

RMPP Extension Pilot into Action Network

A Longitudinal study

DRAFT: AL6, Southland

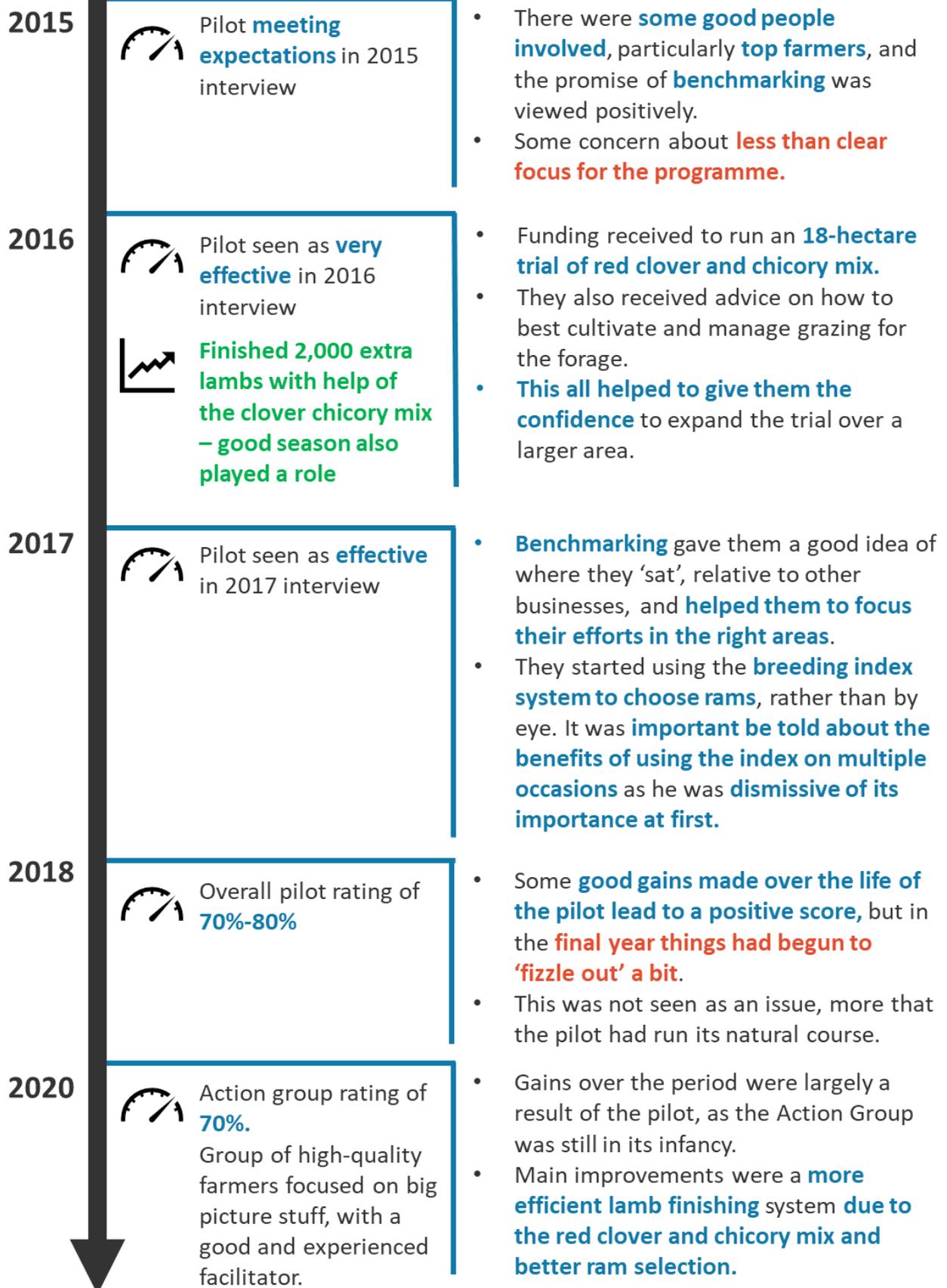
July 2015 – April 2020



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The Pilot Farmer Journey



Executive summary

Farmer I.D: AL6

Basic Stats



Location: Southland



Farm type: Gentle rolling



Stock numbers: About 3,800 sheep, 500 grazing dairy heifers

Main body

Main objective:

Is to get the best advice on different cropping options for lamb finishing, to conduct some experiments, measure the results of the different options in dollar terms. And end up with a clear idea of which options are the best for improving their farm's profitability.

Main advantage:

Being able to talk to other farmers who can give honest and independent advice on the success or failure of different ideas they have tried on their farms.

Main apprehension:

Overall, they have no real apprehensions about the Pilot process. However, they would be concerned if the process did not continue to be farmer led, or if things like farm visits just became boasting sessions for the host farm.

Background

2.1 Introduction

As part of the RMPP Extension Pilot (the Pilot), each participating farmer was interviewed once a year. This was done to help the RMPP develop an extension program that would best work for farmers while achieving the goals of the RMPP. The findings from these interviews fed into the design of the RMPP Action Network Program.

