



Diverse Experiences of Farming

Building a Place-Based License to Operate

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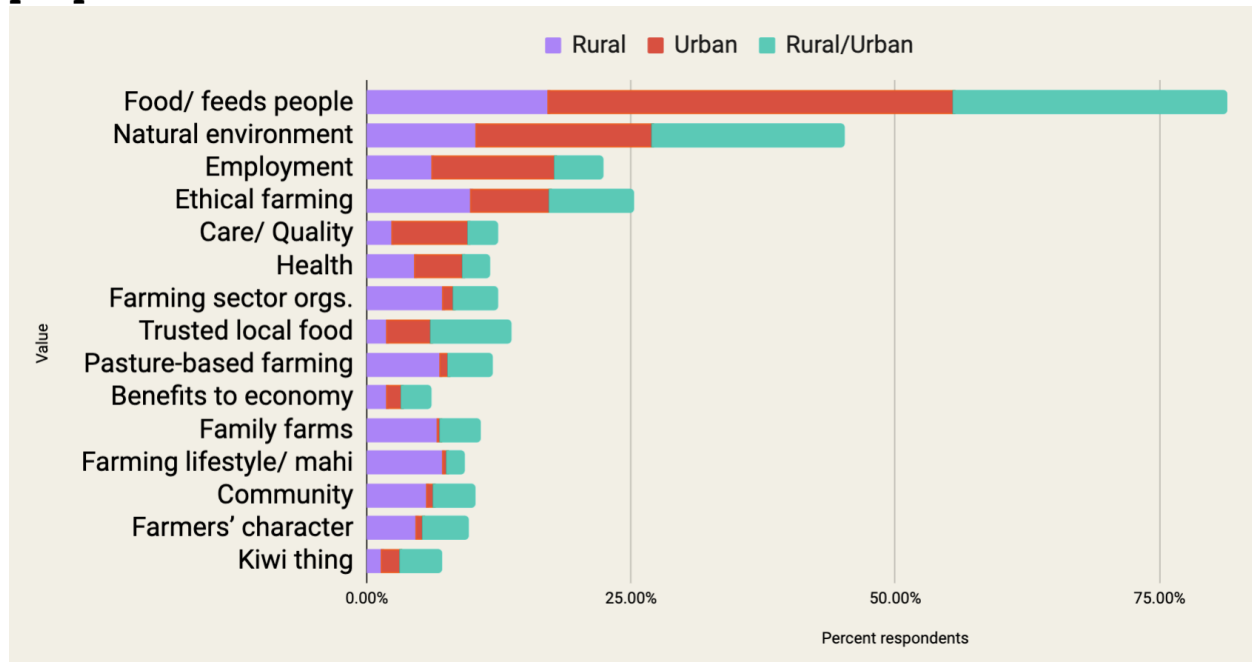
NZ farmers and rural industry leaders recognise that public preferences and perceptions of farming will be a key driver of change in the future. Building and maintaining Social License to Operate (SLO)—the ongoing acceptance of the industry's practices—cannot just be about the industry 'telling their story'; SLO must be place-based, rooted in trust, and built on genuine dialogue with empowered communities.

Our research, undertaken in 2022–2023, sought to understand what shapes New Zealanders' perceptions of farming, and what are the points of divergence and connection that can offer new ideas for connecting farmers and diverse publics to strengthen social licence. By better understanding the underlying worldviews that shape perceptions of farming and the agri-food industry, this project aims to support empathetic connections between producers and consumers.

What we did

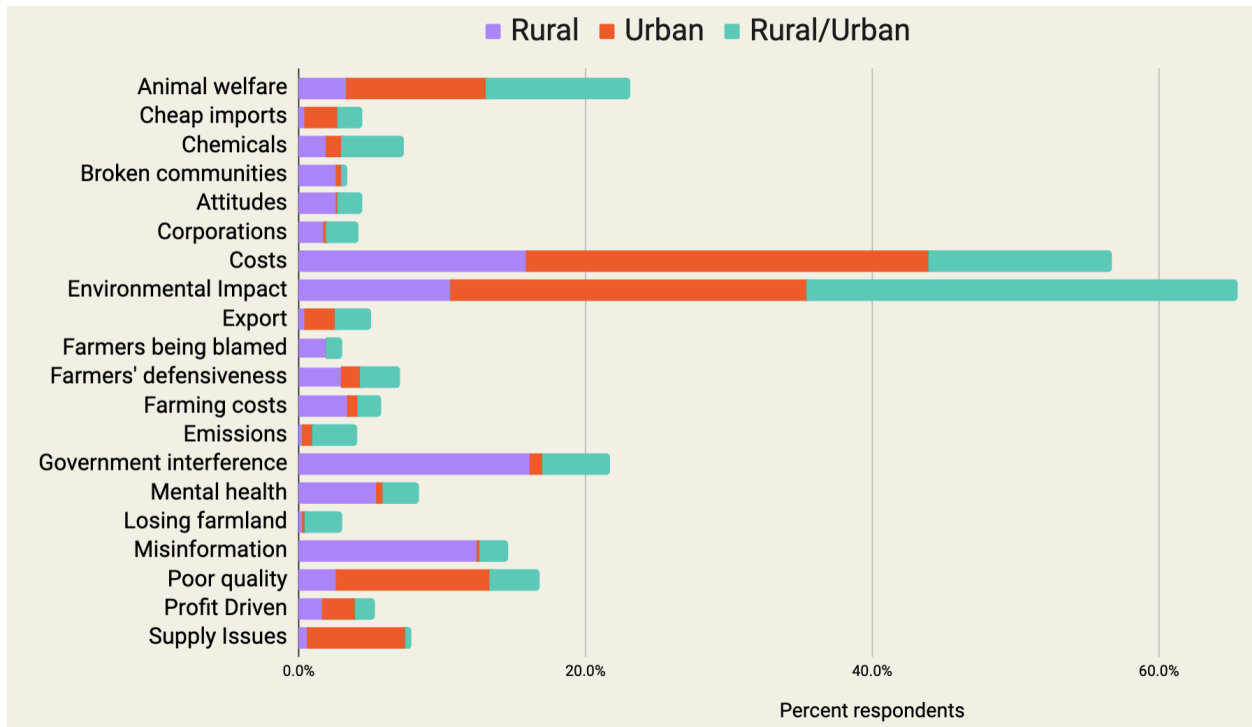
We conducted a survey with a sample of 1,384 individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand, ensuring representation across genders, ages, and ethnicities throughout the country. To gain further insights, we also conducted follow-up interviews with survey participants who expressed interest, and key stakeholders from various sectors including farming, environmental groups, Iwi, government, and food supply chains.

