

Ep 14 - Grassroots action in Waikawa

[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.

Rachael Halder: Welcome back to Catchment Convos. Today we're heading right down to the southeast corner of Southland to the Waikawa catchment. This group formed back in 2009 by a group of farmers and community members who wanted to better understand their own backyard, care for the environment, improve waterways and all the way from the bush to the river and the back paddock.

Joining me for this episode are two longstanding farmer representatives from the group, Alison Thomas and Craig Short. Together we'll unpack how the Waikawa team have steadily been chipping away at [00:01:00] some of their opportunities and challenges for more than a decade, and how in recent years they've really started to hit their stride with science lead projects, sediment mitigation structures and a vision to restore and protect the Waikawa River for generations to come. We'll talk about how the restoration plans have come to life, how they've tackled erosion head on using high resolution mapping and local knowhow, and what's next for this driven and down to earth group?

Let's get into it. Welcome to the show, Craig and Allison. Awesome to have you here.

Craig Short: Thanks Rachel.

Rachael Halder: The Waikawa Catchment Group, Craig, do you want to place us a little bit?

Craig Short: Well, I guess you'd say we're down on the southern coast. Our catchment goes from sort of just before Tokanui, Quarry Hills, Fortification includes Waikawa Valley, Progress Valley down to Waikawa, I guess. So, it's a farming community. It's quite unique in a way from a water catchment point of view, because we actually have quite a high [00:02:00] percentage of native bush still in our catchment, which is quite a good thing. Which does also have

its own wee challenges with, a few feral animals running around. But no, it is, it's a really great wee place to be fair. So we enjoy living down here, I think at this end of the country.

Rachael Halder: Very cool. And so farming systems, what are you predominantly made up of?

Craig Short: Um, predominantly sheep and beef. There's only really sort one dairy farm on the catchment, to be fair, which is probably another quite unique feature for Southland. There's a couple of farms planted out in trees, which I guess present some more challenges for us, but yeah, predominantly sheep and beef.

Rachael Halder: Very cool. You guys are in a really special place of the world. Allison, did you wanna tell us a little bit about how the catchment group fits into this?

Alison Thomas: Okay. I'd also like to add, we do have quite a bit of forestry. Um, Southwood up Progress Valley and the Waikawa Valley and the East Branch also in the West Branch also has forestry.

Um, the catchment group was formed in [00:03:00] 2009 and, it was noted that there were a lot of native species still on our river, which is quite unique, as in other areas of Southland the Kowhai and the Ribbonwood had been cleared, but we still have quite a bit. And from there Landcare did a river restoration plan giving us ideas on planting native species around there. From then , the group slowly got going with field days, looking at, pests and pest destruction and, collecting native seed and, uh, wetlands that were present in the catchment were looked at. And then about 2000 and, sorry, just thinking back 23 , the ICMP idea, Thriving Southland, became involved and really helped to grow [00:04:00] our catchment group and to encourage participation.

Rachael Halder: You were probably one of Southland's original catchment groups then. Um, Craig, engagement wise, how have you found catchment group members and , buy-in from your local farmers of recent times?

Craig Short: I guess when we start right back in sort of 2009, it was first , started by probably just a few farmers on the west branch, which were having issues with, erosion from the river. But over the last few years we definitely getting more farmers turning up, which is great to see and just general people from in the area, to be fair, they're not all even just farmers.

So we're getting quite good buy-in. And obviously as time progresses and we sort of start doing some different, plantings and things to help the river, we're probably gonna get more buy-in as well. I'm hoping. So yeah, it's really positive. There's always the same ones turning up, but we are definitely getting new people turning up and we're always welcoming of more locals. The more that turn up, the better it is. And you [00:05:00] know, like just I guess trying to spread the word round that that's not actually a bad thing. These catchment groups and like Thriving Southland have just been absolutely amazing. It's definitely a positive thing for the community.

Rachael Halder: Thank you Craig. I didn't pay him to say that, but it's lovely to hear, the team being recognized.

You mentioned the integrated catchment management plan. Do you wanna say a little bit, around the steps from there and what you have been doing in the last 12 months.

Alison Thomas: The integrated catchment plan was completed in 2024. And from there we were able to secure some funding for A2E experts. A group of scientists that can look at specialized areas, and we wanted to look at erosion and sediment runoff. On our field days as farmers, we were discussing problems and I think we all have the problem with planting an area and then the river floods and takes [00:06:00] away a fence or the area that has been planted. So we wanted to look at ways to mitigate that and knowing that sediment build up in our estuary can be a problem and something we wanted to mitigate.

I think with the ICMP, it gave us an opportunity to speak together and find out direction that we all wanted to go. We probably would've got there without the ICMP, but it is something that government does like to see.