The Pilot showed that farmers needed time to bed in new practices and see the results. In response to this RMPP decided it would be a worthwhile exercise to track farmers engagement with extension activities for longer than just the three-year Pilot.

A handful of farmers who participated in the Pilot, also became members of Action Groups. This presented a unique opportunity to explore the potential longer-term impacts that the Action Network program could have in the New Zealand Red Meat sector.

We interviewed ten farmers who over a period of about five to six years have been engaging in small group extension activities. Firstly, via the Pilot for around three years and next as an Action Group member for around two years. The results in this report and nine others like it follow the journeys of these farmers through this period of industry and peer support.

2.2 Basic farm statistics

To preserve anonymity pseudonyms* are used throughout. A husband and wife farm team were interviewed (Jordan and Chloe).

30 June 2015 Stock numbers:

3,000 ewes, 750 hoggets in lamb, 50 rams.

350 winter dairy grazing, which they have provided to the same farmer over several seasons; this was arranged through PGG Wrightson.

Currently no beef animals but typically they have 150-200 trading cattle in the summer. They have had a couple of contracts with Silver Fern Farms (SFF) in the past for cattle grazing where they would fatten to specification for a contract price.

Farm description:

Jordan and Chloe lease the property from Chloe's parents who live on a neighbouring block of land, which is used as a deer farm. The block they lease is rolling to flat land.

They have experimented with fodder beet in previous years which they grazed with ewes and hoggets, the results were no better than when they used swedes. Currently the farm has both kale and swedes. The cows have mainly been grazing the kale, but they will possibly put ewes across this crop as well. The swedes have been used for break shifting the ewes.

Farm management:

Jordan and Chloe lease the farm, Jordan does most of the day to day work. They have a young family which takes up a good portion of Chloe's time; however, she is trying to get involved in more of the bookwork which can be done from home. Jordan enjoys the bookwork/ business management side though so that can make it difficult for Chloe to fully take over that side of the business. Aside from that Chloe is mainly a pair of extra hands when needed on the farm, which is usually yard work, but also involves helping with the topping and doing the mothering up at lambing.

They also have a full-time employee who works Monday to Friday and lives on the farm at the shearer's quarters.

Jordan has a tailing gang, so when that operation is in full swing Chloe's father does tractor work on the farm that Jordan doesn't have time to do. As ad hoc payment for the tractor work Jordan does work for Chloe's parents neighbouring deer farm.

Their farming style has been influenced by education, with Jordan having a degree in farm management from Lincoln. Their family play a part, with Chloe's parents being the landowners who they lease the farm off, and they live on the neighbouring property.

They have been to farm discussion groups in the past but have been put off by the process being poorly run. The groups used to run every second Monday for 2-3 years; They have stopped going as often only short notice was given, which is even more difficult as their property is out of cell reception, so it takes longer for messages to reach them.

Jordan will sometimes use farm advisors, but it is very ad-hoc, it's not something he would do as a first resort, he would go through all other avenues before bringing in an advisor. He doesn't see value for money in advisors, and any information he gets from advisors would be purely for fine tuning purposes.

Jordan considers the vet to be a valuable information source: *Our core business is livestock ... vets are our key rep with livestock, animal health side of things.* (Jordan)

During the Pilot they are not planning on parting ways with any of the sources of information they currently have, be they independent or not. They have built relationships already with people, like their seed rep, so it's not something they want to replace with independent advisors during the Pilot. Jordan can definitely see the value in independent advisors, and he is keen to interact with industry experts, but in conjunction with all the relationships he already has in place.

Farm system:

Breeder/ finisher.

2.3 Farmer Pilot objectives July 2015

- Jordan and Chloe's core business is livestock and finishing and they are very keen on having the ability to measure their results in purely dollar terms. They want to be able to run detailed cost benefit analysis on changes they make to their processes. For example, it is key for them to be able to experiment with different lamb finishing feeds and see the exact tangible results, in terms of money.
- To make changes they will seek advice around cropping. They have experimented with turnips, chicory, red clover mix, and more; but they are looking to get more in-depth knowledge on what works best for them.

Year One (2015)

3.1 Pilot expectations

I think it's positive, because if we can make some changes to what we are doing, and help to lead change in the region, to benefit us then it's going to be really good. (Chloe)

- Chloe is also keen on the farm extension type activities even though she hasn't been able to attend any so far.
- In terms of specific goals of the Pilot they would like to be able to know in three years which feeds, and other techniques work best for them. But they also believe it is important that they can leverage successful results from other farmers in the Pilot.
- Specific targets include reaching an average kill weight of 18kg, but they don't want to get too hung up on this aspect because the true test for them is how they can increase profits.

Production is vanity, profits is sanity. (Jordan)

■ Expectations being met

Q. Even though it is early days yet, we are interested in your overall sense of the Pilot process to date. Would you say that so far, the Pilot process has exceeded expectations, met expectations or not met expectations?

Expectations met:

They believe that so far, the right people have been involved, but Jordan wants to see a clearer focus, he feels that things have been drifting around a little.