2. People from diverse backgrounds value farming's role in feeding people



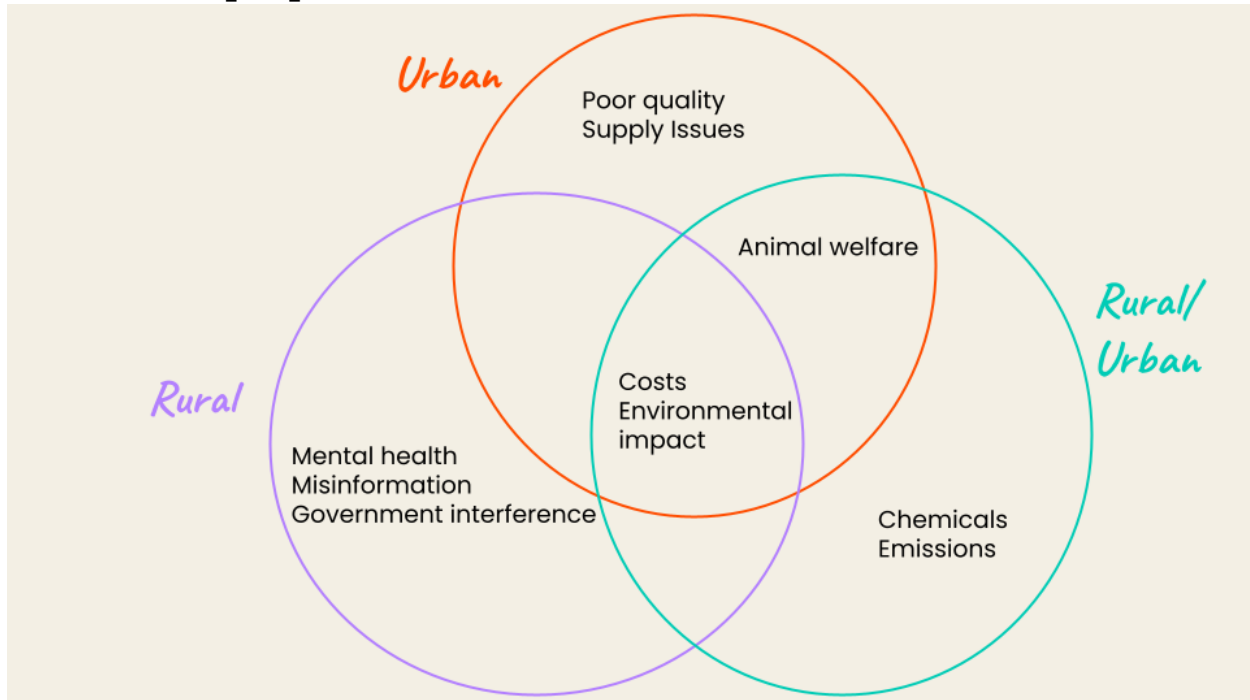
People from across ages, ethnicities, genders, occupations and rural-urban identities value the farming sector's role in feeding people. The natural environment, employment, and ethical farming of animals are also valued across different groups. Farmers were more likely to talk about the value of people and rural communities alongside pasture-based production and sector support. Urban respondents also valued the jobs the farming sector brings, and the care farmers show for the land.

3. Common Concerns include Environmental Impact and Costs



All identity groups focused on two key concerns: **environmental impact** and **costs**. Rural/urban respondents were particularly concerned with environmental impact, noting the ‘environmental harms’, ‘degradation’, ‘and footprint’ of farming. Cost was the most common concern amongst both rural and urban respondents, who pointed to rising food costs and rising costs of farming inputs.

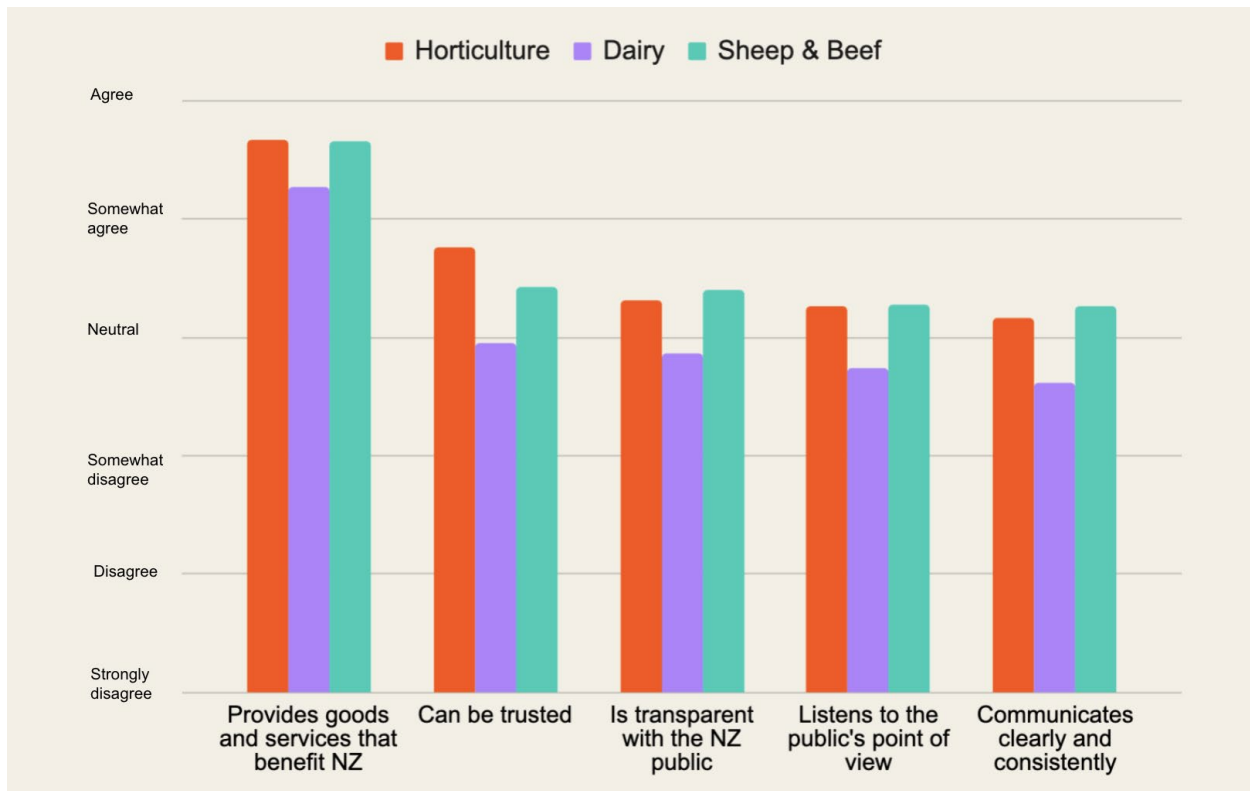
4. There are also different concerns held by rural, urban, and rural/urban people



