

UPPER APARIMA CATCHMENT GROUP

# PEST ANIMAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Community Report 2026

THRIVING SOUTHLAND

# Acknowledgements

The Upper Aparima Catchment Group would like to thank everyone who contributed their time, knowledge and support to this project.

This report has been built on the observations and experience shared by Upper Aparima landholders through the community survey. We are especially grateful to the three landholders who gave extra time for follow-up interviews. Their detail and honesty helped turn survey numbers into a clearer picture of what pest impacts look like on the ground.

The project subcommittee (Paul Turner, Mike Ryan, Mike Beattie and Callum Kyle) provided support, guidance and local insight throughout the project.

Stacey Stuart and the team at Thriving Southland coordinated and supported the work.

Environment Southland provided funding support for the associated possum control programme, as well as significant in-kind support for this assessment, including input into the survey and Residual Trap Catch (RTC) monitoring design.

We thank Andy Kinley of K Traps Ltd for completing the RTC monitoring across the catchment and for providing the photographs used throughout this report.

We also acknowledge Kaitlin Dickson and Dave Burgess at Environment Southland, James Horton at OSPRI, Jesse Bythell at QEII National Trust, and Sean Jacques at the Department of Conservation for their time, advice and information.

This report has been prepared to support shared understanding, local discussion and future planning for pest animal management in the Upper Aparima catchment.

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**Read the full report online**
www.thrivingsouthland.co.nz/upper-aparima

# Introduction and Catchment Context

## WHY DO WE CARE?

Pest animals are a problem in our catchment. They eat our crops and pasture, damage our fences and set back our regrassing. They carry disease, including bovine tuberculosis (TB), that puts our herds and our markets at risk. They damage our native bush, waterways and the plantings we have worked hard to establish. Managing pest animals individually, property by property, is not having the required impact on pest numbers.

The Upper Aparima catchment is a large, working catchment in Western Southland, which includes around 80,000 hectares of farmland, forestry, native bush and conservation land. It runs from high country near the Takitimu Conservation Area down through farmland around Wreys Bush, the Mossburn Road corridor and Jacobs Bridge.

Dairy, sheep, beef and forestry sit alongside river margins, wetlands and pockets of native bush that link up with the Takitimu Conservation Area. Pest animals move freely across all these land types, which means control in one place can be quickly undone if neighbouring areas are not managed at the same time.

## ABOUT THE CATCHMENT GROUP

The Upper Aparima Catchment Group formed in 2016, when local farmers came together during the submission period for the Southland Water and Land Plan. This helped establish ongoing collaboration across the catchment. Through the Aparima Community Environment (ACE) initiative, farmers and community members have worked on sediment trap systems, farm planning and water quality improvement.

## WHY THIS REPORT WAS PREPARED

The case for collective action needed to be built on evidence. From November 2025 to April 2026, the Catchment Group ran a community pest animal survey. This report brings that together with follow-up interviews, advice from the Department of Conservation (DOC), Environment Southland, OSPRI and QEII National Trust, as well as Residual Trap Catch (RTC) possum monitoring by K Traps Ltd, to give our community a shared picture of pest impacts, and a foundation for the possum control programme NZ Conservation Services is delivering.