There have been meetings where everyone has said what they wanted to do, and also a benchmarking meeting, Jordan went on to say:

I really want to have more benchmarking in the red meat industry, compared to the dairy industry, there is heaps of benchmarking in the dairy industry, but not so much in the sheep industry. (Jordan)

Jordan is most interested in hearing top local farmers speak about farming; this is one aspect of the Pilot that he has found very valuable so far - he is more interested in the talks with top farmers than people considered to be industry experts.

After discussing with Jordan that the Pilot may feel as if there isn't a clear focus yet because RMPP are very keen on making the process farmer driven - he agrees that it should be done that way. He believes that there needs to be the right balance and is keen on the funding to be for industry good. Jordan feels that the focus should be on Pilots where there would be a tangible good for the industry he suggests that some of the Pilot ideas do not necessarily fit this criteria, as there could be difficulty in getting tangible results that could be extended to and replicated on other farms.

3.2 Expected usefulness of channels

EXPECTED USEFULNESS OF CHANNELS

Q. Thinking about each of the following, in relation to helping you make practice changes on your farm or farms, how useful do you think they will be? Would you say you think they will be very useful, useful, not useful or not that useful at all?

Independent advisors	Useful
Group discussion with other farmers	Very Useful
Visits to other farms	Useful
Working with your meat processor	Very Useful
Support from your RMPP team	Useful

■ Independent advisors

Viewed as potentially useful because:

- Jordan believes the fact that they are independent is what makes them useful.

They are not trying to push product, at the end of the day it doesn't worry them if you choose to, or not to ... they are not incentivised either way. (Jordan)

■ Group discussions with other farmers

Viewed as potentially very useful because:

- Jordan believes it is helpful to be able to talk to other farmers about what they have tried on their farms, especially if the practices were in line with ideas they were considering. He also pointed out that other farmers were an independent source of information.

■ Visits to other farms

Viewed as potentially useful because:

- Jordan sees the value in seeing how other farming operations do things; however, farm visits lose value for him if they are not run well.
- Jordan is concerned that farm visits sometimes just turn into boasting sessions. He believes that the host farmer must be honest and tell the 'good and the bad' for the visit to be valuable.

■ Working with your meat processor

Viewed as potentially very useful because:

- Jordan has developed a lot stronger relations with AGL over the last few years. When they first took over, he had no real connection, but now they have more connection with the whole process and what happens once the animals leave the farm gate.
- Jordan believes there is peace of mind working through their own processor, they like being treated as equals. They also think there is a feel-good factor to being involved, it makes the process more transparent.

■ Support from your RMPP team

Viewed as potentially useful because:

- Jordan sees RMPP's involvement as useful to allow them to get an idea of what is happening in other parts of the country in the Pilot programme. They can also help steer things in the right direction if things get off track.

3.3 Potential barriers to making on-farm changes

Jordan suggests that there is a chance of him losing interest if he feels that the group is heading in the wrong direction. He feels it would be hard for him to buy into the whole process if that was the case. He hopes that the balance of the group's focus remains right, and he would be concerned if it got too technical or too basic.

What is needed for Jordan to retain his interest in the Pilot program is:

Keep doing what they are doing, with the farmer led ... [So, having top farmers come in and talk? And also having it completely driven by what you want to do?] Yeah, they are achieving that at the moment, rather than someone from plant or Ag Research coming in, a sciency type person, and trying to run it, I guess. Trying to tell you what you should be doing on your farm.

Jordan is unsure on what the Pilot program will provide in terms of funding; for him, if something was too expensive to implement that could be a barrier to change.

3.4 Apprehensions about the Pilot

At this stage they have no apprehensions about the process.

3.5 Potential advantages and disadvantages of the processors

■ Potential advantages

- For Jordan, being able to get access to other farmers kill data, and other performance data, will mean they can identify who the top farmers are. They can then use that performance data to make their own operation better. Jordan feels that running it through the processors will drive better change, as opposed to running it through B+L who he thought are mostly just the talkers.
- Jordan also feels that running the Pilot through the processors will mean they get a closer connection with them and are able to find out more information about AGL.

■ Potential disadvantages

- Personally, they couldn't think of any real disadvantages to the process, but there is a low level of concern around segregation of the learnings across different processors. They are also concerned that people may not be willing to accept results from other processors.

3.6 How is the Pilot progressing so far/ areas for improvement?

So far, they have found the Pilot great, in particular, Jordan has found it very useful getting benchmarking information and talking with top farmers. Jordan also felt that the Pilot structure seemed to suggest that they have been listening to farmers which is a positive.

So far Chloe hasn't been as involved in the whole process as much as she would like, mainly because they have a young family and she didn't want to have to take them to the meetings. After prompting on the idea of a crèche at the meetings, which has been mentioned in previous interviews, they thought that would be a good idea. They agree that to get full buy in into the process it is important that the whole farm team attend the meetings. Chloe thinks the crèche could be as basic as someone looking after the kids with a few toys at the meetings, or in an adjacent room.

