

# Ep 15 – Behind the scenes of Thriving Southland

**Rachael 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 back to Catchment Convos. My name is Sarah Thorne and I'm your host today. I'm a Catchment Coordinator with Thriving Southland and have the wonderful job of working with Southland's catchment groups. I started back in 2017, with the New Zealand Landcare Trust, and in 2020 I was part of the local team who helped set up Thriving Southland, and I've been part of the Thriving Southland team ever since.

In today's episode, we're exploring all things Thriving Southland, what we do and how it works. Thriving Southland just turned five years old and yes, we did have birthday [00:01:00] cakes at lots of catching group meetings and events. And during our work we get asked a lot of questions about what we do, how it works, and why Thriving Southland is special.

And we thought it was about time, we did a podcast on it. Today I'm joined by Richard Kyte, Thriving Southland's Project Lead, who played a huge part in bringing the idea of catchment groups to Southland and has supported them ever since. Richard spent seven years as the regional lead of DairyNZ in Southland, and was a key force in setting up Thriving Southland.

And we also have my lovely fellow catchment coordinator, Tessa Miller with us too. Tessa is a Southlander and a farmer. She's worked with our catchment groups for many years, starting out as an environmental graduate with DairyNZ, and moving to Landpro and finally taking up the role of Matura catchment coordinator.

Together, we're gonna cover all things Thriving Southland, what Thriving Southland does, how it's set up, and why it works so well.

So let's get into it. Welcome, Tessa and Richard. So to help [00:02:00] set the scene for our listeners today, Tessa, could you tell us a bit about our team and how it's set up and works?

**Tessa Miller:** Yeah, thanks Sarah for having me on the podcast. It's really exciting to work for Thriving Southland and I'm actually really proud to be a part of the team. Essentially the way I put Thriving Southland is that it's a platform to help farmers work together around supporting community action. We support, whatever the catchment groups are interested in but essentially we are the facilitators to share knowledge, help farmers access funding and get some real change happening within the catchments.

And so the team that supports catchment groups, we have five catchment group coordinators, and we have three fabulous office based staff. Our coordinators each manage a different patch. So there's four freshwater management units within Southland, and we have [00:03:00] five coordinators across those. And so it makes sense that our catchment coordinators actually live in those communities as well.

**Richard Kyte:** Just to back up what Tessa has said, I think, the key thing about Thriving Southland, and I know there's catchment groups that run the same way throughout the country, but one of our core principles is actually you know we're ground up driven. What we say with our catchment groups is they all own the projects that they're running because it's the stuff they want to do and the stuff they're focused on. And Thriving's role is to actually support that, to find them the science, the information, the right people, to actually give legs to their projects. So, the key challenge is always finding funding for the core work, which is, supporting work on the ground.

We're a real ground up based model. That to me, that's, the fundamental part of Thriving. And then the ability to support them, which is obviously the catchment coordinators [00:04:00] because there's 37 groups.

Basically we're a farmer run organization. We've got a farmer board, and I think that's what makes us quite different. The way we run is, really core to the success that, well I say we've had, but the catchment groups have had.

**Sarah Thorne:** And I think the point you made that everything's ground up, isn't it? All our work comes from our groups. We listen to our groups. You summarized it beautifully between you that we've got a team of coordinators and an office-based team. We all work together really closely.

Richard, you mentioned funding there. Could you tell us a little bit about how our funding works and how it helps the catching groups and they can access it?

**Richard Kyte:** We're supported by MPI and they've been really good around understanding the way we operate. We have good financial systems to give them the confidence, around putting the funds in and knowing that the catchment groups are getting what they want and they're gonna deliver.

We've also funding from other areas. Currently we are working with Environment Southland looking at funding for wetlands and [00:05:00] also some of the extension work we do. The key to it is the organizations we work with who fund us, they understand it's ground up. They understand that the farmers lead the way. So it's a bit of what the groups are doing builds the confidence that builds the ability to fund. And I think again it comes back to the way we're structured, but also the way the catchment groups actually have been delivering outcomes here.