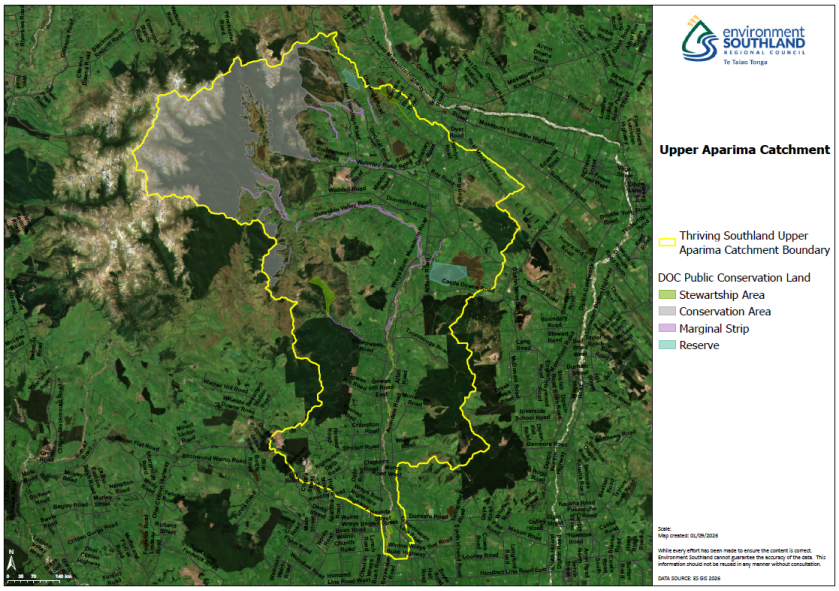



*Figure 1. Upper Aparima catchment: the catchment boundary and DOC-managed land.*


Upper Aparima Catchment Boundary
N
Printed: 15/09/2023
0
1.75
3.5
7 Kilometers

# How We Built the Picture

This report draws on five main sources:




These five sources complement each other. The survey and interviews give us direct landholder experience: what people are seeing, what it's costing them, and what they think should happen. Advice from DOC, Environment Southland and OSPRI adds technical, regulatory and conservation-land context, particularly around TB risk and possum management standards. The literature review grounds local findings in what is known more broadly across New Zealand. RTC monitoring, a standard field method for indexing possum abundance, provides a field-based snapshot of possum activity across the monitored blocks. It does not count every possum, but it gives a comparable measure of possum pressure and helps show where control effort may need to focus.

## WHO RESPONDED

Twenty-two landholders completed the community pest animal survey. Together they manage an estimated 14,600 hectares, around 18% of the total 80,000-hectare catchment, or roughly 23% of the estimated non-DOC land area.

This is not a full census of every landholder in the catchment, but it is a substantial and practical working sample of the people making day-to-day land management decisions here. It gives the report a credible basis for understanding the main pest concerns, impacts and control challenges being experienced on the ground.

## HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

The findings in this report reflect what participating landholders told us: their observations, experiences and priorities. This is practical, on-the-ground evidence, not a statistical measure across every property in the catchment.

Where numbers are given, they refer to survey respondents unless stated otherwise. Quotes come from survey responses or follow-up interviews and should be read as individual examples, not as views shared by every landholder.



# Key Findings at a Glance

From November 2025 to April 2026, our community pest animal survey asked landholders what pests they are seeing, what the impact of those pests is costing them, and whether they would support a coordinated catchment response.
Here's what stood out.

**18 of 22**
respondents concerned about TB spreading from possums to livestock. Not one was unconcerned.

**21 of 22**
carried out pest control in the past year. The effort is there; it just needs coordinating.

**Possums**
most commonly ranked top pest concern: 19 of 22 placed them in their top three.

**17 of 22**
support a coordinated, catchment-wide possum control programme.

**Deer & Pigs**
are the main drivers of visible, day-to-day farm damage: pasture losses, crop damage, regrassing costs and fence repairs.

