



# What Does It Mean To Be A Professional New Zealand Farmer?

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**Abstract:** This article reprises the idea of 'professional farmer' as of central importance to the future of economic wellbeing and innovation for farmers, farming communities, New Zealand as a whole, and by implication any society. Using contemporary analysis of professionalism and how this continues to change, a mix of admiration and critique of current practices and encouragement for the sector to continue its professional development, will help engagement with today's changing political, environmental and economic climate. Common contrasts made between government versus farmers, science experts versus farmers, and urban residents as 'townies' versus farmers are unhelpful hangovers from last century and the one before. Embracing elements of each is necessary for a present-day professionalism that is sustainable as a career and way of life across generations, meets the needs of the land, water and local environment, and for meeting the global questions of sustainability facing farming and society today.

## INTRODUCTION

Being professional, doing a professional job, acting like a professional, are all terms much bandied around today. Do these words help us to think about modern farming? The idea of a professional has changed over time, even though most people think of profession or professional as a fixed thing, role or quality. The modern idea of professional has been around for about two centuries, a little longer than when New Zealand Māori and Pakeha (white) partners signed the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. In the decades either side of the Treaty, a series of charters were accepted in Britain incorporating Royal Societies around different spheres of expert knowledge—from medicine in 1800 to veterinarians in 1844 several dozen occupations gained royal charters beginning the journey towards present-day professions (Reader, 1966, pp. 16ff). The history of professions has a particular resonance for New Zealand, since the country does not have an extensive aristocratic class or landed gentry, but professions developed in the era of colonisation and modernisation (King, 2004).

The focus in this article is not, however, the history of professions but the contemporary question of how the idea of professionalism that emerges from modern historical and economic developments can be identified in the New Zealand farming community today. Both *professions* themselves, and the idea of *professionalism* – what counts as being professional or doing a professional job – have continuously shifted over the last two centuries (Larson, 1977; Macdonald, 1995). There used to be features of class status

associated with professions, but this sits very differently today. At one stage, profession meant the *opposite* of business, whereas today in conventional professions and in activities like farming, the two words are often put together—professional manager, for instance. To be a professional is not only used to refer to some formal legal status and registration but is also used to say something about the approach to an activity in terms of quality, knowledge, competence, as well as factoring in the range of internal and external influences and resources in how that complex activity is performed.

Staying a moment longer on that historical development helps make the connection to the idea of contemporary professional farmers. Farming today with its high levels of business, technological and other requirements is very different from what the same word farmers meant centuries ago. The majority of farmers then were poor, uneducated, unskilled and in their rural environment largely cut off from the intellectual, social life and innovations of cities and elites. From that sort of world, it was part of the emergence of the colonising European modern world that the conjunction of scientific knowledge began to be applied to farming as well as other spheres of human need and concerns such as health and education. Land improvement, animal and crop breeding, agricultural and horticultural trading, developed alongside other more controversial developments like land enclosures, deforestation, decline in fallowing, and other sustainable practices.

## **FARMER PROFESSIONALISM AND THE GOODNESS-EXPERT BUNDLING**

Professions have always offered in some variation or other the double claim that (1) they are experts and (2) they are good and oriented to serve the good of society. I argue in my recent book (Burns, 2019, p. 123) and a series of articles about professions and professionalism over some years, that this is a powerful claim, and has been substantially successful for professional groups in their occupational projects of winning social recognition and status as well as gaining economic rewards that are for the most part higher than the average earnings of members of society. In significant ways, however, there are powerful *unbundling* processes happening to each of these twin claims today. Farmers are positioned in such a way that they have actually experienced their own version of these unbundling processes, and so farmers are potentially, in key respects, better placed to deal with these shifts than many conventional professions are – if they take present opportunities to do so.