Jordan has a small issue with some of the projects that he doesn't perceive to be very good.

Year Two (2016)

4.1 Changes to farm statistics

Interview was conducted mainly with Jorden - with Chloe offering some insights from time-to-time.

There has been a major change in the farm statistics with Jorden and Chloe purchasing a neighboring deer farm from parents, however this farm will not be part of their Pilot activities.

They still have one full-time employee so with the extra property they are very busy. Jorden notes that they also plan to purchase a 50-hectare block to join their current red-meat operation in October.

4.2 Overview

Main outcomes

- Finished an extra 2,000 store lambs as a result of planting a new crop of red clover and chicory mix.

Main suggestions for improvement

- Jorden would like a bit more guidance on where to take his Pilot now that he has achieved his year-one Pilot objective

Most effective learning channels

- Learning from other farmers and from an independent expert (a practical scientist who understands the wider context of farming).

4.3 Pilot Effectiveness

Jorden rates the Pilot as **very effective**

The two main reasons for this positive view are:

1. Receiving funding to run an on-farm forage trial

Jorden said they put in 18 hectares of a red-clover and chicory mix plus received some independent advice through the Pilot of how to best put this in and manage the feeding of it to lambs. Jorden noted that this was a success, however he concedes that it has been a good summer for the crop, and he is now interested to see how it goes through another season.

2. Being challenged to think more outside the square

Jorden indicated that the group learning environment that has been set up by Alliance has worked well for them. He went on to say that being in smaller group of similar farmers has worked well. He noted that:

Having a smaller group of around six means we can go into more detail of what we are doing, and it doesn't turn into a pissing competition.

Furthermore, having some benchmarking within the group has helped to keep the discussions real. He liked being exposed to a range of ideas that emerged in group discussions with other farmers who faced similar challenges to them.

4.4 On-farm changes

4.4.1 Overview of changes

■ Forage trial

Jorden has made one major change in the trial and that is the introduction of the red-clover and chicory mix. He noted that when they first entered the Pilot, they had only been leasing the farm for two years, so they were just finding their feet before they tried something different on the farm. However, the presence of the clover-root weevil meant they had to give something a try.

Jorden noted that having access to the funding was a key driver to giving them the confidence to try out the new forage on their property. Having access to independent experts via the Pilot has also given Jorden some more confidence to try a new practice. He noted that he was much more relaxed about trying out the new forage mix on his farm under the advice of an independent than he would have been if he had relied on traditional channels of advice from seed representatives. He stated that:

Seed reps are good, but they are not independent which makes them hard to trust.

4.4.2 Summary of Pilot outcomes

- Jorden stated that as a result of the new forage planted in the Pilot, they finished an extra 2,000 store lambs last season. He noted that it was a good summer so this much improved result needs to be interpreted within that context.
- Jorden felt that he would have most likely made the change without the Pilot as he was facing a situation where a change had to be made, however, he concedes that he was definitely more 'bullish' with the magnitude of the change he has made in the first year. Jorden conceded that if he had not been in the trial he may have experimented with the red-clover and chicory mix in one small paddock rather than across the 18 hectares that he did.

4.5 Effectiveness of channels

EXPECTED USEFULNESS OF CHANNELS

Q. Thinking about each of the following, in relation to helping you make practice changes on your farm or farms, how effective have they been? Would you say they have been very effective, effective or not that effective at all?

Independent advisors	Very effective
Group discussion with other farmers	Not effective
Workshops and group learning	Very effective
Visits to other farms	Couldn't attend them
Working with your meat processor	Very effective
Support from your RMPP team	N/a

■ Independent experts

This very effective rating is mostly about Tom Fraser. Jordan noted that hearing from Fraser was very useful. He said Fraser was *old school and practical* he described Fraser as not being like a consultant but as having a very good grasp of stock and the entire system in which farmers have to operate. Jordan remarked that there were aspects of farming that were very difficult to measure, and that Fraser understood the wider complexities of the farming environment. Jordan finished by saying: *I would like to spend a couple of hours with him* [Fraser].

■ Group discussion with other farmers

Jordan found it difficult to rate this channel as they had not had many discussions within their group of six members.

It is important to note that in the field the lines between different channels of learning are often blurred for farmers. In a learning event there could be elements of a one-to-one discussion, could be farm visits that include group discussions, hearing from experts and top-performing farmers.

■ Workshops and group learning

Jordan said Alliance organised some of these where top-performing farmers had spoken with them about their operations and way of farming. Jordan declared these as very effective he explained that learning from top farmers was best as they were independent (not trying to sell you anything) and whatever they said was backed up by hard evidence not just based on theory or ideas yet to be implemented and realised.

■ Farm visits

Was unable to attend the ones that Alliance arranged.

■ Meat company

Jorden rated Alliance as being very effective in the role they have played, he described how Alliance has the right people running their Pilot, they have been organised, and communicate well in advance when an event is approaching. He said Alliance also listened to group members, allowing the farmers to drive the Pilot in the direction they wanted.

■ RMPP

No connection - it's all with Alliance.

