



6 December 2021

Unique partnership to enhance soil health and test Regen Ag practices

New research on farms across New Zealand will measure and provide farmers tools to enhance soil health, including identifying where regenerative agriculture practices can make a difference.

Agriculture Minister Damien O'Connor today announced a unique partnership between food producers Synlait Milk and Danone, science provider AgResearch, and the Ministry for Primary Industries' (MPI) Sustainable Food and Fibre Futures fund. The project will study soil health on 10 farms in Waikato, Canterbury, and Otago over five years, to determine the impacts of changes in soil health on production, farm resilience and the environment, including climate change.

Soils underpin New Zealand's food and fibre sector and managing for healthy soils improves the natural capacity of soil to sustain plants, animals, and humans. However, assessment of soil health on farms is not routinely measured in New Zealand, and so practical tools are needed to help farmers understand the detailed state of the soils and how best to manage them. As well as on-farm production and performance, improved soil health is expected to benefit the wider environment with improved fresh water and nutrient outcomes, support for biodiversity, enhanced soil carbon storage and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

Two paddocks on each of the 10 farms will be dedicated to a comparison between conventional practices and regenerative practices, focusing on greater pasture diversity and reduced nitrogen fertiliser use. The findings will help respond to a need for evidence that regenerative practices can make a positive difference in sustainable food production.

Through the course of the research, the farmers involved – supported by AgResearch scientists – will do sampling, testing, and modelling to assess the changes in soil health and its implications.

“A focus on soil health will be a key part of our industry's journey to keep making milk in the most sustainable way. We are proud to have six Synlait farmers working alongside their industry peers to innovate, experiment, and lead our sector to explore the benefits of regenerative practices,” says Hamish Reid, Synlait Director – Sustainability, Brand, Beverages and Cream.

“Ultimately, we want to support farmers and provide solid guidance based on scientific evidence,” says Danone New Zealand Director, Steve Donnelly.

“We are proud to leverage Danone's significant global expertise in regenerative agriculture to support new on-farm practices in New Zealand and across the dairy sector. This project is a pioneering step in Aotearoa to build new farming models that help mitigate climate change, preserve or restore soil quality and secure farmer welfare, all while preserving the quality of New Zealand dairy.”

Research already done by AgResearch, and commissioned by DairyNZ, has demonstrated that New Zealand has the lowest carbon footprint for milk production compared to 17 other countries, including major milk suppliers. However, the dairy industry is still striving to identify areas where it can make further environmental gains.

AgResearch soil scientist Nicole Schon says the research will provide important scientific knowledge around soil health in the New Zealand context.

“This is a five-year study with the aim to provide information for farmers throughout New Zealand on how to measure soil health and how we can better manage our soils. By optimising the soils' ability to function, it may help meet increasing constraints faced by the industry.”

“There is a lot of anecdotal evidence around the impacts of regenerative practices, and there is a lot of discussion on this topic. Part of the research will look at how regenerative practices impacts soil health, and I think it will be particularly interesting to understand the impact on the soil biology and its functioning,” Dr Schon says.

The Government has committed \$2.8 million to the research through the Ministry for Primary Industries’ Sustainable Food and Fibre Futures fund, with Danone and Synlait contributing a further \$1 million. AgResearch will independently gather data and report findings of the research.

Some initial assessments of soil health have been conducted, and the trials on the 10 dairy farms involved are expected to begin early in 2022. Results will be made available from the research.

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About Synlait

Synlait is a young, pioneering New Zealand-based company that is shifting perceptions and driving value through new thinking, a new attitude. We combine expert farming with state-of-the-art processing to produce a range of nutritional milk products for our global customers that provide genuine benefits for human health and wellbeing. Our company was born disruptive. It is this spirit that has driven our success. We’re applying that attitude to sustainability - ensuring that looking after people and protecting our planet underpins all we do.

About Danone

Danone is a leading multi-local food and beverage company building on health-focused and fast-growing categories in 3 businesses: Essential Dairy & Plant-Based products, Waters and Specialized Nutrition. With its ‘One Planet. One Health’ frame of action, which considers the health of people and the planet as intimately interconnected, Danone aims to inspire healthier and more sustainable eating and drinking practices. To accelerate this food revolution and create superior, sustainable, profitable value for all its stakeholders, Danone has defined nine 2030 Goals, and paved the way as the first listed company to adopt the “Entreprise à Mission” status in France. With a purpose to bring health through food to as many people as possible, and corresponding social, societal and environmental objectives set out in its articles of association, Danone commits to operating in an efficient, responsible and inclusive manner, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. By 2025, Danone aims to become one of the first multinational companies to obtain B Corp™ certification. With more than 100,000 employees, and products sold in over 120 markets, Danone generated €23.6billion in sales in 2020. Danone’s portfolio includes leading international brands (Actimel, Activia, Alpro, Aptamil, Danette, Danio, Danonino, evian, Nutricia, Nutrilon, Volvic, among others) as well as strong local and regional brands (including AQUA, Blédina, Bonafont, Cow & Gate, Horizon Organic, Karicare, Mizone, Oikos, Prostokvashino, Silk). Listed on Euronext Paris and present on the OTCQX market via an ADR (American Depositary Receipt) program, Danone is a component stock of leading sustainability indexes including the ones managed by Vigeo Eiris and Sustainalytics, as well as the Ethibel Sustainability Index, the MSCI ESG Indexes, the FTSE4Good Index Series, Bloomberg Gender Equality Index, and the Access to Nutrition Index.

About AgResearch

AgResearch is a Crown Research Institute in New Zealand, with responsibility for delivering innovative science and research outcomes specifically for the agricultural sector.

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