In New Zealand's history the settler-farmer has been economically a major force and until relatively recently the dominant political block of voting interests (Belich, 2001; Burns, 2007a). Even today the economic importance of dairy, sheep, cattle, horticulture and viticulture are basic to the country's wellbeing. Yet what sociologists call the normative position of farmers and farmers has changed. Just as professionals generally mounted a claim to be good and doing publicly good and useful things, farmers held a parallel position: they were contributing to the wealth of the nation, developing land into productive forms; producing food, all of which was regarded as inherently a good thing. Campbell has described how that farming normative umbrella has shifted, as the economic and political focus has changed, not only in New Zealand (Campbell & Le Heron, 2007; Campbell & Dixon, 2009). Non-farmer views about food quality, water quality, treatment of animals, environmental effects of farming, eating meat, alternative milks, and other issues have steadily grown to loom large in discussions of the value and 'goodness' of farmers and farming.

So like professions more broadly, the previous automatic normative positioning of farming as a good and honourable calling is not the same today. There are in my view, however, points of opportunity that can in ways that conventional professions may not have open to them, bring back that respect and social approval of the societal value and human worthwhileness of farmers and farming. First, the necessity for humans to have food and water, which is mostly within the care of farmers, is the central driver of recognition of farmers as the source from where quality and sufficiency of various foods come. In the century ahead, the importance of food production and water are likely to become once again primary signifiers of what distinguishes functioning societies around the world. Second, if rising best practices are applied by farmers to their farm management and food production and deployed consistently, then end-users, consumers and regulators can be assured of the quality of what they do and how they do it. Former standards and practices will in many instances not provide adequate justification, whether sincerely believed, argued in curmudgeonly style, or used to belittle urban folks. But a core professional approach will be able to provide the necessary justification. Cost and profit are necessarily part of this professional approach. The professional capacity to adapt can secure the future of different forms of farming and communities across New Zealand.

Having spoken about the *normative* place of New Zealand farming as an occupation and community, I want to name the expert dimension of New Zealand farming and argue for the expertise of New Zealand farming in conjunction with this positive normative space as forming the basis of high-level professional approaches in New Zealand's rural industries. This changing professionalism can potentially lift sectoral performance, social respect and acceptance in several ways within New Zealand and against international benchmarks since the bulk of produce is sent globally. As with other professional groupings, there is not just one category of farmers in terms of competence, expertise and doing the right thing.

## CHANGING PROFESSIONALISM

Professions used to be thought of simple categories of occupation and expertise. Nowadays we are more knowledgeable (Burns, 2007b). Not only have professions been differentiated and new professions emerged, we know that any given professional group has poor practitioners, average practitioners who function appropriately, and some who are outstanding. I have spoken with professionals and they find this hard to credit since in their view they all have the same qualification and fulfil the same function, surely? Such credentials are, however, simply the minimum entry point. A little reflection reminds us this is the case: the reason we ask around friends and family when choosing a doctor, dentist or accountant is to increase the chances of avoiding less competent professionals and increasing our chances of getting a better and more capable one. The same logic applies to the range of professionalism and competence amongst farmers. Any categorisation is, of course, a simplification of complex factors, but it also highlights important net effects of applying knowledge and purpose to an intended professional outcome.

Here is a farm-focused example of this kind of contemporary professional analysis. On one occasion I attended a bank seminar at which the keynote speaker to the rural audience was a very experienced principal of a large accountancy firm with many agricultural clients in a major farming district. His farming clients, he said, could be divided into four groups, and only the top quarter of his clients—group one—fitted an ideal professional profile:

they did the right things at the right time. So what, he posed the question we should be asking him, was the difference between the group one farmers and group two farmers—the second quarter? His answer was that the second group similarly did the right things but often not at quite the right time, a little too soon or a little too late—planting, sowing, harvesting, shearing, calving, spraying, and so on. The third and fourth groups of farmers in his typology (third and fourth quarters of his client list respectively) sometimes made the wrong decision (group three); even then, some pursued the related poor decision/action outside the best time to do it (group four).