■ Learning approaches

Jorden noted that groups are great for being exposed to new ideas but if he is interested in gaining specific direction on topics directly pertinent to his farm one-to-one interactions are best.

4.6 Pilot improvements

No real suggestions for improving the Pilot, however Jorden felt he was in limbo at the moment having achieved what he wanted from introducing the red-clover chicory mix. He does not really have a plan for what he will be implementing next season.

Jorden felt it would be useful if the Pilot could be a bit more transparent about the amount of funding, they are able to access. He noted that this would enable him to think more about the scope of any changes he could consider for his operation.

4.7 Role of Meat Company and scaling the Pilot

Jorden is happy with how the extension model via a meat company is working for them. He wondered how the Pilot would work if under a different funding model, where RMPP funding is no longer on offer. However, given the results he has enjoyed so far, he would be open to contributing more financially to the extension if required.

4.8 Next 12 months

Jorden is less sure what he will be doing for his Pilot over the next season. The new practice change implemented under the Pilot last season is now part of his system going forward. He put in 18 hectares of red-clover chicory mix last season and will add a further seven or so hectares this next season.

Jorden noted that he may look at genetics or a different feeding regime focusing more on body condition scoring. He stated that it would be:

Good to have some options thrown at me and an idea of the funding available so I can scope up a new project.

Year Three (2017)

5.1 Changes to farm statistics

Jorden and Chloe's farming operation has grown considerably since they started the Pilot. They have gone from leasing 700 hectares to owning 1,500 hectares.

This has resulted in some big changes in the number of stock they run. At the start of the Pilot they had round 3,800 sheep and 500 dairy grazing heifers. Today they are running a similar amount of sheep, except they now expect to trade 3,000 store lambs this season.

In terms of cattle, they now winter graze 700 cows for two months of the year. They have 200 bull calves for the summer and 50 trading beef cattle.

In addition, Jorden and Chloe now farm deer and they currently have 550 hinds, 500 wieners, 200 trading wieners deer, 100 velvet stags and 10 breeding stags.

5.2 Overview

Main outcomes

- Being prompted to focus on the basics. The Pilot has provided the extra certainty that these basics were the right tasks to focus on and has therefore increased their motivation to put in the extra effort.
- Given the farm has doubled in size since Jorden and Chloe joined the Pilot, it is difficult to measure outcomes.

Main suggestions for improvement

- Have more transparency around funding and how it can be used at the start of the Pilot.
- Provide an easily searchable internet platform for locating resources to improve on-farm performance.

Most effective learning channels

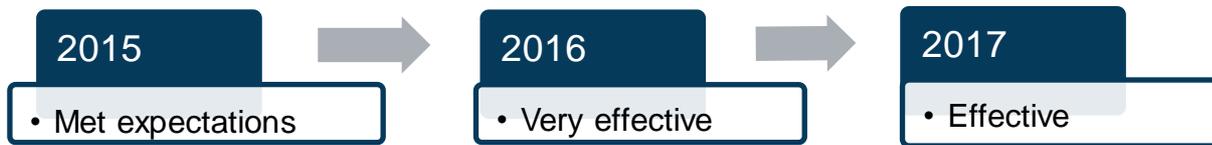
- Visiting farms and seeing first-hand what top-farmers are doing so Jorden and Chloe can make their own assessments of its application to the home farm.

Questions about test funding model

- Need to make sure they can bring together like-minded farmers.
- Questions on how effective overseas-owned meat companies would be at helping farmers via the programme.

5.3 Rating overall effectiveness of Pilot

Over the past 12 months Jordan and Chloe have found the Pilot to be **effective** in helping them make improvements to their farming operation.



The main reasons for this 'effective' Pilot rating were:

1. Farmer-led

Jordan liked how the Pilot had been farmer-driven. He noted that they had been asked to throw their ideas into the mix and Alliance helped with suggesting who they felt would be best to support them to turn their ideas into a practice.

2. Funding made available

Jordan suggested that without funding to help take some of his ideas into action, it would have taken longer for him to implement some of the changes they have made.

3. Having a reasonably small group

Jordan commented that he preferred to be involved in a smaller group. He noted that in a smaller group of like-minded farmers it was easier to ask questions as they were all on a, “*level-playing field*”. Jordan went on to suggest that in smaller like-minded groups there tended to be less, “*show boating*” and more honest discussion.

4. Enjoyed working with Alliance

Jordan said that Shona was very approachable, and he liked that she left it up to the group participants to drive what they were going to do, with still putting some structure around it and organising sessions as needed. Jordan finished saying that, “*She [Shona] listens to us*”.

5.4 On-farm changes

5.4.1 Overview of changes

■ Motivation to focus on basics

Jordan was not convinced that the Pilot had taught him lots of new practices, rather he felt that the experience had helped reinforce much of what he already knew. He elaborated that the Pilot had reminded him to do the important things like: Feeding ewes well during lactation and having good quality feed for finishing lambs. The most benefit Jordan and Chloe had received from the Pilot was prompting to do what they felt they already knew was important. This prompting or reminding had given them more confidence that the extra effort to make sure certain tasks were completed to a high standard was worthwhile. Jordan said, “*It’s like when I do this again next year, I will make sure I put in more effort to get it 100% right as the importance of it has been reinforced by the Pilot*”.

