2002 under the CTE Farm Contract Scheme <i>Jean-François Baschet, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Rural Affairs</i>	117
Chapter 6. The Implementation of Organic Farming: The Case of Peloponnese, Greece <i>Konstantinos Kloudas, Nikolaos Michopoulos and Angelos Koutsomichalis, European Enterprise Organisation Group SA; and Elena Kagkou and Amalia Liatou, Ministry of Rural Development and Food</i>	129
Chapter 7. The Evaluation of Agri-environmental Measures: A Survey of Different Methods used by Italian Regions <i>Annalisa Zezza, Istituto di Servizi per il Mercato Agricolo Alimentare</i>	141

Part III
EVALUATION OF PAYMENTS - OTHER

Key Issues

Floor Brouwer, Agricultural Economics Research Institute (LEI)..... 159

Chapter 8. Evaluating Agri-environmental Schemes in England

Geoffrey Radley, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 161

Chapter 9. Alternative Approaches for Evaluating the Performance of Buffer Strip Policy in Finland

Jussi Lankoski, MTT Agrifood Research Finland 177

Chapter 10. Assessing Long-term Impacts of Agri-environmental Measures in Germany

Bernhard Osterburg, Federal Agricultural Research Centre 187

Chapter 11. Sweden's Experience with Evaluating Agri-environmental Payments

Bo Norell and Martin Sjödaahl, Swedish Board of Agriculture..... 207

Chapter 12. Evaluation of Agri-environmental Measures in Switzerland

Ruth Badertscher, Swiss Federal Office for Agriculture..... 223

Chapter 13. Conservation Policy and Agriculture in the US: Valuing the Impacts of the Conservation Reserve Program

Daniel Hellerstein, United States Department of Agriculture..... 231

Part IV
EVALUATION OF TAXES

Key Issues

Iain Fraser, Imperial College..... 261

Chapter 14. The Use of Green Taxes in Denmark for the Control of the Aquatic Environment

Hans Larsen, Ministry of Taxation..... 263

Chapter 15. Taxes as a Tool to Reduce Health and Environmental Risk from Pesticide Use in Norway

Erlend Spikkerud, Norwegian Food Safety Authority 281

Part V
EVALUATION OF REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

Key Issues

Davide Viaggi, University of Bologna..... 293

Chapter 16. The Regulation of Nutrient Losses in Denmark to Control Aquatic Pollution from Agriculture

Søren Kjaer, Ministry of Environment; Pieter Feenstra, Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries; Søren Mikkelsen, Danish Institute of Agricultural Sciences; and Torben Moth Iversen, National Environmental Research Institute 295

Chapter 17. Has Conservation Compliance Reduced Soil Erosion on US Cropland?

Roger Claassen, United States Department of Agriculture..... 309

Part VI
EVALUATION OF ADVISORY AND INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES

Key Issues

Ingo Heinz, University of Dortmund 325

**Chapter 18. Evaluating Community-based Programmes in Australia:
The Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality**

*Mike Lee, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry,
and Blair Wood, National Land and Water Resources Audit*..... 327

Chapter 19. The Canadian Shelterbelt Program: Economic Valuation of Benefits

*Suren Kulshreshtha and Edward Knopf, University of Saskatchewan;
and John Kort and Julie Grimard, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada* 347

Chapter 20. Evaluation of the New Zealand Sustainable Farming Fund: A Work in Progress

Kevin Steel, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 363

Part VII
EVALUATION OF POLICY MIXES

Key Issues

John Finn, Teagasc (Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority) 377

Chapter 21. Evaluation of Agri-environmental Policies in Japan

Yukio Yokoi, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 381

Chapter 22. Evaluation of the Dutch Manure and Fertiliser Policy 1998-2002

*Hans van Grinsven, Martha van Eerdt and Jaap Willems,
National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM);
Francisca Hubeek, Agricultural Economics Research Institute (LEI);
and Erik Mulleneers, Ministry of Agriculture Nature and Food Quality (LNV)*..... 389



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