At an earlier point in history, altruism or service ethic as work goals were perceived as sharply contrasted with commitment to making money and were seen as opposites. The same was true decades ago in many sports codes, rugby football included. Today this opposition no longer holds true – yes, these may be opposites, but not necessarily so. Applying expertise and working for the good of the wider society in what is being produced may yield wins for multiple stakeholders. Farmers often see themselves as business enterprises, but re-framing identity as professional farmers offers new narratives for generating sustainable success.

## **LOOKING FORWARD: WHAT COUNTS AS PROFESSIONAL ‘GOODNESS’ AND WHAT COUNTS AS EXPERTISE?**

From one perspective farmers have a real possibility of coming back to being seen as good for society in a way that might be harder for conventional professional groups because of the driver of client need – food and clean water. Mitchell (2019) reports a positive perspective, ‘while dairy has been the story of farming for the past 25 years, there would be much greater diversity across the industry during the next 25 years’:

The outlook for the future of the farming sector is bright, so long as farmers can adjust to the changing nature of the industry. ASB Rural Banking general manager Richard Hegan said skyrocketing global food demands were the reason for the optimism in New Zealand’s primary sector. ‘To feed 10 billion people is going to require the world to produce as much food in the next 30 years as has been produced since mankind was first created’.

At the same time, however, this is not a simple winding of the clock back to the ‘good old days’. Society, as clients, government requirements, internet-informed publics, reassesses and changes its values about quality, creating a much more complex world we are entering. Good to have the strong positive potential, but the template of professionalism is not today a simplistic repetition of the unproblematised ‘goodness’ of the past, nor is it the assessment of expertise as simple trust—‘the doctor knows best’, ‘teacher knows best’, or ‘leave it to farmers’.

A digital world is a more connected world and a more knowledgeable world, and issues of how outputs are achieved, at previous stages in history, such as the farmer externalising their costs onto water itself, and similarly to environment, to animal wellbeing and to soil health, are much more acutely focused upon than ever before. Fournier (1999) and others including myself in New Zealand have described how urging the idea of professionalism can be an issue of control rather than independence (Burns, 2006). However, rather than that being a reduction of farmer control over their work as it is for the subsidiary professional

workers that Fournier describes, farmers still have substantial autonomy in the practice and direction of their work. But there is a reframing that is necessary here to integrate this in today's economy and society and it runs as follows. Each of those constraints, or potential impacts on farmers' work, enterprise and profit at the same time indicate the scaffolding of expertise required in the twenty-first century. Not just the tractor, but dangers of the tractor, damage that mechanical farming can do. Not just water, but the dangers to water and the dangers that impacted water has downstream.

Not just the production of food but the selling of it, the social acceptance of it. New Zealand farmers have an excellent track record back into the nineteenth century of co-operative action that is more genuinely entrepreneurial and professional than the digital step-change of Silicon Valley. It was Beck (1992) who explained that in terms of contemporary risk theory, being conscious of 'bads' as well as 'goods' in decisions and practices is fundamental to how society and any subset such as farming is run. The amalgamation of diverse forms of knowledge and skills in farming meets the criteria of complex knowledge, or expertise, that ordinary people do not possess and hence rely on the skilled practitioner. We have seen conventional professions experience resistance from the ordinary population on prescriptions, vaccinations, surgery, alien environments and many more things. Farmers today need to recognise general policy and governmental scrutiny arises from a broader cultural opposition to being excluded, and hence vulnerable, by those who 'know better' or command a field of knowledge and expertise.

The same higher levels of farmer education are also matched by greater public and political awareness of the 'bads' or potential 'bads' that may adversely affect the wellbeing of clients or community by farmers and farming as well as more widely. This changes social and business discourses, creating new levels of attention and concern, but also a sense of barrier from farmers' expertise that citizens know they need but find hard to evaluate—who is benefiting most and what risks do they place themselves within in receiving them? Things that famers used to be able to expect to be largely invisible except to farmers, are now likely to become publicly available through social media, mobile cameras, drones, challenges in courts to quality and care. It cannot be repeated too often that this sense of 'nuisance' has to be met and it can become the very pivot point of embedding modern professional practices and standards that raise the quality and monetary value of what is produced.