■ Red clover mix

Jorden had put in a crop of red-clover mix but had some bad advice from a seed company agronomist and the crop did not work out that well. This had been a painful experience for Jorden, and it has made him a little reluctant to trust the advice of 'experts'. Jorden explained what happened:

We had a good red-clover paddock, but we had a few docks coming through, so we were recommended to spray with a product call Harmony, and it killed the whole paddock. And then we came into re-sow the paddock and the sowing date was way too late and now we haven't grazed that paddock for about eight months.

Jorden then went on to say that while he was disappointed at the poor advice he received, ultimately it was his decision to proceed with the advice, however Chloe added that it is difficult when you ask a specialist because you do not have that specific understanding yourself. Chloe also said that they have changed to a different agronomist and were hoping for a better result in the future.

■ Choosing better rams

Jorden noted that in the past they tended to look at rams first to narrow down their selection before considering the numbers. However, the Pilot had taught him to look at the numbers first to narrow down his selections, and then look at the rams second to make this final decision.

■ Benchmarking

Jorden described how Baker and Associates through the Pilot had given them a ranking among the general farming population based on their performance. Jorden indicated that the ranking was not 'too bad' and this had given him increased confidence to push ahead and focus more strongly on what they were already doing.

5.5 Effectiveness of channels

EFFECTIVENESS OF CHANNELS

Q. Thinking about each of the following, in relation to helping you make practice changes on your farm or farms, how effective have they been? Would you say they have been very effective, effective or not that effective at all?

Independent advisors	Effective
Group discussion with other farmers	Effective
Group learning activities such as workshops/field trips etc.	Not effective
Visits to other farms	Effective
Working with your meat processor	Very effective
National workshop	N/a
Support from your RMPP team	N/a

■ Independent experts

Jorden gave this channel an 'effective' rating. He noted that if you can work with an expert on a specific topic, such as genetics, this can bring benefits to your business. As already reported, Jorden had found the discussions on choosing better rams useful for his business and has now changed the process of how he selects rams.

■ Group discussions with other farmers

Another 'effective' rating was given for discussions with other farmers. Jorden noted that he preferred to hear from someone who had, "*skin in the game*". He noted that these discussions allowed him to get into the detail of putting theory into practice. Jorden is a practical farmer who likes to get on with the job so discussions that could led to specific actions he could implement on farm appealed strongly to him.

■ Workshops and field trips

A lower rating of 'not effective' was given for this channel. Jorden said that often on field trips the talk could become quite broad and focus on topics that he felt were too basic for his current grasp of farming. This meant he often found these types of leaning channels less useful.

■ Farm visits

Jorden gave a more positive rating of 'very effective' for farm visits. He liked to be able to have a look around a farm, see things for himself and make his own assessments about the potential usefulness of practices for his operation.

■ The meat processor

The meat processor was given a 'very effective' rating by Jorden. He concluded that Alliance was able to find the right people to assist Pilot farmers in the areas they each identified as needing work. Playing this connecting role between farmers and the experts to meet their identified goals had been useful to Jorden and he noted it had led to him feeling even more loyal to Alliance.

From a more practical perspective, Jorden also stated that Alliance had the right venues for bringing everyone together and hosting events.

■ The National Farmer Workshop

Jorden did not attend the workshop.

■ Red Meat Profit Partnership

Jorden stated he does not really have any contact with RMPP.

5.6 Pilot improvements

Jorden wanted more transparency at the start of the Pilot around the amount of funding that was available for farmers. He believes this would have given a clearer picture of what potential changes he could have focused on.

Jorden noted that he liked to learn by visiting other farms, where top farmers could speak from experience and he could see for himself what works. Therefore, he would like more opportunities for this type of interaction.

Also, Jorden wanted to be able to have easy access to searchable information on the internet. For example, he would like to be able to put in a topic like 'grazing young stock' and for this to bring up a range of independent resources he could look at to help form his own approach. Jorden said that DairyNZ did a good job of providing this kind of information as did the New Zealand Grasslands Association.

5.7 Role of the Meat Company scaling the Pilot

Jorden felt there was a role for companies like Alliance (co-operatives) who he felt had a more long-term interest in building relationships with farmers and sustaining the industry. However, he was less convinced that there would be a role for companies that were owned by overseas investors. Jorden was unsure but suspected that overseas-owned companies would have less interest in working to help farmers.

5.8 Testing the funding model

Given Jordan's earlier comment about lack of transparency around funding for the current Pilot he was buoyed, when told about the proposed upfront \$4,000 amount per farmer for the Action Networks. He said this would make it clearer for farmers about what they could expect and how they could scope their plans.

Jordan was less convinced about how the group approach would work and said he thought it would work if RMPP managed to bring together groups of like-minded farmers and had a very good facilitator to make this happen.