Rural/urban respondents identified a concern with chemicals, likely related to the use of on-farm pesticides and herbicides. Urban people noted a concern with poor quality and supply issues. Rural respondents are particularly concerned with government interference in the farming sector, misinformation and mental health.

Rather than a strong urban-rural divide marked by antagonism between rural and urban respondents, criticisms from urban respondents were oriented more towards institutions and specific industries, and toward farming practices, rather than toward farmers themselves. Likewise, farmers focused on media and government interference rather than urban populations.

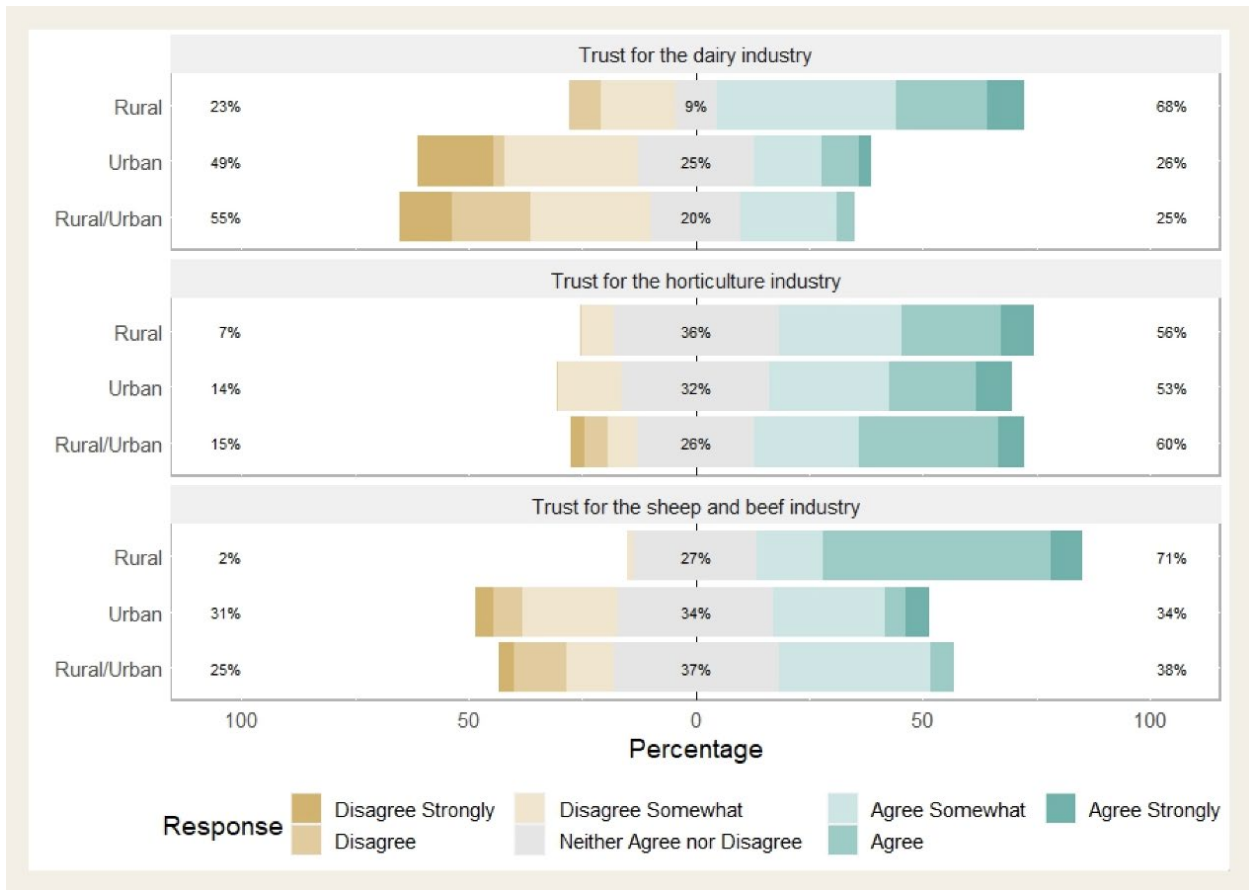
5. Overall public support for the benefits farming brings to the country is high, but trust is lower



The majority of respondents feel that all the main farming sectors provide goods and services that benefit the country. This speaks to an overall public support for these industries.