More than simply information being 'out of the way' or unknown to the non-farming and urban public, there was simply not the attention by anyone to environmental soil and water impacts of farming. In fact, like business generally in the modern western era, farming was an externalising machine, passing the costs of land-clearing and intensification onto the environment. The land in its own time-frame pushes back and shows that it is not accepting that division of cost and profit. What requires necessary sympathy is that farmers now receive greater blame for this than the rest of society which has benefitted in multiple ways from this activity. But farmers are still doing it, comes the reply. But the further counter in this changing discourse is that society wants cheap milk, cheese, butter, vegetables, fruit, flour and other farmed crops. It does not matter how desirable more sustainable practices are, urban people want these commodities and many more. To farmers, embedded in the social and economic relationships of food production, such urban non-farming consumer attitudes appear as hypocrisy and feeds a sense of unfairness at what appears to be spurious concern about sustainable land-use: maybe noble values but unchanged behaviour.

## RECONFIGURING NEW ZEALAND PROFESSIONALISM

Farmers, like all professionals, then, find themselves engaged in a contest about the value and identity of what their goods and services are. Yes, in one sense these products are highly desired, but it is more than urban consumerism that insists on having opinions about things, even though individuals are substantially ignorant in terms of detailed knowledge. Doctors, lawyers and accountants have client groups questioning their work today; from a farming position one might say of these professions: ‘and rightly so’. The same, of course, applies to querying what farmers do and the feeling of less familiarity about what and how farmers produce their outputs does not diminish the claim, from the non-farmer viewpoint. Farmers’ understanding that the populace need them for food and water, seems very simplistic if not defensive to an outsider to farming; it seems spurious insofar as wastes, inefficiencies, sprays, treatment of livestock and run-off, are all visible to these outsiders, and impacts are increasingly measurable. The professionalism of New Zealand farmers to date is what has made them competitive on the world stage. The key is not dismissal of critical, even uninformed views, but ‘reading’ what these views signal and turning these negatives into opportunities.

What are these characteristics of professional New Zealand farmers? What skills and abilities place them in the top group of farmers in the example cited above? That is, the timeliness and good decision-making seem clear, but what skills and combinations of skills give consistency and underlie these resulting virtues of the top farmers? It has always been the case that whatever is the major threat of the times—land degradation, water access and quality today, economic recession at other times, perhaps changing tastes and preferences in commodities—the problems are a greater threat to farmers with less-developed professional skills. They are pressured to exit the industry, and while excellent farmers are also pressured, the latter have skills and ‘personal capital’, to adapt Bourdieu’s (1992) phrase. Bourdieu’s (2008) depiction of French farmers in the 1960s and 1970s struggling to adapt to rural depopulation, aggregation of farming units and the need for acquiring modern skills and practices, conveys a feeling or pathos but eloquently described the inevitability of change affecting modern rural individuals and their communities.

Five traits of professional farmers are suggested below. Inevitably they overlap, intersecting with each other. None by itself achieves a professional approach to farming. It is the bundling of them that has greatest utility to meet difficult challenges and finding a way to be effective in adapting to viable and sustainable farming.

### *1. Multiple skill-sets*

Farming requires multiple skill-sets that are used and understood in relation to one another. A professional farmer integrates these, recognises limits of their personal knowledge and seeks further specialised knowledge. Some of this is learned apprentice-style doing the task and learning the skills. In previous generations this was commonly the only way to gain the requisite skills. Gradually from agriculture colleges, short-term courses and university study, many new kinds of input of information can be added to on-the-ground activities of farming. Traditional infrastructure of farm agents and agencies, coupled with seminars and study groups, combine with the ubiquity of Google searches, to acquire further information. It is possible to lead with one skill-set—an engineering or building background, perhaps banking or accounting in previous employment. These can be great shapers of individual style of farming, but it is the combination with other practical or technical skills that make up broad professional competence.

