

# Not good enough, but still good: the new rules for methane emissions

Methane emissions from dairy cows will finally be included in New Zealand's emissions pricing regime.

## COMMENT:

So the Government is going to bring agriculture into the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), and therefore under the watch of the Climate Commission, only maybe not, and only partially, and it will move quite slowly. Is that good? Yes. Is it good enough? No. Will things get better from here?

That's the real question.

Despite what you may hear in some quarters, the Government's approach to climate change is not tough on farmers. The targets for "biogenic" methane emissions – that's emissions from animals – is spelled out in the Carbon Zero Act. A 24-47 per cent reduction in the 2017 levels by 2050, with an interim 10 per cent reduction by 2030.

Those numbers did not come from the mad-scientist wing of Greenydom, nor do they reveal a hatred of cows or the people who farm them. They were proposed by the Biological Emissions Reference Group (BERG), which comprises Dairy NZ, Fonterra, Federated Farmers, Fertiliser New Zealand, Horticulture NZ, Beef and Lamb, Deer Industry NZ and the ministries for primary industries and the environment.

Good name, BERG. We're going to sink or sail on in this country on the basis of how we approach it.

The targets, said BERG, are what's achievable by current best practices in agriculture. Not voodoo science or ideological bullying. Current best practices.

And, as Russel Norman from Greenpeace has noted, they are far from the "zero" targets we really need.

Actually, the Government's approach to people who live in cities, and the industries based there, is not tough either. We're being encouraged to switch to electric vehicles or leave the car at home for our commutes, but the disincentives for not doing so are mild to non-existent.

Where, for example, are the plans to help companies shift their whole workforces out of single-occupancy travel in fossil-fuel powered vehicles? Where are the requirements, as constantly proposed by the Green Building Council, for zero-carbon performance requirements for new and existing buildings?

Who's going to step up and tell industry that just because individual citizens are changing their behaviour, they're not off the hook?

People in the rural sector have a very good point when they say the cities need to pull their weight. On the other hand, people in the rural sector consistently vote for the political party – National – that is most actively undermining attempts to make the cities pull their weight. Go

figure.

The biogenic targets are moderate, but the start has been made. Between now and 2025, the primary sector will work with Government to develop an efficient way of pricing farm emissions. In 2025, unless an agreed better option has emerged, farming will be included in the ETS. If progress isn't being made between now and then, it could be earlier.

Farmers will be asked to pay very little: just 5 per cent of on-farm emissions will be subject to pricing. That equates to about 1 cent per kilo of milk solids and beef, and 3 cents per kilo of sheep meat.

The deal is called He Waka Eke Noa - the Primary Sector Climate Change Commitment. Despite Federated Farmers and other primary sector groups signing up to it, the Feds and others have still managed to be critical.

Mind you, their complaints are modest compared to those of Greenpeace, which calls it a "sellout". Is that fair?

It depends what you expect from a coalition government, even one with the Green Party in it, even one with a Prime Minister who says climate change is the issue of her generation.

The thing about that? Don't read it as a declaration that all is well, she's got this. Read it as an invitation: the bigger, more widespread and more insistent the clamour there is for effective action on climate change, from outside Parliament, the easier it will be for those inside to pass better laws.

Jacinda Ardern is right to hail the new agreement. It's a world-first and should, could, be the start of something big. It's clear we'd have far less if NZ First had got its way, and it looks to me like one more validation of the Green Party's role in the coalition.

Everyone likes to think Winston Peters is the expert at getting his own way, but a good part of that reputation is based on his charmingly crease-faced ability to remind us of it. James Shaw, Greens co-leader and Climate Change Minister, scored a big victory in getting this deal into the coalition agreement in 2017 and arguably an even bigger one in keeping it there, even in its compromised form.

He's kept everyone at the table, which really wasn't looking possible.

That's important, because right now the targets don't matter as much as the process. This is an emergency and we're just at the start of it. The greater need is not for big targets, but for strong democratic process. As this emergency unfolds, we need institutions robust enough to enable us to cope in the decades to come, a citizenry not torn apart by notions of a town-and-country divide, and political leaders who don't fuel the grievances that arise from those notions.

We also need a citizenry that demands more. The most important climate-change action this year has not been the proposed new laws and Government agreements, or the declarations of a climate emergency by several local bodies, valuable as all those things are. It's been on the streets.

The Student Strike protests have been magnificent. A genuinely nationwide mass movement, with determination, energy and grand ideals is the single most necessary requirement for

progressive change. We wouldn't have the new emissions agreement in any form without it.

The rise of Extinction Rebellion in this country is exciting too. Non-violent direct action: there's nothing like it for reframing the narrative.

We're moving too slowly on climate change, and every delay will make the changes we need harder, more expensive and more disruptive, once there is enough political will to make them. But inside and outside Parliament, just in the last couple of years, there's been a real change: we are, finally, moving.

Covering the just-gone council elections, I noticed one theme coming up more than any other. It wasn't rates or traffic congestion or the bloody council itself. It was the environment, and top of the list of environmental issues was climate change. And on the whole, in Auckland and around the country, candidates who prioritised it did well. That's new.

It's important to have politicians committed to change inside Parliament and councils. They'll do what they can do, and all power to them. They face tough battles with those who do not share that commitment.

But don't rely on them. Don't let them do all the work. They're just part of the process. And if you're frustrated about the pace of change, it's perverse to think Green politicians are your enemy. Have you seen some of the others?