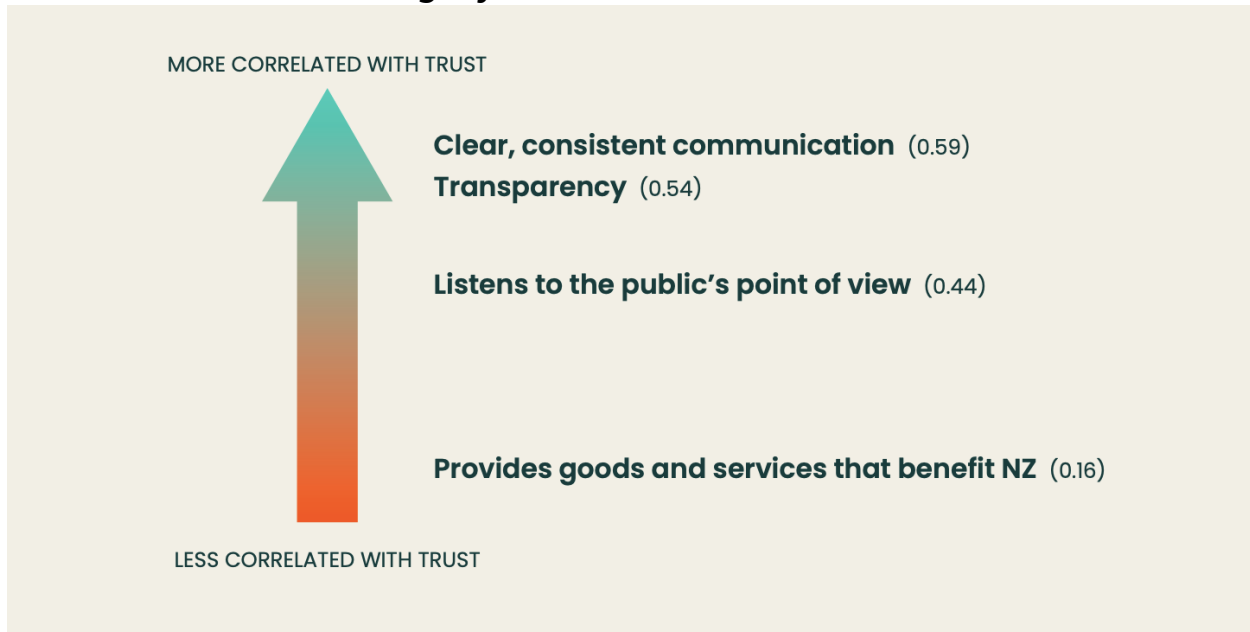
Yet, there are areas for improvement relative to SLO, as seen in the relatively lower scores for trust, transparency, listening to the public and communication.

6. Levels of trust vary amongst different groups of kiwis



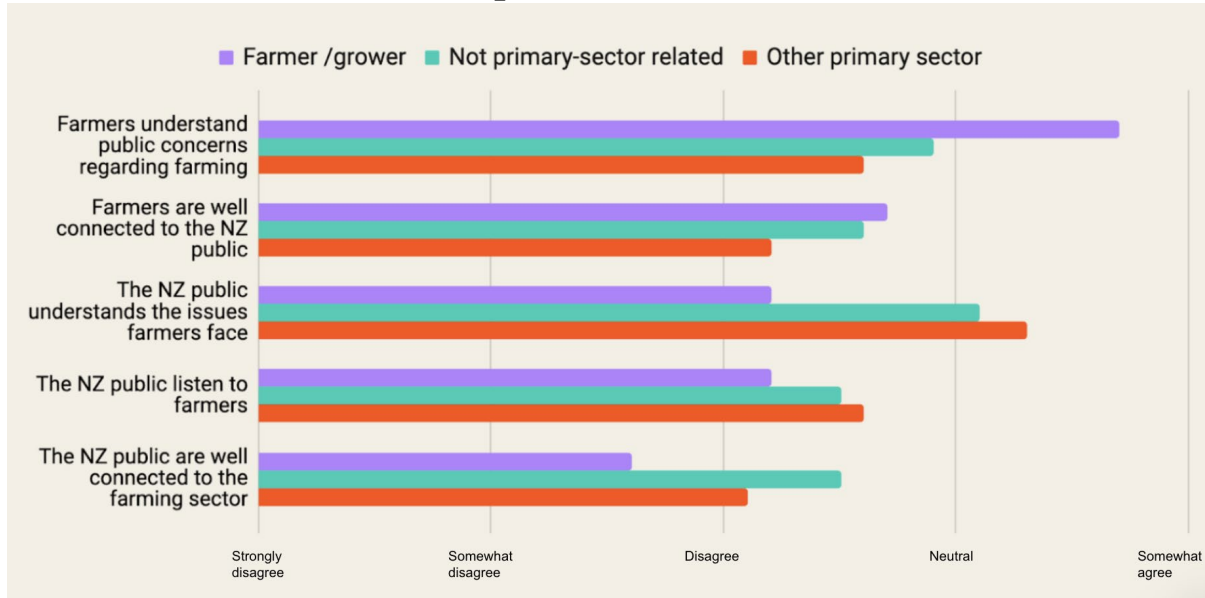
Regression analysis showed that urban respondents were significantly less likely to trust the main farming sectors compared with rural respondents. Respondents who migrated to Aotearoa NZ as adults showed higher trust in all three farming sectors when compared with those who were born in NZ.

7. Communication is highly correlated with trust



Communication is most highly correlated with trust in all three farming sectors amongst a set of questions related to SLO. Honest, clear, consistent communication by a sector, which acknowledges an appreciation of the wider public's point of view, was highlighted as contributing to trust in that sector. Trust in the three farming sectors is not strongly correlated with the perception that the sector provides benefits for the country. This has implications for social licence. It suggests that a perception of broad benefit to the country does not ensure social licence on its own.

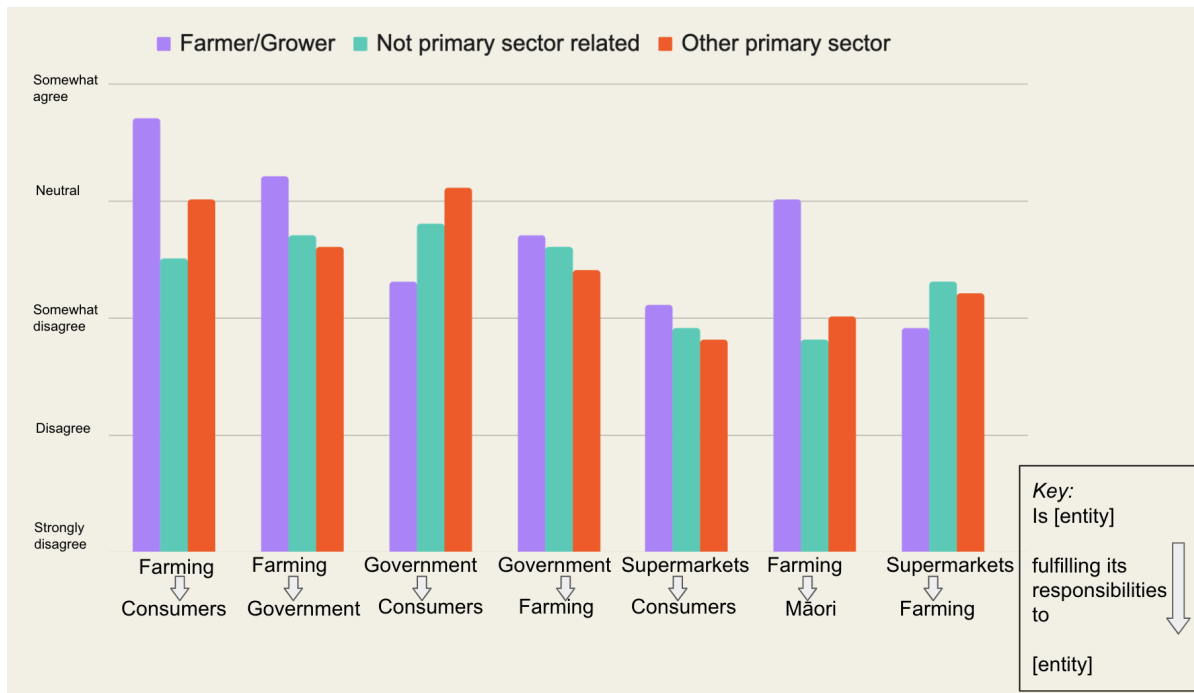
8. Farmers and the broader public feel disconnected from each other