**Tessa Miller:** To add to what Richard has said from a catchment group point of view, it's actually really exciting that we as catchment group coordinators can support that funding in a really easy, streamlined way. If we have a catchment group that comes to us and says, Hey, we've got this challenge down here it's really cool to be able to go, what does that look like as a catchment scale?

We've got a super easy form that we can help the catchment group to fill in. But it's the farmers that take responsibility and they're the ones that sign the [00:06:00] funding agreement.

**Richard Kyte:** And I think, I think another thing to add is, the projects, we also have an independent project panel. We have a group that sit and look at projects and actually, pull them apart, quite rigorously. That independent panel's really important so, there's a outside view , of what's happening and what's being done.

**Sarah Thorne:** So you guys have mentioned some projects there. Do you have any , that really stood out for you that you absolutely loved and thought, wow, I'd love to share that.

**Richard Kyte:** It is probably, not one, and not trying to get out of, naming and, uh , being biased, but , I suppose what I've found, fascinating is watching, groups, maybe start with water quality and then taking on the understanding around protocols and water quality testing and from that they're finding what they know aligns with what the water quality is testing is telling them. And then they're saying, well, what are the solutions to this?

And, and now we're seeing groups that are actually moving quite quickly, around we know what we're working with. Now we know what we have to , focus on.

Actually watching groups follow [00:07:00] the trail of the science, uh, the Makarewa Headwaters group, that's just one example where they were talking about, mitigations on farm first, and they're looking at the headwaters water quality. And that led them to understand their key challenge was ungulates in the native bush. So they're saying this is where we need to start to actually get the outcomes that we want.

So yeah, watching groups following the science, that's what really excites me about the work of catchment groups and the communities because I think, as somebody said to me, , you throw them the ball, they pick it up and run and leave you behind.

**Tessa Miller:** And one other saying that Richard has is to go slow, to go fast. We see that all the time that catchment groups start with something really, really small but cumulatively you wait a month or two and it flies. We are busy supporting these guys and like Richard said, really cool to watch them actually follow the science.

**Sarah Thorne:** I think you've just touched on a really cool point, Tessa. I mean, being a Catchment coordinator is a fun job and I think you've gotta be a bit of jack of all trades as [00:08:00] well. Can you tell me a bit about what a typical work week or even a workday is that possible looks like for you? Probably all so different.

**Tessa Miller:** Yeah, absolutely. We are so different. Each of us support between six and 12 groups. From a day-to-day point of view, it essentially looks like how do we connect with the people that matter to the catchment group, whether that's your farmer leaders, whether that is industry groups or specialists that people wanna hear from.

And another core thing is that we actually try and keep up with what's happening around the space so that we can bring ideas to the catchment groups themselves. As anyone knows, who's a part of a catchment group, a lot of our meetings are actually at nighttime, which, you know your day does look a wee bit different than a normal nine to five. When I come home from meetings, you feel supercharged. [00:09:00] People turn up and they've talked about something really positive and local for their community for the last two hours, and they've made some headway, they've got a funding plan or they've got an

extension plan. They know where they're gonna go, they know how they're gonna share their learnings, and it's a brilliant place to be. Um, I don't think that answers your, what does a day-to-day look like, but that's the basis of what we do.

**Sarah Thorne:** I think you made so many wonderful points there, Tessa, and catchment groups have really brought communities together again. Now, Richard, what about you? You are in the office, you're at catching group meetings and you're out and about.

**Richard Kyte:** I think the work in the community, you really don't know what's gonna pop up. And, I think that's what makes it a really enjoyable role. I think one part of my role that I enjoy and, you'd be quite surprised, like the number of organizations now that actually they're really wanting to engage with catchment groups. There's a lot of interest [00:10:00] now in the work, even nationally, being done, by catchment groups because it's about applying the science around solutions to challenges. I think there's a lot that the organizations are learning from catchment groups and the way they approach their challenges.