Rachael Halder: From this report, I guess it was a really big piece of work done in your catchment helped you get that idea as to what you were gonna do your projects in.

Craig Short: Yeah, we got that funding for the access to experts, which we were then lucky enough to get Dr. Clint Rissman to come and look at the sediment and erosion issues that we felt members of the [00:07:00] catchment group were experiencing. And he's done a pretty amazing job of compiling all the information and, anyone can sort of access it. So that's allowed us, as we get funding to know the areas and the catchment where the highest priorities are, and where would be, your best bang for buck to put any, funding we get into projects to help the catchment. So, the plan definitely it's been a great starting

point for us, to go in the right direction, and I believe we can, still build on it over time.

Rachael Halder: Cool. And so Alison, it's all kind of being targeted around slowing the flow, isn't it? And that's a big part of it and a little cheeky reason we got, yourself and Craig on is that you two have , been identified as having sites on your farm that could do some mitigation options.

Alison Thomas: Yes. It was good to have Dr. Clint Rissman, do the mapping, using a lot of satellite imagery, [00:08:00] and looking at the whole catchment and looking at the geology, the soil, the gradient, and bringing everything together. He also followed up with ground truthing coming out to the farms so it was really good to build on that. Then , ES made us aware that MFE liked the sound of the project that we had undertaken and we came together as a catchment group and asked farmers to bring their projects that could be undertaken to slow the flow and reduce sediment runoff. And from that, it was a difficult process, but, seven farming projects were selected and this was put forward to ES and through that they took that to MFE and we received the funding to undertake these [00:09:00] projects. So the seven projects were quite diverse and all look at slowing the flow.

I must admit, our engagement in the catchment group has certainly risen when there's funding available to make a difference and to improve water quality within our catchment.

Rachael Halder: Oh, that's awesome.

Craig, you've got a site on your farm too. How did you select the site and how does it fit in with the greater project?

Craig Short: Well, it's, it's a gully at the back of my farm, and it's quite, quite a low lying gully , pretty flat at the bottom and then it goes up into a quite a steep sort of area, which over the years I've noticed a bit of slumping at the top of the gully and, and obviously done nothing with it. Clint Rissman come out on farm to look at a site. So , he made his suggestions of what should be done. And so when it come time that we had our meeting down at the hall for putting forward ideas, I took my ideas along and yeah, lucky enough to get [00:10:00] selected. Craig, Simpson, then took on the designing of all their seven projects and working, to make sure they fit within the criteria to fit in with ES rules and regulations. So we've created one dam sort I guess halfway down the gully and then there's like eight sediment traps just using rocks and everything, which in a flood event, it'll help slow it down. And then there's been a thousand plants

planted, and obviously the whole gully's been fenced off. I think it looks absolutely magic and it's one, it's gonna make my stock management a lot easier. 'cause obviously this gully fenced off now and it's, it was a project that I've been sort of wanting to do for some time, but obviously, you know, budget constraints. So this funding has been brilliant for that.

We've been going to meetings for years and, some of the, years gone by, it felt like you're just kicking a bucket along the road. We're always aiming, to try and get some sort of funding in it we could just never quite grasp it. And now that we've finally got this first project or seven projects on the way I just think it's, it's the start of [00:11:00] something amazing to be fair. We're gonna be having an open day and, hopefully we get more of the catchment group come along and see what's been done.

Obviously there's gonna be ongoing, you know, like with planting the natives, it's a long process to get them fully established. So there'll be wee bit of maintenance going forward, but, it's something like you just drive past and it's like, this just looks magic and really looking forward to seeing it in probably five or 10 years when these plants come up. And I think that's when they'll, all these projects are really gonna come into their own and they can all sort of be seen from the road too, which is another big bonus.

Rachael Halder: Is really exciting and I'm lucky I've been able to head along to your site Allison and Craig. And so Alison, have you got a comment on your site?

Alison Thomas: Oh, our site was selected by Clint and also six years ago, we got ES out to give, their input as to if there's anything on our farm they felt would benefit from planting, as we were looking to do some riparian planting. Both [00:12:00] Clint and ES had identified that that would be possibly a good site to plant and we were able to put a sediment trap.

Rachael Halder: So I just wanna make a note to you guys come the start of 2025, this was all still basically a piece of paper and here we are and you have managed to get thousands of plants, in the ground and many sites done. So Craig, roughly how many plants have gone in the ground in the catchment in the last, what, like couple of months?

Craig Short: Oh, I don't know. It's probably around, well actually no, it's probably over 8,000 plants. It's probably nine, maybe 9,000 native plants.