There is a general perception of disconnection between farmers and the public. Farmers felt that they have a reasonable understanding of public concerns but that the public does not fully understand the issues farmers face. Rural people, which may include (but is not limited to) farmers, perceive greater disconnection than urban people, but all identity groups agree there is some lack of understanding, listening and connection.

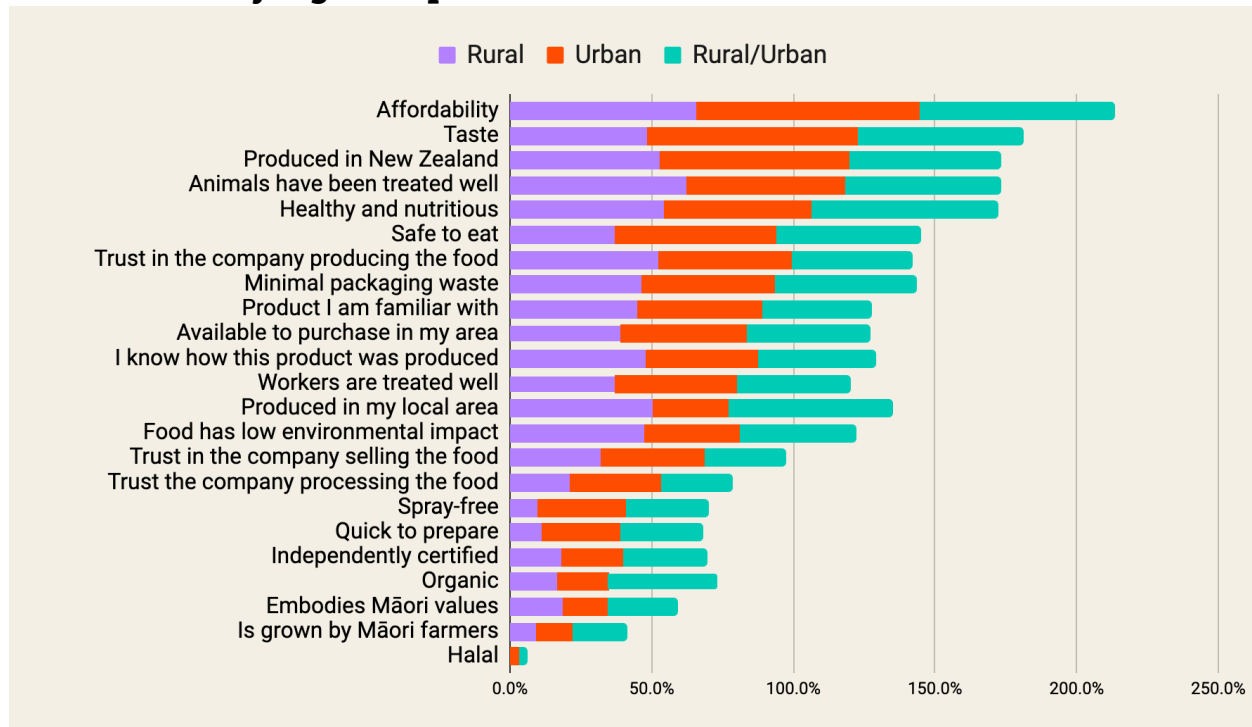
9. There is a perception that some entities are not fulfilling their responsibilities

Social License encompasses a perception of whether or not expectations of responsibilities are being met. We asked survey respondents whether they perceive different institutions and stakeholders to be fulfilling their responsibilities towards the farming sector, consumers and Māori.



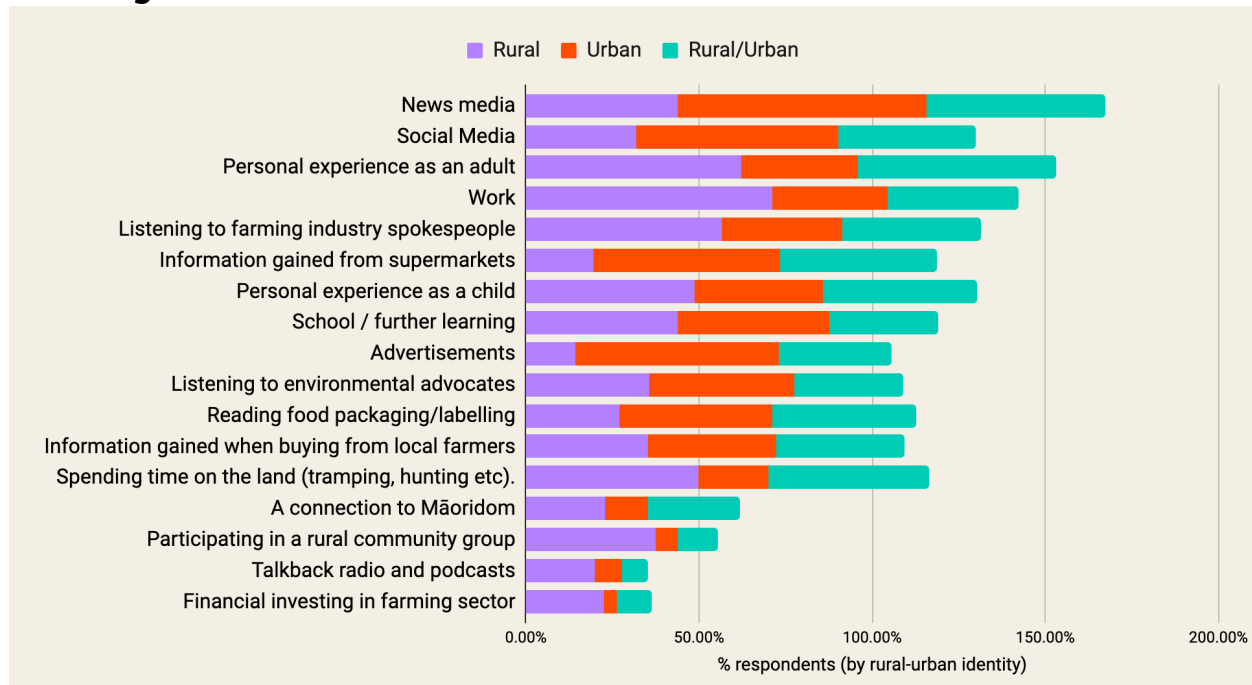
A common perception amongst farmers and non-farmers is that supermarkets are not fulfilling perceived responsibilities to consumers or to farmers. Comments focused on concerns over duopoly control, expensive pricing and quality. Supermarkets could be a valuable site for building SLO through quality communication about the products produced by the farming sector. More than half of urban respondents claimed that information gained while visiting supermarkets shapes their perception of farming. However, the lack of a direct connection between farmers and purchasers makes it difficult for farmers to rely on supermarkets to facilitate these connections. Other common perceptions on responsibilities are that the government is not fulfilling perceived responsibilities to farming (interestingly, non-farmers rated this slightly lower than farmers). Māori respondents, on average, felt strongly that the farming sector is not fulfilling its responsibilities to Māori, while non-farmers also shared these concerns. On the other hand, Māori respondents were slightly more likely to feel that NZ farming is fulfilling its responsibilities to NZ consumers.