## *2. Technological competence*

Within this cluster of skills needed for professional farming practice, the ‘new kid on the block’ is competence with digital technologies of various sorts. Rural communities are not always able, however, to access the essential infrastructure to participate quickly enough in these developments. Online purchases and accounts payments are the start of gains. Replacing cheques and bank visits with staff payments online or by mobile phone save hours at a time. But receiving daily milk reports from collection, market intelligence for flock decisions, or ever-better weather forecasts, have become indispensable. But great gains beyond that are accumulating, some still seem like science-fiction, but gate-opening, trough-monitoring, water and nutrient monitoring are quickly becoming standard, with robotics and drones showing early promise. With control over a land area, farming is well placed to avoid some of the more contentious areas of negotiating these new tools and digital technologies. Computer spreadsheets and databases have already revolutionised accuracy and assessment of budgets, costing and strategic decision-making; they get better and simpler to use.

## *3. Inner sense of stewardship*

This sounds like a ‘soft’ professional skill, but it relates to knowing the limits of one’s capabilities, mentioned earlier. The shift from settler hyper-masculinity of previous generations shows that farmers are as vulnerable as the next group when careers and income are in jeopardy, and the sense of responsibility is coupled with the lack of ability to control events. Beyond the simple and sensible recognition of the need for managing this exposure and seeking advice, the point of personal enjoyment and interest in an individual’s working day is the fulcrum for doing well. It is enhanced by a professional approach, at the same time, lowering the boom on expectations. One of the unspoken offences of the neoliberal regimes under which farmers and other groups are expected to ‘perform’ is the crushing pressure this brings to bear through narratives of hyper-success, making amazing incomes—bandied around as though these things can be pulled from the air if individuals just work hard enough.

The implicit message in such myths creates a sense of failure and blame when those unrealistic, supposed entrepreneurial stories, are not able to be met. Instead, I would invert that business model. New Zealand has an amazing professional narrative in the history of the dairy co-operative movement (Ward, 1975; Scrimgeour et al., 2006), first in dairying, but it can be seen in other places like the success of the ‘Veterinary Club Movement’ during and in the decades following World War Two (Burns, 2007a). Instead of manufacturing pseudo-success narratives, a grounded sense of being stewards of the land in one generation for future generations is stronger, many farmers already having this kind of perspective. It resonates well with Māori traditions in New Zealand—stewardship, whaihua, or guardian of the land, kaitiaki o te whenua.

## *4. Business competence—knowledge for decision-making*

Business competence is a different kind of expertise than important technical knowledge about equipment, varieties, breeds, fencing, drainage and transport, described earlier as multiple skill-sets. It overlaps, as do all these traits, but it is decisional capacity that is distinctive of professional farmers compared to others. This is not the gung-ho approach

of male-CEO decision-making that is sometimes seen as defining in organisational or other business contexts. Always, the competence is shown (or not) in processes of information-gathering, sorting and evaluating, leading up to decisions. Decisions themselves are simply the outcome of such processes. Several additional points extend this contention. First, the process is not a simple linear one; often decision-making follows a circular route or even a spiral one, rechecking or cross-checking relevant facts. For some farmers this comes apparently naturally, though it can be improved by training, for others there is a continual agony despite other good qualities. Second, only in academic analysis can a decision be isolated. In real-world farming multiple events and activities require decisions many times over, re-deciding or changing over time.

Third, again only in formal analysis that is set out on the page or presentation slides can the mistake be made that all decisions are created equal. There are pivotal decisions, season-ending or making decisions, five-year strategic decisions to spend or invest, daily decisions that have cumulative effects that can barely be identified. Fourth, a style of arriving at decisions, evolves slowly, just like the quality of All Black captains' on-paddock decision-making, maturing over time and better integrating multiple forms of farming knowledge: these were noted above as contributing sources of skill and knowledge for farmers. Previous background skills may inadvertently also create blocks to full competency in decision-making. For example, an engineer-turned-farmer whose training was to measure everything carefully and exactly, may miss the need is to make timely decisions. The necessary indeterminacy of many farming decisions will not allow indecision from informational exactitude that farming seasons, weather and markets never fully provide.