**12 of 22**
ranked damage to native bush and vegetation in their top three impact concerns



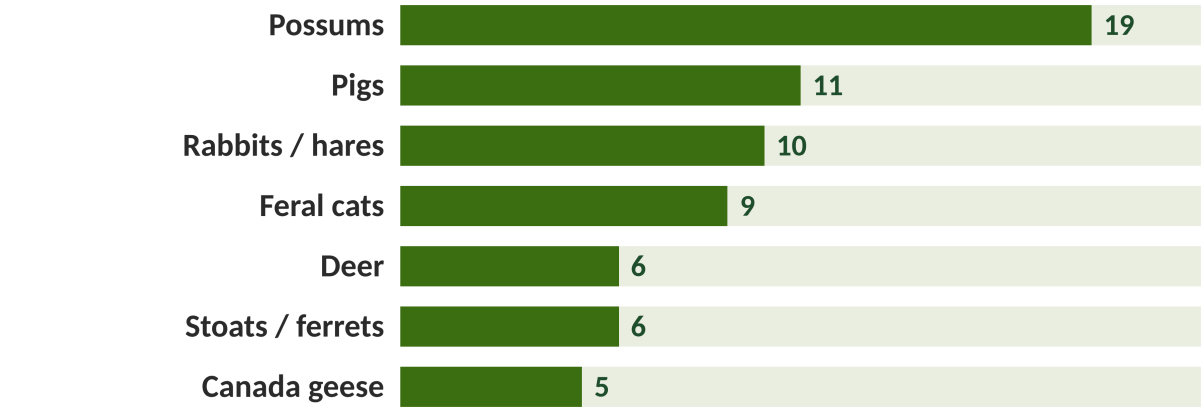
*Dawn over the Upper Aparima catchment: farmland, forestry and hill country across the valley.*

# Main Pest Concerns

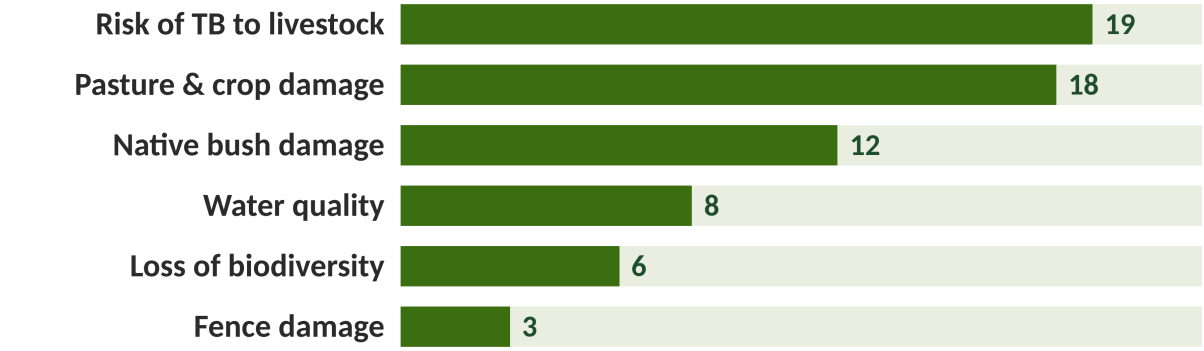
We asked all 22 respondents to rank the pest animals and impact types that worry us most. Two things stand out clearly: possums and TB risk, and the visible day-to-day damage that deer and pigs are doing to our farms.

Deer ranked lower as a top pest concern, though they remain a significant cause of pasture and crop damage on many farms. Their specific impacts are covered in the farming impacts section.

### Chart 1: How we ranked our pest concerns




### Chart 2: What we are most worried about




In both charts, respondents were asked to rank all options in order. The figures show how many of the 22 respondents placed each item in their top three.

| Tier 1: Possums & TB | Tier 2: Deer & Pigs | Tier 3: Other species |
|---|---|---|
| Most commonly ranked top concern. A coordinated possum control programme is now underway with NZ Conservation Services. | Real farm damage across the catchment: pasture, crops, fencing and native vegetation. | Feral cats, stoats, rabbits, geese. They are a real issue, but a lower priority for coordinated control. |

# Possums and TB: The Risk We Can't Afford to Ignore

Possums are the top pest concern in our catchment. They damage stored feed, plantings, riparian margins and biodiversity values, but for many landholders the greatest concern is bovine tuberculosis (TB), a disease that can infect cattle, deer and other mammals and create major financial risk.

Possums are the main wildlife carrier of TB in New Zealand because they can keep the disease circulating in wildlife populations and pass it on to livestock. Wild pigs, deer and ferrets can also become infected and can be useful for TB surveillance, but they do not normally maintain the TB cycle. This is why sustained possum control remains central to reducing TB risk.