10. Affordability matters most when purchasing food, but people also care about buying food produced in New Zealand



Price continues to be the largest consideration for NZ consumers, followed by taste and NZ-produced food. When we asked about their likelihood of purchasing from various company structures of food production, survey respondents were more supportive of NZ family-owned and operated businesses, followed by NZ co-operative owned and Māori owned and operated businesses, and were much less likely to purchase from international corporations. Across age ranges and gender, the results were fairly similar. People do care about the fact that food is NZ produced, even if this often comes after its affordability.

11. News media is the biggest influence on people's perceptions of farming



News media is the primary influence respondents feel shapes their views of farming. Thirteen diverse sources of influence on people's views all reached more than a third of the sample. Beyond this commonality, we find that urban perceptions of farming are more often mediated through different forms of media, rather than first-hand experience. Urban respondents were more likely to say that traditional or social media, advertisements, and supermarket information and food labels shape their views of farming. Rural respondents often cited personal experience and work experience, farming industry spokespeople, and spending time on the land as influencing their views. Rural/Urban people bridge the two main influences, citing both news media and personal experience.

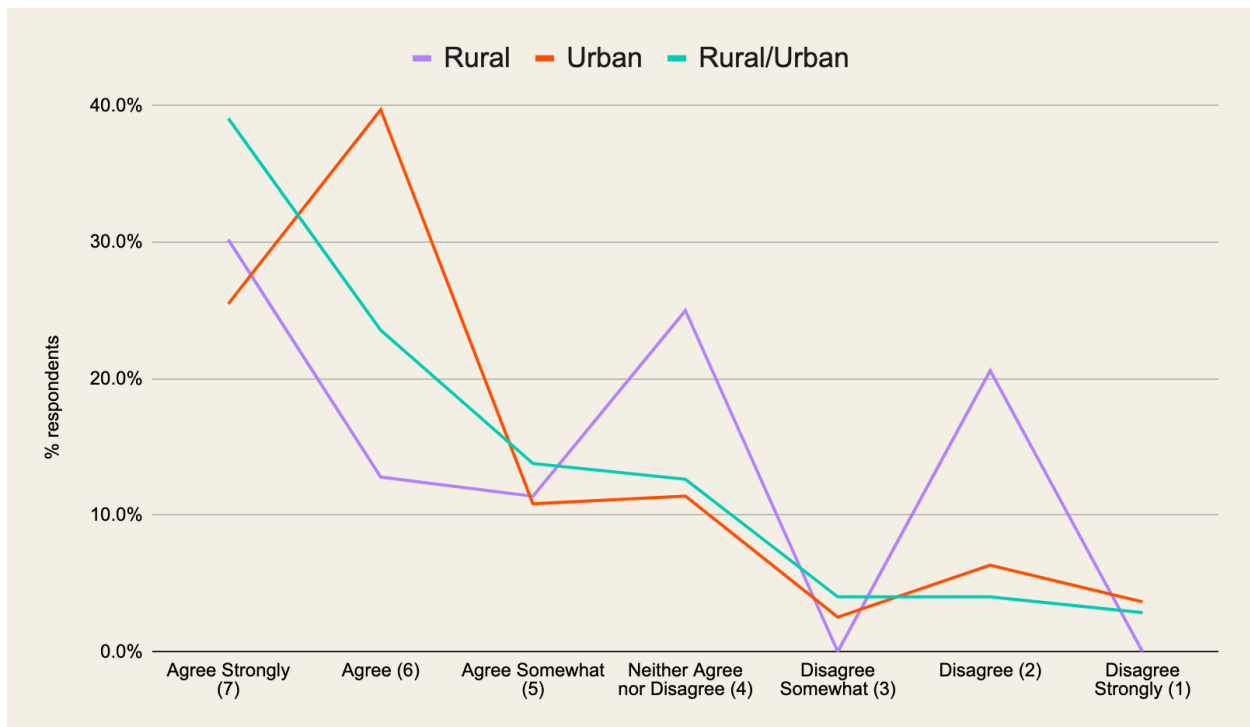
When viewed in relation to trust levels, we find that those who say news media shapes their perceptions have significantly lower levels of trust for the sheep & beef sector, and slightly lower levels for dairy, than other survey respondents. While the news media may be presenting the sheep & beef and dairy sectors in ways that reduce trust in these sectors, they may be either positively presenting horticulture or not discussing it at all, as trust in horticulture is positively associated with news media. Interestingly, those who said their views were influenced by advertisements had the lowest trust in all the farming sectors. Other research suggests that people

can often be sceptical of greenwashing with advertisements, and this finding reinforces the need for dialogue rather than one-way presentation.

