

Social Licence to Farm, and ‘Good Farming’: Public Views



This fact sheet explores the public’s perceptions of a social licence to farm and how it relates to ‘good farming’, based on 2023 survey results¹.

What is a ‘social licence to farm’?

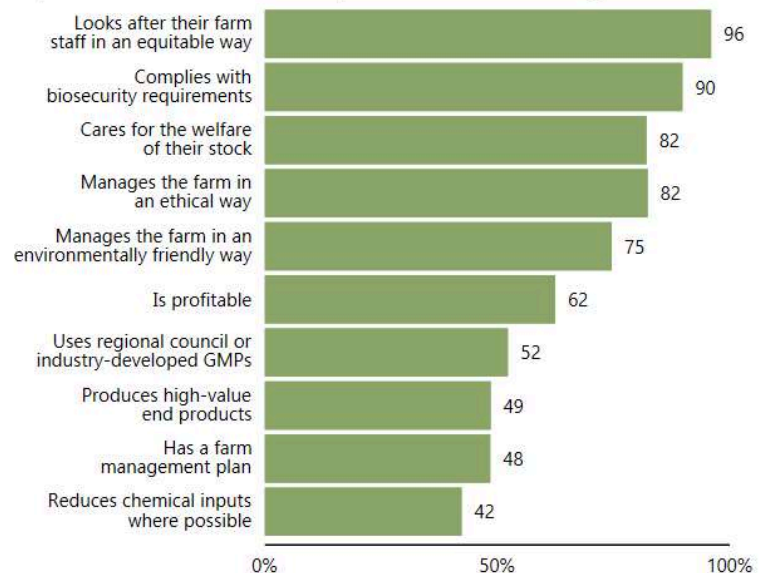
A social licence to farm² is community or public acceptance of farming and its associated operation(s), enabled by legitimacy and transparency, trust, tolerance, evidence and practice. It is an ‘unwritten social contract’ that reflects perceptions and expectations of the broader community. A social licence is not static or permanent, and can be gained, lost or regained according to changing values held by producers, processors, consumers, and the public. ‘Good farming’ attributes were seen as a starting point for understanding expectations between farmers and the public, and thus a potential proxy for social licence.

Public perceptions of ‘good farming’

Sixty-five percent of public respondents claimed ongoing interaction or relationship with one or more farmers, while 73% claim to feel connected to the farmers who produce their food.

In the top ten attributes that the public considered necessary for ‘good farming’ the four most important were farmers looking after their staff and the environment, caring for their stock, and ensuring that biosecurity requirements are taken care of. Farmers that used good management practices (GMPs) and had farm management plans were also important. The public additionally noted that farmers who provide transparency around their practices, and contribute to their local community, practice ‘good farming’. Other important criteria included using good management practice, having a farm management plan, and minimising the use of chemicals.

Top 10 attributes of what the public thinks makes a ‘good farmer’



¹ These figures and statistics in this factsheet were derived from a selection of questions from a survey about the public’s perceptions of “good farmers” and understanding of the social licence to operate (SLO) concept in New Zealand conducted by Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research, Quorum Sense, Thriving Southland, Dirt Road Communications, Cawthron Institute and University of Otago. The survey was enumerated online in March 2023 and completed by 1293 randomly selected members of the public across all regions of New Zealand. The survey and this factsheet were funded by the Our Land and Water National Science Challenge.

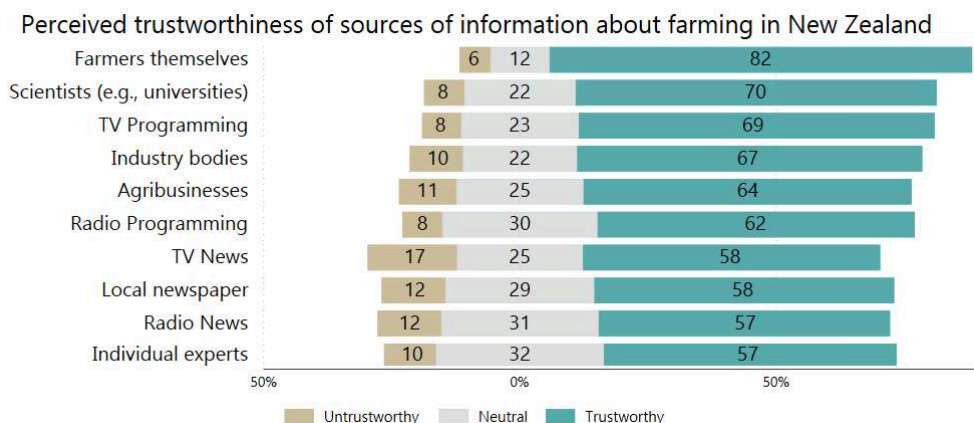
² See <https://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/discover-our-research/environment/sustainable-society-and-policy/slo-framework/> as applied specifically to farming.

How do communities and the public affect the social licence?

Communities, the general public and agricultural sector players (e.g., industry bodies, farm consultants) are so closely intertwined that their relationships cannot thrive without each other – they are mutually beneficial. Industries that seek to gain a social licence will look to the communities in which they operate for acceptance and approval. As industries, and communities change, so too will the licence; what does not change is the involvement of both parties to reach a common goal. Without community engagement and acceptance, those industries without a social licence potentially lose their markets and consumers.

Trustworthy sources of information about farming

Nearly all respondents (82%) think farmers themselves are the most trustworthy sources of information, followed closely by scientists and scientific research from universities or research organizations. Television programming (such as Country Calendar) and industry bodies (such as Federated Farmers, Beef + Lamb, FAR) are also considered trustworthy.



The public felt that social media, online media and alternative media were the least trustworthy sources of information (not shown), with an average of only 30% of respondents perceiving them as having any degree of trustworthiness.

Gaining and maintaining a social licence to farm

For farming to gain or maintain its social licence in New Zealand, farmers and producers need to work with consumers and the public in a way that positively influences the domestic and international image of what it means to carry out 'good farming'.

TAKEAWAYS FOR FARMERS

- A majority of the general public considers farmers to be 'good' at what they do.
- Producers and consumers share a mutually beneficial relationship. Many respondents feel a close association to the farmers that produce their food.
- Clear, concise communication and transparency of on-farm practices could lead to more support and acceptance from the general public now and in the future.
- Where possible, actively pursue environmentally safe practices that care for the land and waterways in a sustainable way.
- Farmers being compliant with regulation and striving to improve profitability in the primary industry without sacrificing environmental gains could improve public perceptions of farmers.
- Perceptions can become reality in a heartbeat, so it is worth working to ensure the public maintains a positive perception of what farmers do (social licence).
- Farmers who openly share their experiences are likely to be well received by the general public. Collectively this could significantly influence public opinion.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

For more information about social licence and connecting producers and the public: ourlandandwater.nz/project/connecting-food-producers-and-consumers/

Disclaimer

While every effort has been made to ensure the information in this publication is accurate, Our Land and Water NSC and the research partners do not accept any responsibility or liability for error of fact, omission, interpretation or opinion that may be present, nor for the consequences of any decisions based on this information.