

# What makes a 'good farmer' in Aotearoa?

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Credit: Florian Weichelt via Unsplash

In New Zealand, farmers and the largely urban general public are held to have differing views on what is meant by being a "good farmer." Anecdotally, farmers see themselves as stewards of the land for future generations, using management practices that would be considered environmentally sustainable, whereas the urban public disagrees with

such a portrayal. But does a rural/urban difference of viewpoint about "good farmers" really exist?

Recently, [social scientists](#) at Manaaki Whenua—Landcare Research have teamed up with researchers from the University of Otago, Cawthron, AgResearch and Lincoln University and partners Dirt Road Communications, Quorum Sense and Thriving Southland to dig a little deeper into public perceptions of the "good farmer."

The [study](#) is published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*.

The research team undertook two surveys in 2023, one among [farmers](#) and one among the general public, to discover how well the public's perception of a "good farmer" and farmers' perceptions of a "good farmer" align.

To do this, they used the idea of social license to operate (SLO)—a wide-ranging concept that describes how expectations of behavior and actions are set between a community and a business or industry, often at a local level. If a group has SLO, its actions and behaviors are accepted by the society it operates within.

SLO can extend into many aspects of what constitutes a "good farmer"—and the surveys reflected this. Participants were asked, among other things, whether they thought farmers manage their farms in an ethical way, comply with government rules and regulations, use practices that focus on [animal welfare](#), contribute to the local community, and reduce chemical inputs where possible.

The [survey results](#) showed some differences in perceptions between the two groups—for example, the public tended to mention treating staff well, keeping fences intact, minimizing the use of chemical inputs,

ensuring they meet environmental requirements and legislation, and that they produce a good yield during harvest as being characteristics of good farmers, whereas farmers did not.

By contrast, farmer respondents reported more often that a "good farmer" was one who gained "social acceptability" for their practices, and farmers expressed a belief that many members of the public do not understand what farmers do, and that this lack of understanding could affect public perception of the acceptability of farming.

Overall, however, the study showed a much closer alignment between the groups about what is meant by a "good farmer."

"Interestingly, both groups trusted farmers as a source of information more than they trusted the media," says Peter Edwards, senior researcher at Manaaki Whenua—Landcare Research.

"These results, when taken with other work in the Our Land and Water National Science Challenge, suggest that the perceived urban/rural divide between farmers and the public may not be as large as previously believed—which is good news for farmers' continued SLO in New Zealand."

Hugh Campbell, professor of sociology at the University of Otago, adds, "This is an encouraging outcome in an area where there has been a lot of discouragement lately. The gap between urban and rural isn't nearly as wide as it might appear in some social media discussions.

"We need to build on this to avoid any further loss of trust between many parts of New Zealand society as we go about collaborating on finding solutions to some compelling farming challenges."

**More information:** Pamela L. Booth et al, Perceptions of the 'good farmer' and social licence to operate in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/03036758.2024.2351910](https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2024.2351910)

Provided by Manaaki Whenua - Landcare Research

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