So my role is I say, looking at funding, but also, going and catching up with organizations who want to engage with groups. And again, it's ground up and they look at me sideways when I first say, well, actually, we'll have to go and ask the catchment group if they're interested in what you're doing. So it is great to be helping that, flow between the science organizations and the stakeholders, and the groups themselves.

**Sarah Thorne:** I think you touched on it before, but we are now five years old and we've covered a huge amount of ground. I think we're up to 882 events, over 12,000 attendees and more than 150 projects. But there have been challenges on the way, and I think it's important to talk about that too. [00:11:00] Would either of you feel comfortable sharing some of your challenges?

**Richard Kyte:** Yeah. I think one of the key challenges we have as you know, is community. We've all got different views and different ideas and so, I think, the ability to actually pull a whole group of people together, uh, sit down, allow everybody to be heard, and watch people start working together, you know that that's a challenging space, and you throw in some science and it becomes more challenging, and then, you throw in the day to day stuff. You know, we've just seen that in Southland with, the massive wind events and, challenging springs. And, yet in amongst all that we still see the catchment groups achieving great things with their projects and the work they're doing. So yeah, the challenges

around community, and people's time and agreement. That's a big space and yet out of that, we get results, which is, I shouldn't say surprising, but it's [00:12:00] actually really pleasing to see. You know, it's having trust in your community. I think that's a key takeaway for me from all the projects we've done because they're all a bit like that.

**Tessa Miller:** To add to what Richard has said, we are so , lucky within Thriving Southland around how our funding is set up and how quickly we actually are able to get funding out the door. But with catchment groups, you are working with community and you are working to deadlines and trying to get them all to come to a decision in a timely fashion is, you know, it's a bit of fun.

One of the groups that really showcase that with me was the Edendale Aquifer Group. Essentially they came up with a huge project very quickly that was around how do they understand nitrogen moving through their catchment. They were meeting almost weekly to try and pull together all the different threads of this huge project. The way that they managed it was actually to say, Hey [00:13:00] look, we can gather as much science as we can, but we actually don't know what that result is going to be until we see the science for ourselves, as farmers in the catchment. And so they put together what was called a stop go into their funding plan. They have only recently reached that stop go point, and they've got a whole bunch of information that now means that they understand their catchment and now they can take those learnings to what does that actually mean for us? How do we wanna share this information wider? Can we put in some capital work? Can we put in wetlands along the terrace? Whatever that might look like for them. But it's been really interesting to watch how they formed from such a big challenge and so many views in the groups to being quite cohesive around what they're trying to achieve.

**Sarah Thorne:** Oh, they have a fabulous group Tessa, they've done so much so quickly.

Now I [00:14:00] know this is putting you guys on the spot a wee bit, but do you have a favourite project or event?

**Tessa Miller:** I think that is a tough one, Sarah, because all the catchment groups are different and they all focus on their own, you know, unique ideas.

When I think about the event that I had the greatest feeling walking away from, that's probably the easiest way to answer the question. The Waikawa catchment group, they had this idea around needing to understand their landscape. They were having a lot of issues with flooding in the Waikawa River and the flooding

taking out fences and going over productive paddocks and wiping out bridges and culverts and all these kinds of things. And so their project they wanted to develop was, how do we slow the flow of the Waikawa River? They are such a fantastic community and they all have huge trust in each other, and they [00:15:00] chose to come together. It was the first beautiful day after the horrible wet spring that we had had, and everyone should have been in the tractor, but instead about 20 of the farmers chose to come to the Hall and they sat there for I would say almost four hours. Each of them who came had come with their own project that was on their own farm, and they had put in the work to say just what the description of the project actually was, how it was going to reduce how much water was coming down, what other benefits it might have, what have they already done on their farm that worked or didn't work, and it was the most incredible feeling to sit there and watch all of these farmers put these projects up onto the big screen and they just, they literally mapped the catchment of projects that they wanted to do that was gonna make a difference. And then I had to take all that home and work out who on earth was [00:16:00] gonna go forward for the funding and what on earth we were gonna do. But now we've got this incredible database of farmers who are actively trying to improve their local environments. For me that was just the most special event.