Yeah, the planting like big job, don't get me wrong there. If you go and look at a thousand plants, like I know myself. In my site, there's a thousand plants and you sort of think at the time it's like, oh, that shouldn't take too well, you know, it's gonna take a bit of time. But , by the time you place them out, dig them in, put the plant protectors on, it's, yeah, it definitely takes time, but it's just so rewarding.

I'm guessing [00:13:00] 9,000 plants and, there's room for more in some of the projects. Obviously, we had funding limits, and as Allison mentioned , we had a lot of project ideas put forward and it really was hard to pick, pick the ones to go with and yeah, it'd be just magic if we could get some source, some more funding further down the track 'cause obviously we've got other projects waiting in the background that would be , just as brilliant as these ones we've done.

Rachael Halder: It's so cool that you guys are doing this as a group though. You have also had loads of community and volunteer help to get these plants in the ground, and that's been quite cool for you too, hasn't it?

Alison Thomas: Oh it's been really special. It's been lovely coming together on the planting days and helping neighboring projects. Been quite impressed by the local rural banks, the ANZ, BNZ, ASB. They've all come out and helped and Thriving Southland to be there on the spades. And we also got ESO they're [00:14:00] group of businesses that come together to do environmental, work. It's lovely to come together and be doing something positive for the environment as a group. They've been very social and fun days. And the best thing would be to grow this through our catchment.

Rachael Halder: You've ticked a lot of boxes and we can't wait to see how these sites develop and how this project builds. So maybe looking back and forward, something that sticks out to you both that you've done in the last 12 months, and then, something that you're looking forward to.

Craig Short: Oh, gee. Highlight, well, I guess a big highlight for me was to be one of the first to be chosen for this. That was a real, real honor to be in this first group of people to get this funding out. I guess just every day I went out there, you could just see the progress. And so that's, that was a highlight every day.

I think that, timeframe is probably maybe something going forward [00:15:00] would be good if we could sort of maybe have slightly longer timeframes. But having said that, it's also been good 'cause we've got a D-Day and obviously we've had a project manager, Poppy Hardie, who's, been awesome cracking the whip and make sure that we're all getting everything done.

But no, the project as a whole has been a highlight.

Rachael Halder: What are you looking forward to, Craig going forward?

Craig Short: Oh, I think for me personally, I would love to see fellow farmers in the catchment get the same sort of opportunity as what we've had, to pick a site that's relevant to what we're trying to achieve, whether it fences off a gully or a stream and put some sediment traps in or you know, there's lots of things that can be done to help improve the waterway and slow the flow. It would be just good to, see other people gain, what we've gained. And just because I guess every project that goes forward, you just get that extra buy in.

Rachael Halder: So, Alison as you reflect on the last 12 months specifically, and then looking forward, what would some of your highlights be, and something you are maybe looking forward to? [00:16:00]

Alison Thomas: Oh, the first highlight would be greater engagement within the catchment of farmers. Seeing all the work being done around the waterway, the Waikawa river, and the streams leading into it, seeing all the bio diversity growing with lots of native plants going in and the sediment traps, you know that the quality of water, the reduction in sediment, helping to stop erosion it, is just so positive, within the community. Working together on these projects has been quite special and really helps improve and everyone's understanding is growing.

For the future, it would be really good to see this grow and spread throughout the catchment. A lot of farms get the opportunity and what would be ideal would be to see forestry come in and [00:17:00] follow suit doing the riparian planting on the waterways and the sediment traps going off their land, to really make a difference.

We're whistling in the wind if we don't have everyone doing this.

Rachael Halder: Yeah full catchment sort of approach. Yes, we have. We've just sort of scratched the surface on what you guys have been up to but, if anybody was curious, how would they follow along with your journey?

Alison Thomas: I think there's a story link linked into ICMP and it's got Dr. Clint Rissman's work and hopefully it'll have Craig's plans and it'll have the stories of the projects. Or through Thriving Southland and contacting the local catchment group.

Rachael Halder: Very cool. Thank you. And Craig, did you have anything final to add?

Craig Short: Oh, I think as you mentioned, like we've only just skimmed the surface. As a catchment we've also [00:18:00] done planting on a bit of public land, an old dog dosing strip actually, so that's was done during our big projects as well. Hopefully we can get some signage there, maybe a bit of a story map or something that can tell people what we're doing and they can go and look at the natives there and look at the clean water flowing past. Just see what a good job, we're doing as a catchment, I guess.

Rachael Halder: Thank you very much Craig and Allison for giving up your time to be on the podcast with us. We are very excited to follow on and we will be watching with anticipation where you guys get to next.

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 [00:19:00] 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 Southland.