

Important considerations when setting sustainability targets

Deciding which factors should take priority when setting sustainability targets is a rarely addressed and challenging problem. Questions arise such as; whose interests are the most important? How challenging should targets be? And, under what circumstances is it acceptable to let some farmers fail to meet their targets? The NZSD used a choice modelling technique with a group of Beef + Lamb stakeholders to investigate these questions. When considering setting sustainability targets, there is often more than one decision maker, and potentially, many different perspectives. Choice modelling provides a method for combining people's preferences, and confronting the inevitable trade-offs involved in setting a sustainability target.

Group Decision Making

A workshop was organized by Beef + Lamb in which a wide range of agricultural stakeholders attended. The stakeholders got together around a table to take part in a facilitated choice experiment using software known as 1000minds.

1000Minds presents decision makers with a series of choices, each of which involves two criteria which differ in their characteristics. Decision makers are required to trade-off one set of criteria and characteristics for the other. Figure 1 provides an example of a choice presented to decision makers using 1000Minds. By undertaking the choice experiment in a group environment, participants were able to discuss and debate the choices they made.

- The most important consideration when setting sustainability targets is the relevancy of the issue to the industry/enterprise.
- How easily a target can be achieved is not as important as other issues. That some farmers could be left behind in the process of improving sustainability performance is considered an acceptable trade-off in the pursuit of higher aims.
- There is no point doing something unless it is worth doing, therefore the degree to which a target 'stretches' an industry's sustainability is more important than how easily the target can be achieved.

Four Considerations for Setting Sustainability Targets

The choice model contained four criteria which were considered critical considerations for setting industry level sustainability targets. Stretch – Immediacy – Achievability – and, Sustainability Relevance.

The participants were forced by the choice model to trade these considerations off against each other. Decisions were made by group consensus after a discussion on each choice. While the choice experiment could be administered to each participant individually, and their preferences aggregated, the use of a group environment provides the opportunity to discuss some of the tensions around the trade-offs. This in turn results in a more nuanced understanding of the issues involved in setting targets, and helps to build greater consensus amongst a group of decision makers.

B+LNZ should set sustainability performance targets that
(all else being equal)

Achievability
will be achieved by at least 50% of farmers

Sustainability relevance
address threats or opportunities of high importance

this one

this combination is impossible

OR

Achievability
will be achieved by at least 95% of farmers

Sustainability relevance
address threats or opportunities of relatively low importance

this one

this combination is impossible

they are equal

« undo last decision skip this question for now »

8% complete (4 / 52 potential questions *)

Figure 1: 1000minds choice experiment screen

What Matters Most When Setting Sustainability Targets

The choice experiment revealed the following preferences for the Beef + Lamb stakeholders:

1. The relevance of a sustainability issue to Beef + Lamb is the most important consideration when setting targets.
2. Stretching farmers to do better was considered the second most important consideration.
3. How easily the target could be achieved was the third most important consideration.
4. How quickly the target could be achieved was the least important consideration.

It is significant that achievability was not the most important consideration. The participants were more concerned with addressing important sustainability issues as well as stretching the industry to perform better.

The participants signalled their willingness to accept an achievement rate of only 50% under some circumstances. This finding is promising as it suggests a genuine commitment to achieving higher levels of sustainability, despite the potential to cause some discomfort amongst the industry in meeting this aim.

Further Information

Journal Article Olde, E. M., Moller, H., Marchand, F., McDowell, R. W., MacLeod, C. J., Sautier, M., . . . Manhire, J. (2016). When experts disagree: the need to rethink indicator selection for assessing sustainability of agriculture. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*,

Conference Paper:
Whitehead, J., Lu, Y., Still, H., Wallis, J., Gentle, H., & Moller, H. (2016). Target Setting and Burden Sharing in Sustainability Assessment beyond the Farm Level. Paper presented at the meeting of the 12th European IFSA Symposium, Harper Adams University.

New Zealand Sustainability Dashboard Website:
<http://www.nzdashboard.org.nz/prioritisation.html>