

Ep 17 - Inspiring Women in Rural Leadership

Rachel Halder: [00:00:00] Catchment Convos with Thriving Southland, your link to Southland Catchment groups and their impactful projects. Each episode will dive into grassroots effort by local farmers and communities that are driving change and sustainability in our regions. Listen in for inspiring stories and insight. Real people, real change, the Southland Way.

Sarah Thorne: Welcome to Catchment Convos, the podcast where we dive into the work of passionate people driving change in our catchment and communities. I'm your host, Sarah Thorne, one of the Thriving Southland Catchment Coordinator team, and in today's episode, in celebration of International Women's Day, we're sharing the stories of two wonderful ladies, Clare Officer and Rachael Millar, who do fantastic work in the Catchment Groups and local communities.

Clare and Rachael are leading change in farming, science and in their communities through their work and personal time. Both are busy moms involved in kids' activities, school boards, [00:01:00] home and school association, catchment groups, and have careers where they look after Southlands land, water, and communities.

Rachael is a passionate advocate for catchment work and currently serves as a Chief Advisor to the CEO at Environment Southland. Her career spans roles in policy planning and environmental science management. She also brings her expertise to the Thriving Southland funding panel and is a member of the Waimatuku catchment group.

Clare is a busy dairy farmer. Her leadership journey includes the Southern Dairy Development Trust, the Greater Dipton catchment group, time as a catchment coordinator, and joining the Thriving Southland Board in 2025. She's passionate about supporting and encouraging young people and farming, particularly young women.

Together these ladies represent the heart of Southland's communities, balancing family, farming and forward thinking strategies for a thriving future. So, let's hear their stories and explore what leadership looks like in the paddock, the boardroom and beyond.

Welcome to Catchment Convos, Rachael and Clare. It's lovely to have you on our [00:02:00] podcast today. Part of the inspiration behind this podcast was International Women's Day, and we wanted to showcase the effort of some of the wonderful ladies involved in our Southland catchment group community and share their stories and help inspire future leaders.

Now, I've known both of you for many years, and I think you're perfect for today's episode. So would you like to introduce yourself to our listeners? And tell us a bit about why you do what you do.

Rachael Millar: I'm Rachael Millar, also known as Rachael Strang. I am a Southlander, born and bred, grew up on a sheep farm in central Southland, a wee place called Browns. And if you'd asked me when I was 18 and heading off to Lincoln University, what I was going to be doing in 20 years time, I certainly wouldn't have imagined that I was going to be a sheep farmer still on a separate farm in Central Southland, along with having two wonderful children and working at Environment Southland, the regional council. It wasn't where I thought I was headed, but that is where I am now. I've worked in Environment Southland for over [00:03:00] 20 years now in a number of roles across the policy and planning teams, the science teams, strategy and I'm currently the chief advisor at Environment Southland. So we're quite across the organization supporting the chief executive and the council. That's my role there and it's a great fit actually. I'm really passionate about the outdoors, about community and really just love connecting people and ideas and working together on hard problems.

Clare Officer: Thanks, Sarah for that lovely intro. I'm Clare. I'm a dairy and beef farmer with my husband John at Centre Bush in Central Southland. We've got four teenage children, which makes home time fun sometimes. Um, originally from the UK we moved over here 20 years ago. I grew up on a family dairy farm in a rural community and I think being part of the community and volunteering is in my blood. My grandparents and my parents were all very involved in local church and, W.I, Parish council, all those sorts of things. [00:04:00] So it just comes naturally to me to sort of get involved in it and moving to the other side of the world it's a great way to meet people and get involved. Been a dairy farmer all my life and done a few other roles on the side but just love rural community, farming, and being a food producer.

Sarah Thorne: I think that's lovely, ladies. I mean, you're right. It's all about connection and communities, isn't it? And how our, often our parents have inspired us and we get to pass that onto our children, which I know is hugely important to you guys too.

So could you possibly tell us about some of the projects or initiatives that you may be currently involved with, or one that you've loved in your past where you've made a real difference to our community and environment?

Clare Officer: I think being involved with Thriving Southland has been such a thrill really, and such a privilege because it's an inspiring space to work in.

I started off being part of the Dipton catchment group again, just wanting to get involved in the community and take on projects that interested me. And then was lucky enough to be a catchment coordinator for a couple of years and be involved in lots of projects across lots of different groups. I just [00:05:00] find it such an inspiring, positive, collaborative environment to work in and I always come home buzzing when I've been involved in any of those things. So that's been a highlight for me. And through that, then I've got involved in other projects. So one thing often leads to another and things spin out from there.

Sarah Thorne: Thanks, Clare. And you, Rachael.

Rachael Millar: Yeah, it's interesting talking about people that inspired us. I was really lucky, I guess I've been with Environment Southland a few years um, but I had a whole lot of senior leaders who were very encouraging of collaborative processes and evolving lots of people.