**18 of 22**
respondents are concerned about TB spreading from possums to livestock.

**20 of 22**
see possums or notice signs of their presence at least seasonally.

**SOUTHLAND'S TB STORY IS LOCAL TO UPPER APARIMA**

In 1995, Southland had 56 TB-infected cattle and deer herds. Sustained possum control, livestock testing, movement restrictions and wildlife monitoring brought that number down, with Southland reaching zero infected herds in 2009.

In 2011, a dairy herd at the southern end of the Takitimu Mountains was infected due to wildlife TB infection. A later dairy herd just south of Nightcaps broke down with TB in July 2013 and cleared in January 2015. OSPRI confirmed that Southland had no herds classified as infected as at 30 June 2026. That is good news for the region but keeping it that way depends on keeping possum numbers low. DOC confirmed that the most recent aerial 1080 possum control operation in the Takitimu Conservation Area was in 2021.

*"The possum is the one that probably doesn't directly affect us on a day-to-day basis, but it will be the one that will be the most financially damaging if the worst case happens."*

**5% RTC Target**
The coordinated possum control programme is working back towards this benchmark for low possum activity.

**TB-FREE STATUS IS NOT THE SAME AS ZERO FUTURE RISK**

Under OSPRI's Proof of Freedom process, modelling is used to estimate confidence that TB is absent from possum populations. Once the model indicates at least 95% confidence that TB is absent, experts can consider declaring an area TB-free.

This does not mean there is no future risk. TB risk can return if infected livestock are moved into or through the area, if infection persists in or re-enters the local wildlife population, or if possum numbers recover to levels that allow TB to circulate again.