5.9 Next 12 months

Jordan said he was at the stage now where he wanted to learn less about basic farm practices and was more interested in developing strategic business planning skills. He commented that Rabobank ran courses on this topic, and he was hoping to attend one of those.

Jordan concluded that it would be nice to hear more detail about what other farmers had implemented on their properties, as this would give him some ideas to think about for his own operation going forward for the remainder of the Pilot.

Year Four (2018)

The interview this year was conducted with Jordan.

6.1 Changes to farm statistics

There have been no changes to farm statistics over the last 12 months.

Main Pilot takeaway

- More analytical approach to farming by paying closer attention to benchmarking data. This has given Jordan extra confidence in the direction he is taking the farm business.

Overall profitability impacts

- Jordan believed profitability will have increased through better ewe condition all year round and more consistent lambing percentage, up at around 150%.

Any Pilot regrets

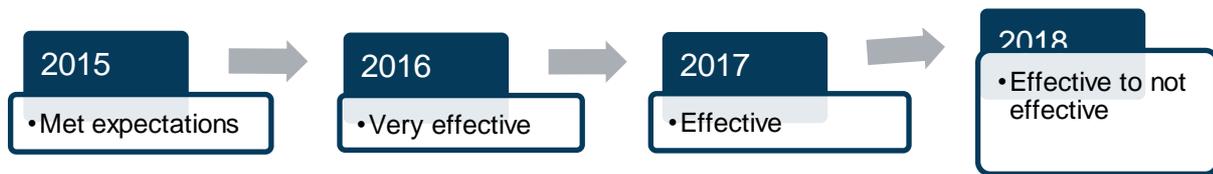
- No regrets

Overall rating score

- 70-80% - Jordan was satisfied with the way the Pilot was farmer led, it focused on topics the group was interested in. He commented that the experts brought in to address each topic were high quality.

6.1 Rating overall effectiveness of Pilot

Over the past 12 months, Jordan felt the Pilot had been somewhere between 'effective' and 'not effective'...



1. Pilot lost momentum

It just fizzled out, two years was enough, I think. The momentum just could not keep going

Jordan felt that the Pilot had lost momentum in the final year. However, he acknowledged that a tapering off was inevitable because what was achieved in the preceding two years was enough to keep farmers going. He recalled one field day at a beef-finishing farm in the past year. However, it was not very memorable for Jordan, as could not elaborate on any of the specific details about the quality of the day.

Jordan recognised that the last year had not been a “disaster” it was simply a matter of the Pilot running its course before it officially came to an end. He believed that this made it challenging for the facilitator to keep the motivation up and maintain farmer participation.

6.2 On-farm changes

6.2.1 Overview of changes

Jordan has continued with changes that were implemented in the previous year particularly focusing on ram selection, feeding stock, and maintaining their condition throughout the year.

6.3 Overall Pilot rating

70-80%

Jordan was pleased that the Pilot process was farmer led. The facilitator had listened to farmers and planned events aligned with their interests. The facilitators also brought in quality speakers who provided useful information at the events. Finally, Jordan explained the funding to support on-farm trials was also helpful.

As noted earlier, Jordan has seen the momentum taper off in the final year of the Pilot. He felt to maintain momentum farmers needed to meet roughly every two months. However, he acknowledged it became challenging to keep farmers engaged during the last year as they had their own ideas to focus on.

The farmers have probably been just as guilty as anyone of not keeping the momentum going, by not being available for events.

6.4 Main Pilot takeaways

Jordan noted he already took an analytical approach to farming; however, he was now paying much closer attention to his performance figures through benchmarking. Jordan also felt more confident with the direction his farm was going. He now knows through benchmarking data that he is at least on the right track with what he is achieving his goals.

I have enjoyed benchmarking, and just seeing where we are at [relative to other farmers]. I am now probably placing more emphasis on that [benchmarking] coming out of the RMPP. I am seeking that information out and including it in our reports to see how we are going relative to other similar farms.

Jordan also believed that a lot of change couldn't be identified specifically. He explained that he is probably doing some things differently based on hearing different ideas repeatedly throughout the Pilot.

I have probably picked up a lot of things on more of a subconscious level, just from going to all these meetings and hearing similar stuff drummed into you. Probably mostly around feeding and things like that.

6.5 Farming profitability

Jordan believed that his farm profitability has increased over the course of the Pilot, particularly in the sheep side of his business. He has seen a more consistent lambing percentage, up around 150%. He commented that before the Pilot, they were able to hit 150%, but this tended to vary widely from season-to-season. His ewes have also maintained good condition all year. Improved ewe performance is a result of Jordan consistently monitoring them as opposed to only doing so just before lambing.

Jordan said it was hard to give financial details on the level of improvement, as there were many other factors that have played a part over the past three years, including succession.

6.6 RMPP Action Networks

Jordan said there is a large array of options for joining an action network group in his area, and in the Pilot group Jordan has spoken to, seems to view the initiative positively. Overall, he is positive about the potential impact the groups will have on farmers in his area.

Everyone who is in our Pilot group is thinking about joining one of these action groups, so that has got to be a positive sign

The group Jordan is considering joining is looking into farm profitability and other 'bigger picture' aspects of farming, as opposed to looking directly at production.