### *5. Renewed normative security*

Farmer professionalism provides a practical and normative framing in the pursuit of commercial success and profitability as well as the aspiration of acceptance and recognition for doing a difficult job well and which benefits the country on several levels. Giddens (1991) and others used the phrase 'ontological security' to refer to a state of stability if not wellbeing that eludes many farmers. Coming after the certainty and self-confidence of settler society the goals of farm production as New Zealand were settled by Europeans self-evidently emulating Britain. More recently the feeling for many farmers is deficit, ontological insecurity, which is best addressed reframing the challenges of today. Those same farmers may feel an affinity for the land with tangata whenua but are conflicted by new understanding of the need for sustainable practices.

This helps explain why contemporary social values and points of respect do not uphold them today. It is unfair farmers bear primary blame for unsustainable ways of farming, yet the simple logic that they are still farming requires professional responses in following a process to a better way of earning a living from the land. Engaging with that covert, incomplete-understanding, even judgemental opinion can be utilised to galvanise entrepreneurship and innovation, ideally in the co-operative tradition of New Zealand's rural past to adapt to water, land and market demands. Both a social-community sense and an economic sense depend on it. What such major changes do not guarantee is the wellbeing or status quo for individual farms or farmers. Sometimes change is rushed not well-managed and individual farmers, sectors or ancillary stakeholders get hurt or frustrated unnecessarily. Even allowing those things to be the case, farming collectively, New Zealand economically and having a good society in which to live, depend on the

controlled expression of multiple skills and values to sustain both farming in the future and the transition to that sustainable future.

## CONCLUSION

This discussion has avoided the listing of professional traits of occupational groups for farmers to be checked off to the degree they measure up to the ideals of professionalism. This check-list approach of defining professions has bedevilled studies of professions for decades (Macdonald, 1995). Instead, the idea of a profession being a special project (Larson, 1977) is more helpful and potentially more energising than the logic that performing some function in and of itself justifies and legitimates a role or occupational group. The range of farmers like other groups includes those who practice a model of professional farming, through to those who struggle to apply such an approach to the difficult times they face. Variability of markets, coming legislation on water plans, seem like impositions, but they are also the moments of opportunity in which famers take back responsibility and community recognition for sustainable use of land in this generation, between past and future ones.

Discerning readers will also have seen that climate and anthropogenic change have been avoided here. The several mentions of water, soil quality, the need for rain, and potable water for stock, crops and communities, all presuppose larger questions that are currently still politically or economically polarising. Instead, the mode of discussion here has embraced Deleuze's (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) idea of assemblage. With different theoretical and regulatory questions facing farming today, simply bringing the pieces together can initiate new possibilities, rebundle existing ways of understanding and doing things, rather than applying top-down approaches. In this spirit, the idea of farming professionals and farmer professionalism offer an assemblage, a bringing-together, of key constituent elements of sustainable and viable farming in New Zealand. It is within this umbrella of professional farming that the large-scale philosophies of land, water and continuance can be found. It is thus not a question of denying that overall coherence of purpose and practice, but the necessity of local and specific things that can be done, working through personal or industry resistance, acquiring support for transitions and costs in the need to change

The world needs professional farmers more than ever. This is a quite different proposition than corporate farming or agribusiness—investments by private equity and Chinese interests around the world (Geisler & Makki, 2014). This article elaborated five aspects of farmer professionalism combining conventional conceptions of what professional means but in ways that are applicable to farming in New Zealand:

- Multiple skill-sets
- Technological competence
- Inner sense of stewardship
- Business competence – knowledge for decision-making
- Renewed normative security

Without these professional skills farms and farming will not last and change will be drastic. This framing combines suggestions from professions' history, the demands of business models of what it is to be professional, emerging digital technologies, and the recognition of global connectedness, including establishing the sustainability of farmed land and water.

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