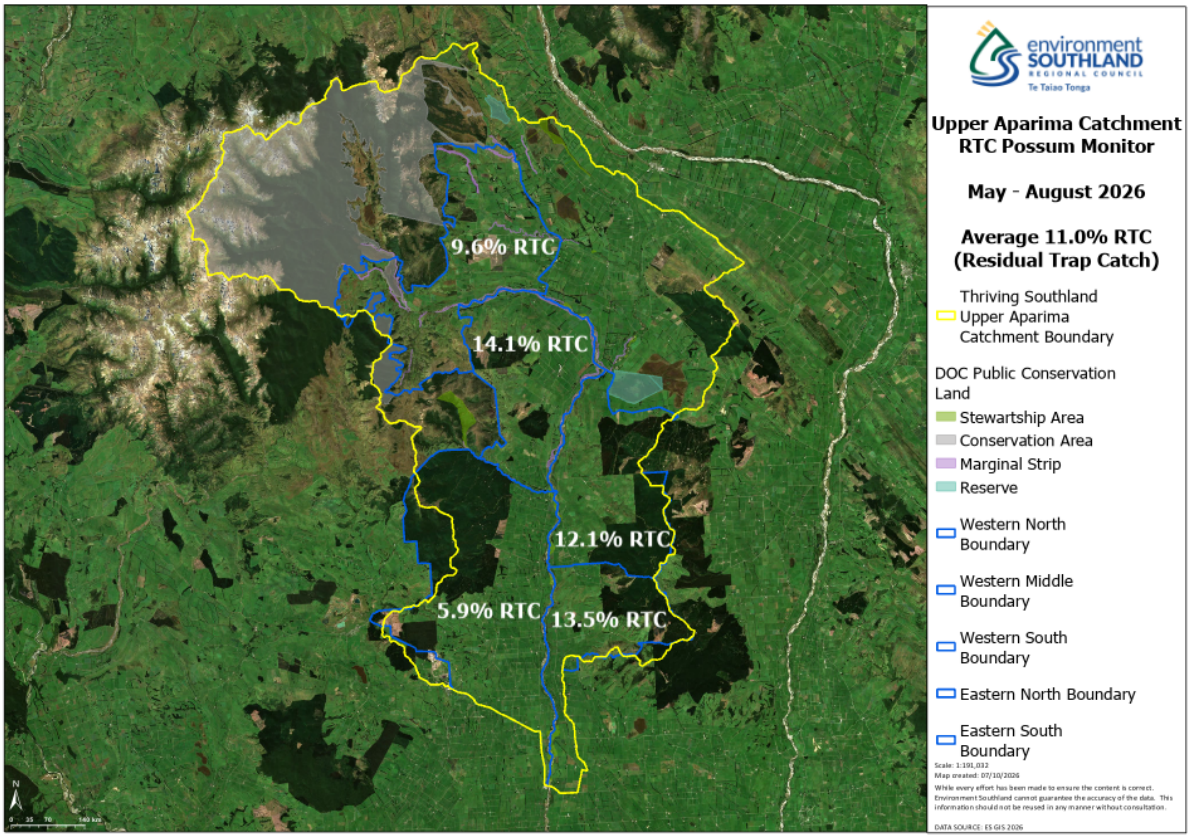
# What the Monitoring is Telling Us

Residual Trap Catch (RTC) monitoring gives the Catchment Group a field-based baseline for possum activity across the monitored blocks. RTC does not count every possum, but it provides a standard, comparable measure that helps show where possum pressure is higher or lower and where control effort may need to focus.

K Traps Ltd completed pre-control RTC monitoring across five blocks of bush and farmland between late May and mid-August 2026, covering approximately 46,100 hectares. The coordinated possum control programme is working towards a 5% RTC target. All five monitored blocks were above that target, with three blocks above 10% RTC.

**RTC Results**

| Block | Area monitored | RTC result |
|---|---|---|
| **Western Middle** | 7,588 ha | 14.1% |
| **Eastern South** | 5,960 ha | 13.5% |
| **Eastern North** | 7,983 ha | 12.1% |
| **Western North** | 10,280 ha | 9.6% |
| **Western South** | 14,327 ha | 5.9% |




The monitoring confirms that possum activity is above target across all five blocks. Western Middle, Eastern South and Eastern North monitoring blocks recorded the highest RTC results, while the Western South block was closest to target. These results provide a clear starting point for coordinated control and a baseline for measuring progress over time.

**5 of 5**
blocks were above the target of 5% RTC.

**3 of 5**
monitoring blocks were above 10% RTC.

# Farming Impacts: Deer and Pigs

From a day-to-day farming perspective, the economic and practical damage – in feed budgets, regrassing costs, fence repairs and lambing outcomes – comes most visibly from deer and pigs.

## Deer

Deer were seen or noticed at least seasonally by 16 of our 22 respondents. The practical impact shows up most clearly in winter feed crops. One respondent described deer halving the yield on a crop paddock, while 15 ha of young grass was kept grazed down through spring – a direct feed budget hit during one of the most critical periods in a dairy system. For some operations the response has become structural: building extra crop area into the feed budget specifically to allow for what deer and pigs will take.

> *"Hard to quantify, but the impact on pasture production has got to be large. We have culled and recovered close to 100 deer this year via ground hunting and helicopter."*

For forestry operations, deer cause additional losses through browsing of young planted trees and antler thrashing, estimated at $5,000–$10,000 in a single year by one respondent.

**10 of 22**
reported crop losses from deer in the past year.

**9 of 22**
estimated the annual cost to their farming operation due to deer at $1,000 or more.

## Pigs

Pig distribution is less uniform, but where pigs are present, the damage is often more severe and harder to recover from than deer. Rooting, regrassing costs and lambing impacts are the recurring themes. Individual pasture damage reports ranged from 2 ha to 20 ha in a single year, with recovery times of 6 months to a year.

> *"They (pigs) are worse than deer, they are a real pest. I'd have deer any day of the week."*

Pigs can predate on newborn lambs, a real risk during an already pressured lambing period. Pig populations can double within a year under good conditions (Parkes, Northland environmental and economic risks report), so control has to be intensive just to hold numbers steady.

**13 of 22**
reported pasture damage from pigs in the past year.

**3 of 22**
reported livestock losses associated with pigs.

**THE REINVASION PROBLEM**

*"We have an endless supply of deer and pigs from the DOC estate that borders our farm."*
DOC estate land, forestry blocks, and neighbouring properties all came up as persistent sources of reinvasion. Control on one farm is quickly undermined if adjacent land is unmanaged.

