

Feds national council exhilarating

By Don Carson
General manager, Strategic communications

It must be more than 20 years since I've been to a Federated Farmers conference. As a Radio New Zealand rural journalist I used to dutifully attend all Wellington meetings, and a few more besides.

How times and those meetings have changed.

Federated Farmers 'Influential Engagement Conference' in Wellington last month was a dramatic eye-opener on what farmers talk about these days and who is interested in talking to them.

For starters, for at least the past two decades, the Prime Minister would regularly have had more important places to go than to open a primary industry conference.

On this day, as the most influential engager of all, John Key turned up early and ready to talk trade and production issues in detail.

And the environment, and the intense concentration now on means to measure and achieve the environmental stewardship, would only have been peripheral for farmers in days gone by.

But as attendees were to learn, the environmental issues and the answers are not simple, even with the most sophisticated technology.

River flows, for instance, can now be

monitored real time. But the level variations raise more questions, rather than necessarily answering them.

A river may be safe for meeting the swimming standard most of the time. But in flood, the E coli volume rises above the safety level. So, should this be a concern if nobody is going to go swimming in a flooded river?

Measuring nitrogen movement through the sub-soils varies as well, with implications for recycling and variable fertiliser applications. But to get accurate numbers on that needs so much equipment that the cost of monitoring is likely to be prohibitive.

It wasn't that long ago that a farmer, who measured pasture by going out with shears and cutting a sward to bake in the oven and then weigh it, was thought to be a bit eccentric and short of confidence.

The presentation by Ian Yule, Professor of Precision Agriculture at Massey University, on an aircraft based sensor system — the hyperspectral imaging sensor — was, almost in a literal sense, light years ahead of what's being used now to get all sorts of information from the farmscape below. The implications for how to manage such a monitored property are immense (see page 7).



CAPTIVE AUDIENCE: Federated Farmers' national president, Dr William Rolleston, opens the National Council before Prime Minister John Key and Minister for Primary Industries Nathan Guy