Open-ended comments highlight the continued importance of diversity in narratives surrounding the farming sector, while also emphasising the significance of portraying the everyday experiences of farmers. Interviewees expressed that while sensational positive stories can draw attention, they can inadvertently contribute to the misconception that commodity producers lack compelling stories to share.

Amongst those who said that social media plays a significant role in shaping their perceptions of farming, personal Facebook feeds were identified as the most influential platform, followed closely by Community Facebook groups. Interestingly, Instagram emerged as a platform associated with higher levels of trust, while Facebook showed a modest increase in trust, especially within the horticulture sector. However, Twitter exhibited a slight decrease in trust, particularly in relation to the dairy sector. Although Twitter can be a valuable tool for producers and the industry to promote their products, it appears to be less effective in fostering meaningful conversations between producers and the general public.

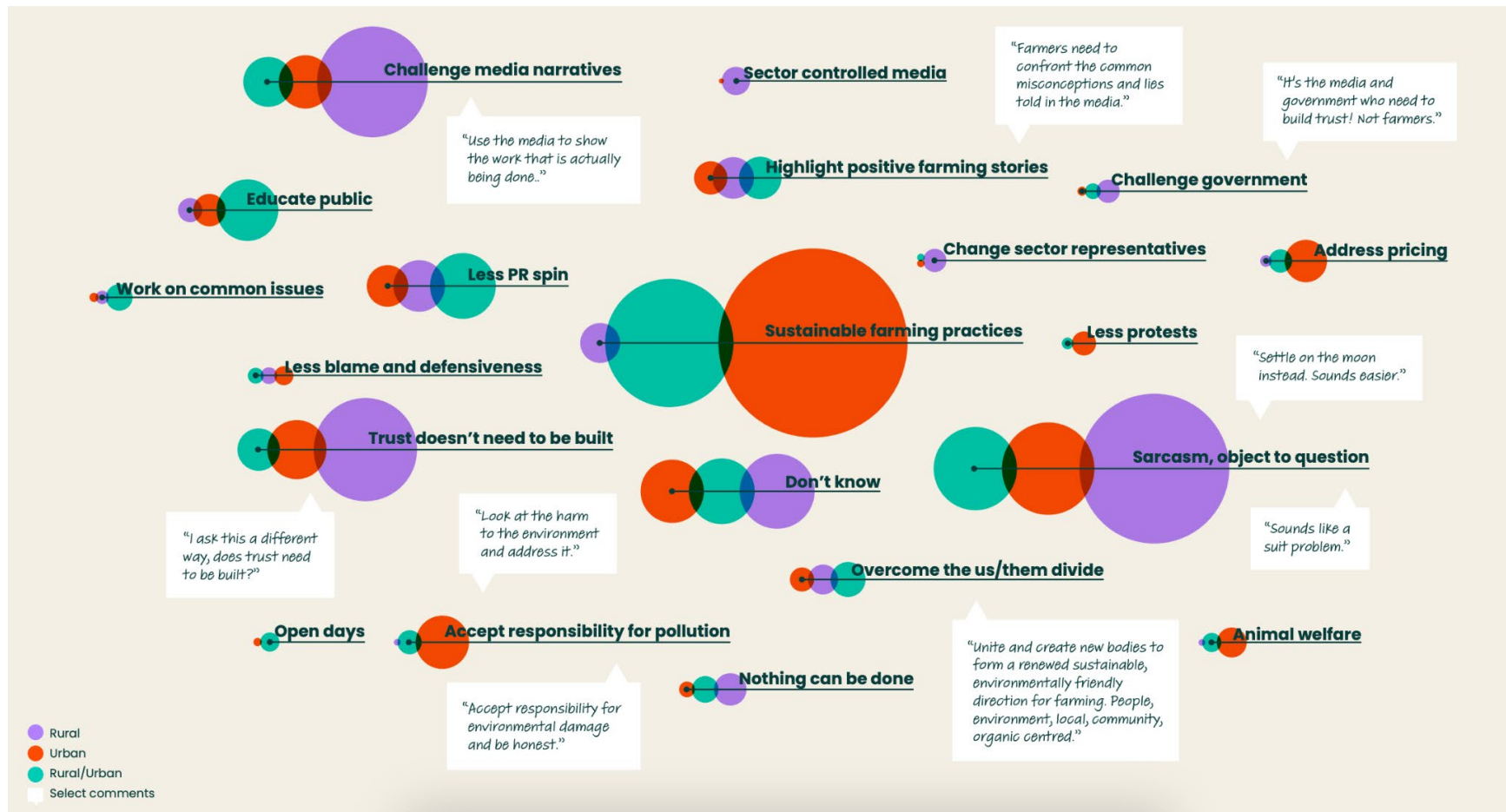
12. There are mixed views on the responsibility of the farming sector to feed New Zealanders first before exporting



The question of whether people feel that farmers have a responsibility to feed New Zealanders first before exporting garnered more diverse opinions amongst rural people than any other question in the survey. Around 30% of rural people “strongly agreed” that the sector should feed New Zealanders first, while a quarter were neutral and over twenty percent disagreed. Amongst farmers, the feeling that the sector should feed New Zealanders first was even higher, at 37%, while almost 30% were on the fence. Farmers noted the need to ‘rebalance’ and said that ‘for certain products, yes, local first’, but were also concerned that as a small country, we depend on farming exports. These diverse views remind us that rural is not synonymous with farmer, and that farmers do not all have the same opinions. This is further evidence that the ‘rural-urban divide’ is not clear at all.

The greatest support for feeding New Zealanders first was found amongst rural/urban respondents, while urban respondents noted a desire to have ‘better quality here, not necessarily us first’, and to have greater access if it would make food more affordable. Environmental concerns about ‘food miles’ and ‘the waste of international shipping and air freight’ featured heavily, alongside answers that took a moral stance and noted simply: ‘Because we should look after our own’. These responses highlight the complexity of people’s perceptions of farming and its role in NZ.

13. To build trust, urban and rural/urban people call for promotion of sustainable practices, while rural people want to get more positive farming stories in the media



Because trust is a core component of social licence, we sought to understand how people feel trust can be built. This chart shows how many times different ideas were mentioned, as well as who said what: the colour of the circle symbolises the groups of respondents (rural: purple, urban: red, or rural/urban: green), while the bigger the circle is, the more comments related to that theme. This allows us to see which themes are common across groups and which themes are felt most strongly by different groups. We see a clear distinction in ideas for how trust can be built amongst urban and rural respondents. Almost one-third of urban respondents and a quarter of urban/rural respondents pointed to changing farming practices and promoting environmentally sustainable innovation as the most important way to build trust. Their comments noted the need for regenerative practices, reduction of environmental harms and emissions, and “listen[ing] to scientific advice on climate change, ecology, conservation, regenerative/organic farming practices & healthy waterways”.