**Sarah Thorne:** That's so beautiful. Tessa. Richard, that's gonna be a tough one to top. Do you think you can?

**Richard Kyte:** Oh, yeah while Tessa was talking, I was actually thinking as well that we must mention all the support from consultants that actually come in and get alongside these projects. So it's not just Thriving. We are not the scientists, we're not the specialists, but we are about coordinating. For me, I really enjoy the amount of people that actually get engaged with our groups and help to drive what we're doing.

But, I just thought I didn't want to pick one project because, I think they're all different, and it sounds like, a get outta jail free, but they're all different and they all bring different ways of working, which we all learn from as well. And we, we spread that amongst the groups.

But I suppose if you're thinking about one project that I really did [00:17:00] enjoy, which is Agritech and that came from the Gore Catchment group. And then the coordinator said, actually, , I've had conversations with farmers about tech as well. Then that grew and, Tania, one of our coordinators, she got the bit between the teeth and then we basically rang all the lead people in the agritech and the technology space and they all turned up. We've run it two years now and the weather freezing cold and I remember sitting there but actually what amazed

me was at the end of the day, the farmers were still there, even though it was cold. That was delivering, that was listening to farmers around they want technology that they can actually use. They want to hear farmers talking about technology that they're using, and then watching the technology businesses get on board and support it. It was a really big event for a really small team, and I was just blown away by what the team delivered. That for me was a fun event. But it [00:18:00] also was a positive event. And I think that's the key to catchment groups. They're about a positive way forward and positive ways of finding solutions for challenges.

**Sarah Thorne:** I think you did very well, Richard.

Okay, so looking to the future, is there anything in the pipeline that you're super excited about that you'd like to share with us today?

**Richard Kyte:** I suppose what I'm excited about, our core funding has been for science and extension and, when we first started I thought that's a real challenge 'cause it wasn't about being able to plant or use that funding to put money on the ground. But actually I think it was the best thing that ever happened because we can now see communities with plenty of science, plenty of understanding about the challenges, and I'm really excited about what they're starting to do with that science and it's a long-term project. It's a marathon, it's not a sprint. But watching the change once the information's there that's what's exciting me about the future. And I think the fact that we've [00:19:00] got groups across Southland, you know, basically the region of Southland has got positive work.

**Sarah Thorne:** Tessa, do you have anything to add?

**Tessa Miller:** I think what I'm excited about is how catchment groups will continue to develop and grow. Within Thriving Southland we often talk about how we've got the ebbs and flows of catchment groups. Some groups are working hard and have big projects, they need to have a bit of a lull phase, relax a little bit and, you know, gather their strength again. And it gives space for another group to open up. I just can't wait to see what projects they start to pull out, and learning from other groups, both in Southland but, nationally as well and even internationally. And then trying to link that with what's actually happening on farm. And so I think that catchment groups are just such a incredible way, of sharing information, trialing new things. It doesn't really matter what it is, but how do we support you to have a better farming [00:20:00] business? And like Richard said, it's a really positive way forward around finding solutions for a challenge.

**Sarah Thorne:** I do too, Tessa. And that's a really beautiful ending to our podcast today. So thank you so much Tessa and Richard for joining me today . I think our local catching groups have a very long and healthy future head with people like you supporting them.

And a massive thanks to all the stakeholders, scientists, and consultants that also stretch around and support the Southland Catchment Groups. And I think our final thanks should be to the amazing people that turn up to the events and the catchment groups and the meetings because you make it so worthwhile and they're doing fantastic change across Southland.

**Rachael 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 [00:21:00] 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 Southland.