So we came up with really practical outcomes and we had an approach from Penny Nelson who was with Dairy NZ at the time and she brought together a whole lot of us from the council, but from the dairy sector more broadly to do some work about farm dairy effluent.

It was a few months the journey and we had lots of differing opinions, lots of different views, but we came up with some really good outcomes. So that's been quite key in shaping [00:06:00] what I do and how I do it. And so a lot of the projects and programs that I'm probably most proud of and think have achieved the most are those sorts of collaborative ones.

So there was that one way back in the day, but more recently we had a group called the Regional Forum do a lot of work actually about how we might achieve community aspirations for fresh water and some really great things coming out of that. And it's really nice to see how it all connects through.

So Clare was talking about Thriving Southland. The regional report came out with some advice and one of the things was to focus in on wetlands. And not long after that, Thriving Southland spoke to Environment Southland about

getting a new fund set up for wetland creation and restoration, and now sitting on the Thriving Southland funding panel and getting to see an action going out to properties and catchment groups to put wetlands in on the ground. So yeah, just those sorts of projects and programs are fascinating.

Sarah Thorne: It's amazing the people we meet along the way, isn't it? And how we end up working together. And I think that's a real strength. Of all the [00:07:00] jobs that we do where we're in contact with so many people, we can connect them and we can go, oh yeah, we know someone who can help here.

So I know you're both really busy ladies, juggling many, many things, but do you have any top tips for women who are considering careers in agriculture or environmental science?

Clare Officer: For me, I think it's just really important to do something that you love and do something that you're passionate about because that's where you get the enjoyment from. Believe in yourself. I think sometimes as a woman, you have children and you're sort of out of the workplace and you sometimes think you haven't got anything to offer.

But we've all got so many transferable skills, whether that be from being a parent from the farm. So put yourself out there and find what your passion is and, don't be afraid to ask people for help or to mentor you. But yeah, just do something that you love. I think that's my key message, wherever that might lead you.

Sarah Thorne: That's lovely, Clare. I really agree with that. Makes everyday fun, doesn't it?

Clare Officer: Yeah, that's right. I don't feel like I'm going back to work on a Monday. I'm just going back to do something that I [00:08:00] enjoy. And for me I think that's some of the reason why I've taken on different roles because I can get a bit bored if I'm just doing the same thing all the time so I like to have some new challenges along the way.

Rachael Millar: So actually Clare, you alluded to probably my number one as you were speaking. And it's about having a really good support network. I've been so lucky. All the different people that have been supporting me over the journey that I've had. You really can't do it all alone and you shouldn't have to either. And so find your people, find mentors, share the load at home and at work. It really does take everyone.

And I've been very lucky actually in the last 12 months done the Agri-Womens Development Trust Escalator programme and I've done some of the courses previously and I'd so recommend them, but I've got a new tribe, if you like, of people that I did the course with and I actually did ask them this question. That's something we discussed and I think we all felt that support network was really key. A couple of other ones. I think it's important to invest in [00:09:00] yourself, and to seek out new information and learning. Be a sponge if you like, and put the time and if you can add some money into your growth. Both agriculture and the environmental management space are changing constantly, so important to stay curious and keep relevant, etc. And probably the last one, and it's funny, I know, Clare, we were messaging before the podcast about doing something that puts us outta our comfort zone and perhaps feeling that imposter syndrome. I think you're getting comfortable with being uncomfortable if you like. It's the place where you grow and learn. So lean into it. It can be pretty challenging sometimes, the world as we know it can be a bit unsettled and so just lean into that discomfort and remember, you're more capable than you think.

Sarah Thorne: Again, I love that as well. My latest thing is thinking about my goals for the year and I've written them in the front of my diary or my notebook, and it's the first thing I see and it just brings me back down to earth and this is why I'm here and I love [00:10:00] it.

So, you guys have done so much through sports and schools and work and catchment groups, but what achievements are you are most proud of?

Clare Officer: We're not very good at being proud of things or remembering the things we did that were exciting. But yeah, proud of my family and the business we've grown starting from scratch in New Zealand. Proud of just being a farmer and a food producer, a custodian of land and part of a fantastic community. I think all those things bring me great joy.

Rachael Millar: Yeah, for me I guess what I get quite excited about is the amount of knowledge and energy we have in our region. I was thinking actually about Environment Southland, then all the science and information we have in that strong foundation of understanding our region, but also the community as well. I was thinking about our farm. We've been lucky to have Lincoln University doing some research on the farm and all that knowledge we have and what that might mean for us in future. But there's all these cool little pockets of things happening right across the region. You [00:11:00] know, Thriving is a great example of where there's exciting new things happening and that they're not always visible to lots of people, so shining the light on some of those things

that are happening and getting them out for others to see as well and to get ideas from. When we can do that, that's where I think, yeah, we've really achieved something

Sarah Thorne: That's special Rachael. Along the way, have you faced any challenges you feel comfortable sharing with us today?