### Social Impacts

The burden on farm families is significant: hunting, trapping, repairing fences and coordinating hunters all take time. Safety is also a concern, with several respondents raising risks to children and staff as pig numbers increase. TB risk adds a community dimension that extends well beyond the affected property, affecting how neighbours trade stock and trust each other's TB status.

Pest pressure also creates friction across land-use boundaries. Where deer and pig numbers build in areas of cover and spill onto neighbouring properties, frustration follows — and forestry blocks in particular can attract blame. But neighbours are not always aware of what control is already happening next door, and land managers are not always told when damage is occurring. There is willingness on all sides to act; what is often missing is the conversation.

# Environmental and Wider Impacts

The same pests hitting our feed budgets are also damaging our native bush, riparian plantings, wetland margins and waterways. Twelve of 22 respondents ranked bush and native vegetation destruction in their top three impact concerns, and eight ranked water quality degradation. The catchment includes 12 QEII covenants, totalling just under 2,000 hectares. Pest animals are present in all of them, and most are being noticeably affected.

## Native Bush, Biodiversity and Plantings

Possums, deer and pigs all put pressure on native bush, wetland margins and plantings, but in different ways. Deer browsing and antler rub can suppress forest regeneration, while pig rooting disturbs soils and seedling establishment. The catchment also contains threatened plant populations, including some of national significance. Pest pressure can undermine restoration work that has already been funded, planted and protected.

> *"There's not a lot of native bush in the Upper Aparima catchment. We need to protect what's there."*

## Waterways

Water quality degradation was ranked in the top three by 8 of 22 respondents. Pig rooting and deer pugging can destabilise soils on slopes and near riparian margins, contributing sediment runoff and undermining landholders' existing sediment management work.

## Other Species at a Glance

**Feral cats**

Seen by 17 of 22 respondents at least seasonally. For sheep farmers, the main concern is toxoplasmosis, causing abortion, foetal death and reduced scanning percentages in ewes, often without prior warning. Feral cats also predate on native birds and lizards.

**Stoats and ferrets**

Seen seasonally or rarely by most respondents. They predate on native birds, eggs, chicks and lizards near bush and riparian areas. Ferrets matter for TB surveillance: they can become infected by scavenging infected carcasses and can indicate whether TB is present in possums.

**Rabbits and hares**

All 22 respondents encounter them: 13 daily, 9 weekly. High rabbit numbers can support ferret populations. Pasture and young tree damage near active planting is also worth monitoring as restoration work expands.

**Canada geese**

Fifteen of 22 reported seeing Canada geese at least seasonally. One respondent culled 100 geese in a year and described it as barely denting numbers. Canada geese can foul pasture, waterways and low-nutrient wetland systems. A governance gap exists nationally: no agency is formally responsible for monitoring Canada goose numbers, and recreational hunting alone is generally insufficient to reduce large, mobile flocks.

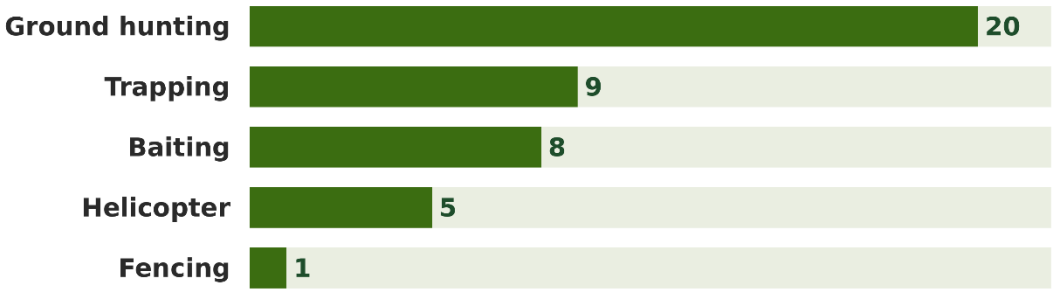
# Existing Effort, Barriers and Coordination

The effort is already there. Landholders in the catchment are not waiting to be told that pests are a problem. They are already spending time and money on it. The challenge is not motivation. It is whether individual effort, spread across a large catchment with uneven pest pressure and no shared programme, is enough to make a lasting difference.