Action Network (2020)

7.1 Changes to farm statistics

Since the last interview, the farm has taken on a lease block of 400 acres situated three minutes down the road. They are still operating with the same number of staff. The new block is running both capital and trading stock including sheep, beef, and deer.

7.2 Action Group rating

70%

It is still early days in their Action Group, which has only been going approximately six months. However, in that short time it has been a positive experience.

Positives:

The key positive for Jordan is the quality of the farmers who are members of the group. He expects to learn a lot from them that will help to improve his business.

We have got a really good group. Some of the guys in the group are probably industry leaders or up and coming industry leaders.

In addition, the focus of the group is more 'big picture' than 'how to grow a crop'. This gives Jordan confidence that exploring this type of content with high quality and experienced farmers will provide a good opportunity to improve his own business.

The group we are in is a Beyond Production Group, so they are trying to think how to create capital or utilise the capital you have got. And get to a better financial position I suppose.

The group has brought on board an experienced facilitator whose input has been worthwhile so far.

The facilitator was from Rabobank previously and his key role there was like a succession facilitator; he was established quite well over that. [So, a good skill set for this particular role?] Yes, getting people talking and engaged, he did that for a living for years. [Has he shown his worth so far?] Yes, he has been good.

Negatives:

Jordan did not identify any negatives at this early stage, but he did note the ever-present issue of keeping commitment to the group strong. However, there have been efforts to address this before it becomes an issue by setting ground rules in the early meetings.

Not really any negative, just keeping going will be the challenge. Everybody is probably at a similar age and stage in the group where they probably have a lot going on in their lives. Young children and things like that. [Has that been addressed in the group around commitment?] Yes, at length and trying to arrange a time that suits most people.

7.3 Practice change process (2014-2020)

7.3.1 Main turning points

Jordan explained there have not necessarily been any specific events which have helped him turn a corner or make a change with his farming. However, having a consistent message repeated over the life of the RMPP Extension Pilot (the Pilot) has been a driver to make some changes for the betterment of his business. He admitted that, often he had dismissed messages at first, but hearing them repeatedly had helped them to sink in. This has had a positive impact on the business, specifically getting more lambs away at weaning time, which had been a key goal for the farm.

I think a lot of little things that at the time you don't take any notice of or you might even dismiss it and think that is not for me but eventually after getting hit with it so many times it starts to sink in. A clear example of that is one of our goals for the Pilot was to increase our number of lambs weaned and then we set goals and we will probably increase the number of lambs away at weaning about 10-fold. At the time when we had subject matter experts on that I was a bit dismissive, but you do take it in.

Some areas that have contributed to this increase in lambs away at weaning have been:

■ Genetics expert helping to change views on the best way to select rams

Jordan recalled a day where a geneticist had talked about the value of making use of the technology available when selecting rams. Jordan's old method for selecting rams involved narrowing down his selection by having a look at them and then using the breeding index values to make the final decision. However, the geneticist suggested he should be relying more heavily on the index values and using his eye as the tie breaker, if necessary.

We had a geneticist in for the day. That was probably a key point. So, picking better rams or knowing how to pick better rams?] Just making use of the technology available.

■ Receiving funding and expert advice to trial new cropping methods

Earlier in the Pilot the farm had accessed funding to run a trial of a red clover and chicory mix. This, along with some expert advice on how best to cultivate and make use of the crop, had given Jordan the confidence to do a larger and, ultimately successful, trial. Jordan has continued and expanded this practice, which has had a positive impact on the number of lambs they are getting away at weaning time.

■ Seeing their performance objectively measured through benchmarking

Jordan commented how useful it has been to see where his farm sits relative to the industry. Before, they did not necessarily know the areas where they were underperforming, and the benchmarking has helped them to focus their efforts in the right areas. It has also given him the confidence to push ahead with how they are doing things in most areas already, as they are relatively well placed compared to farmers in other areas.

Benchmarking was a good thing that I got out of it. [How has that helped you?] To see where you are compared to everyone else, good, bad, or average. Benchmarking was a huge thing actually now we have brought it up. [Is it just good to know or do you act on that information in any way?] You can make decisions and look at what areas other might be doing better than yourself or you are doing better than other people.

7.3.2 Main obstacles

Jordan did not identify any specific obstacles they have faced during the Pilot and Action Group periods.

7.4 Pilot and Action Group benefits

As Jordan felt it was too early to tell, he did not identify any specific benefits resulting from the Action Group. However, he had seen some benefits from the Pilot in his lamb finishing operation:

■ More efficient lamb finishing operation with more lambs away off mum

As noted, one goal for the farm had been to increase the number of lambs away at weaning time. They have achieved significant success, with about a 10-fold increase in lambs away off mum. While Jordan could not say if this was all due to the Pilot, he conceded that the Pilot induced changes of the red clover and chicory mix, and better ram selection must have played a role. Sending lambs away earlier meant they had been able to access a much better prices for these lambs than they would have otherwise achieved.