Clare Officer: Not got any specific ones Sarah, but I think we always face challenges along the way. That's the nature of life. There's always gonna be hurdles and roadblocks or things don't go to plan. And I suppose that's where all those support networks and skills you learn along the way are important. Those challenges are often what help us grow at the end of the day.

It's coming through when things didn't quite pan out as you thought and there where the learning is. If everything went smoothly all the time, we probably wouldn't be the people we are today, would we?

Rachael Millar: For me, probably some of the biggest challenges along the way have actually been [00:12:00] health challenges. It probably just makes me think, actually another thing in terms of tips I think protecting your energy is really important too. So taking time to recharge your batteries, do what you love. Those are really important things as well.

Clare Officer: It just brings me back that thought of it takes a village to do everything we do. You know, it's like Saturday sport for example, I've got four kids in four different places but there's people in the same situation and you just help each other out. And like I say yeah, it takes a village to get everything done.

Sarah Thorne: You are right. And there's some great support networks out there. Have you come across any, like Rachael, you mentioned in your course, and that's been a great bunch of people that you can now connect to. Are there any other ones out there that you know, could be a good tip for people?

Rachael Millar: Actually another one I came across, just the last year is one called Women in Agribusiness. So that's a local group that meets, and that's been really great. I was also really interested in quite a lot of what was coming through in the Southland Business Chamber. They've got a [00:13:00] great range of courses, including some leadership courses and that's another way to connect with people locally.

Clare Officer: So like Rachael, I've done stuff with Agri Women's Development Trust and escalators on my list to do. But also with the chamber, done a couple of courses with them and it's great 'cause you are mixing across different industries. So it's cool to get different perspectives on what's going on when you do some of those courses.

Sarah Thorne: That's so exciting.

So what's next for both of you?

Rachael Millar: So for me it's a really fascinating time to be in local government where I'm going through a period of significant reform. So both the Resource Management Act, or just some new legislation to replace that, but also local government itself. There's a proposal out to streamline local government that's been consulted on, and we're expecting quite a lot of change over the coming months. So yeah, excited to be part of, I guess a completely different way of doing things potentially, and to, I guess, help make sure that that works for [00:14:00] Southland and our region and that we keep all the good things and iron out some of the things that aren't working perhaps so well for us.

Sarah Thorne: That's amazing Rachael, how about you, Clare?

Clare Officer: For me it's just keep getting involved in different projects as they come along. Slightly gonna be in a different phase as my last one leaves primary school in the next couple of years and move on to high school. But at the other end, we've got one going to university so I'm sure there'll be plenty of things that pop up through that. But yeah just keep growing myself and the business and like I alluded to before, love to do maybe an escalator course or a Kellogg, something along those lines is sort of on my radar, but probably just a bit too busy at the moment to take that on. So just waiting for the right time to do that once the kids are sort of a little bit more independent.

Sarah Thorne: I think you'd be amazing at that Clare and you could come back and do a presentation to the catchment group or something.

Rachael Millar: I was just going to second that and say Clare, I waited quite a few years and yeah, so worth it when you do get there.

Clare Officer: Thank you.

Sarah Thorne: And timing's everything isn't it? As Rachael [00:15:00] said, you've gotta look after yourself and it's gotta fit in.

So the final question I have for you today is the opportunity to add anything else ?

Clare Officer: I think we've covered like a great range of things. But I just think get out there and back yourself and don't be afraid to put your hand up. Just start somewhere and get out there because rural communities don't survive without people putting their hands up, and supporting each other, and taking on some of the jobs. So whatever that is, just get out there and you always get more back than what you put in. So I think the rewards you get are of tenfold what you put in.

Rachael Millar: I absolutely agree with that Clare and I was just thinking too that you just need to do what works for you and not be comparing yourself to what somebody else is doing. Don't feel guilty for wanting something different to somebody else. We all contribute in different ways, so like Clare said, put yourself out there, but do it in the way that works for you.

Sarah Thorne: Thank you so much for joining me today and sharing your stories, experiences, and advice.

[00:16:00] I think you're both amazing ladies, and I hope this podcast has inspired some of our listeners to think about how they can help their local communities and maybe even become our future leaders because we need people to help keep our communities and their groups thriving, and I think it's all part of what makes Southland such a great place to live.

Rachel Halder: And that's a wrap for another episode of Catchment Convos, brought to you by Thriving Southland. A big thanks to our guests for being a part of the conversation on today's episode, and for you guys for tuning in. We appreciate your support. Don't forget to like, subscribe, and follow us wherever you get your podcast from so you can stay up to date with all the latest episodes as they're released.

For more information on this episode, check out the show notes or head to the Thriving Southland website where you can also learn more about the awesome work happening across the catchment groups here in Southland. And if you've got a project or an idea you wanna share, don't be shy. Reach out. So until next time, keep up the good work out there on the land and as always, stay connected and keep driving those changes for a thriving [00:17:00] Southland.