**21 of 22**
carried out pest control on their property in the past 12 months.

**17 of 22**
support coordinated, catchment-wide possum control. None opposed; five were unsure or wanted more information.

### Chart 3: Control methods used




In this chart, respondents were asked to select all control methods they use. The figures show how many of the 22 respondents selected each method.

**WHAT'S GETTING IN THE WAY: FIVE BARRIERS**

1. **Time**: pest control is the first task that is dropped during calving and lambing; pest populations recover quickly in the gaps.
2. **Continuity**: recreational hunting can reduce numbers, but often drops off when pest numbers fall, just when sustained pressure matters most.
3. **Cost**: transition from TBfree left our catchment without the funded professional control that had kept possum numbers low.
4. **Reinvasion**: individual property control is undermined by persistent reinvasion from uncontrolled land.
5. **Health & Safety compliance**: requirements for possum trappers to meet forestry contractor standards have made it harder and more costly to engage professional contractors.

### The Case for Coordination

The Catchment Group has already acted on that mandate. A coordinated possum control programme, delivered by NZ Conservation Services, is now underway across participating properties. The programme builds on K Traps Ltd RTC monitoring conducted across five blocks covering approximately 46,100 hectares.

> *"They are professionals. We are farmers; we are not pest control contractors."*

**21 of 22**
are willing or open to using TrapNZ or similar tools to share pest sightings and control data across the catchment.

# Key Insights and Conclusion

### Individual effort is not enough on its own

Landholders are already acting, but property-by-property control cannot match a cross-boundary pest problem. Pest animals do not respect farm boundaries, and control on one property is quickly undermined when neighbouring areas remain unmanaged.

### TB risk is real, local and preventable

Southland's TB-free status was built on sustained possum control, livestock testing, movement controls and wildlife monitoring. RTC results show possum activity is above target across all blocks. Keeping risk low means bringing possum activity down and keeping it low.

### Deer and pigs are a recurring cost

Feed losses, regrassing, fence repairs, crop damage and lambing impacts are not one-off events. They happen season after season. Consistent, coordinated management is more effective than repeated cycles of individual effort and reinvasion.

### Environmental and farm outcomes go hand in hand

Reducing pest pressure protects native bush, riparian plantings, wetlands and waterways, while also protecting pasture, crops and livestock. Coordinated pest control can support multiple returns.

### Conclusion

This report is built on what Upper Aparima landholders told us through the survey, interviews and practical examples of pest impacts. The picture is consistent: the problem is real, the community understands it, and the conditions for collective action are in place. The coordinated possum control programme now being delivered by NZ Conservation Services builds on this foundation by turning shared evidence and community support into action.



## What Happens Next

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | **RTC results guide control effort:** Monitoring provides the baseline for targeting possum control across the monitoring blocks. |
| 2 | **Coordinated possum control is underway:** NZ Conservation Services is delivering professional control on participating properties, with the goal of moving results back towards the 5% RTC target over time. |
| 3 | **The shared data picture is growing:** Landholders can record pest sightings and control work through TrapNZ or similar tools, building a shared catchment data picture and helping link control effort to changes seen on the ground. |
| 4 | **Coordinated deer and pig control is worth exploring:** Cross-boundary approaches may be particularly useful near forestry and DOC-managed land. Starting conversations between land managers and relevant agencies is an important first step. |
| 5 | **Communication continues:** The Catchment Group will continue to share updates, results and next steps with members. |



*“We can’t sit there on our farms with our hands out waiting for someone to sort this out for us. It’s our land. It’s our livelihood. We’ve got to be masters of our own destiny.”*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