Rural respondents, on the other hand, pointed to challenging media narratives as the key way trust can be built. Some farmers expressed frustration, noting that they are farming sustainably and taking steps to protect waterways and biodiversity, but this is not seen because the media focuses on “a few bad apples”. Many rural people also felt that trust does not need to be built. Some respondents took affront to the question, with responses that affirmed the sector’s job as feeding people rather than building trust: “This question makes me angry! Why does trust need to be built? Isn't food production the job?”. Others agreed that trust building is not the sector’s job; their responses, however (focused on communication, transparency, engagement) pointed to trust building:

I don't think this is a job of the sector but we could do more around discussing the issues, transparency of what is actually being done and less emotional reactions when the blame comes.

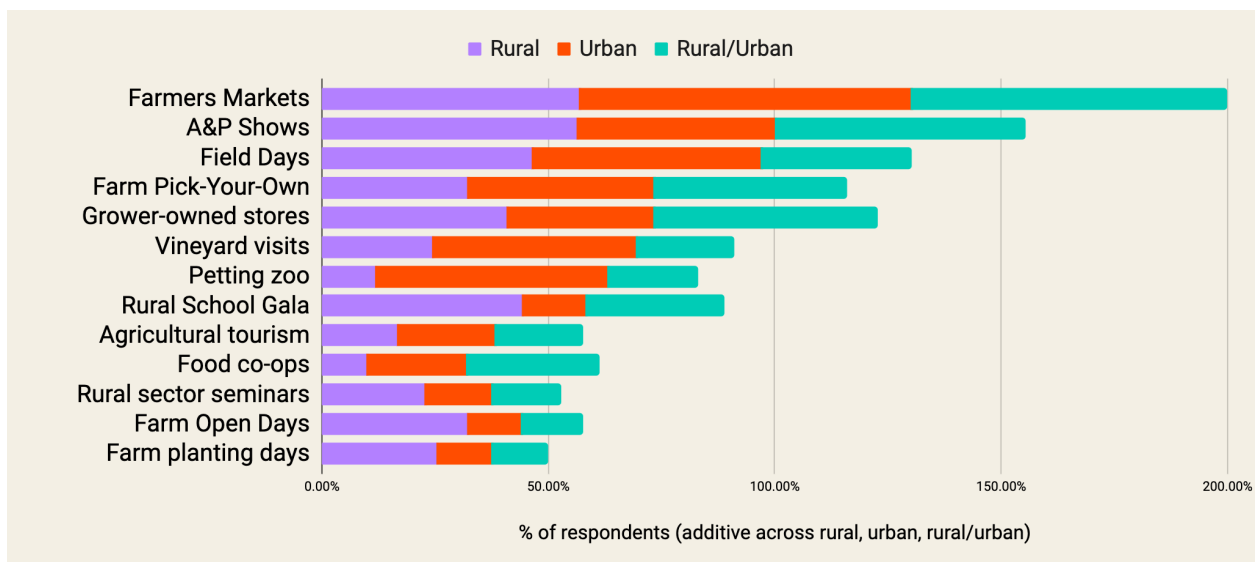
Two major courses of action stand out from responses by those with low trust in the farming sector: **implement sustainable farming practices to address environmental harms** and **reduce the amount of PR spin by being open and using facts and science**.

We followed up this question by asking survey respondents about their biggest hope for the future of NZ farming. The most common answer is that farming practices would be environmentally sustainable and that the sector would continue to produce food and increase their focus on food production. An equal number of

respondents hoped that farm produce would be more affordable for NZ consumers in future, and that farming costs would become lower for farmers. These responses reiterate the value people have in the sector’s role in food production, and their support for sustainable practices.

14. Initiatives that connect farmers and non-farmers are popular

A significant body of research reveals that the development of SLO is not solely dependent on one-way communication from the farming sector; instead, it relies on fostering a reciprocal dialogue. Even brief interactions between farmers and the public, driven by a sincere desire to learn and understand, can enhance awareness and foster collaboration in addressing common challenges. To understand what kinds of initiatives might foster interaction amongst diverse New Zealanders, we asked people what events and activities they had taken part in.



Farmers’ markets, A&P shows and Field Days were popular amongst all respondents. When we examined which activities are connected to higher trust, we found a moderately strong relationship between Farm Open Days and trust in the dairy sector. While we cannot conclude whether this is causal, this suggests that the in-person, on-farm interaction that farm open days enable may have a positive impact on trust. Interviews confirmed that on-farm experiences provide a valuable space for dialogue and trust building. However, these events appeal to a limited demographic and are difficult to scale outwards. Virtual experiences that enable genuine dialogue between farmers and non-farmers, and prioritise reciprocity and listening, have shown some success. While hesitations about virtual forums for dialogue are

prevalent, we encourage testing out multiple forms of engagement and spaces of dialogue.

Alongside planned events, our interviews highlighted the importance of everyday interaction and social engagement in fostering dialogue. The critical element of these interactions seem to be that they occur locally and are context-based. As one interviewee, a keen hunter and fisher, said:

But deep down, it's just it's just, you know somebody who's a farmer or you know somebody who's not a farmer. And they're all right. They're actually just like us. That basic human stuff. Everybody's got problems.

Where to next?

To strengthen SLO in farming, we need to understand how others view the world and where our common connections are as a base for trusting relationships. We are now using the insights generated through our research as a base to build tools that enable reciprocal dialogue between farmers and the broader public. We have trialled an interactive word cloud activity to encourage dialogue at several A&P shows in the South Island. This activity attracted many show attendees to add their views, and we discovered that people genuinely desire engagement in dialogue and that creating a physical space for such interactions is important. However, we also observed that people prefer informal interactions, often centred around food, and are less interested in formal dialogues or interviews. For the next stage of this project, we are developing a version of the word cloud dialogue activity that can be experienced both asynchronously, as part of a guided discussion, virtually and in-person. The exhibition will be designed so that visitors can interact with it and leave their own ideas, thereby creating ongoing dialogue.