Thomsons Creek Catchment Project:

A Comprehensive Case Study in Community-Driven Environmental Management

Executive Summary

The Thomsons Creek Catchment Project represents a transformative example of how collaborative, community-driven approaches can deliver exceptional environmental outcomes while building lasting stewardship capacity. Operating from February 2022 to June 2025 in Central Otago, this Ministry for the Environment initiative achieved remarkable success across multiple domains: constructing sophisticated water treatment infrastructure, protecting threatened native species, enhancing catchment-wide biodiversity, and establishing exemplary community engagement that attracted national recognition.

With a total investment of $2.8 million, the project exceeded all original objectives while demonstrating the power of genuine community ownership in driving sustainable environmental change. The initiative's success as the initial phase of the Manuherekia Exemplar Catchment provides valuable learnings for catchment management across New Zealand.

Photo 1: Adding native plants to one of the early catchment demonstration sites

Project Context and Background

Geographic and Environmental Setting

Thomsons Creek catchment in Central Otago faces typical challenges of intensive agricultural landscapes in New Zealand. The catchment encompasses 18 farming operations representing a diverse mix of dairy, beef, sheep, and cropping enterprises, along with several lifestyle blocks, within a landscape extensively modified over 160 years of European settlement.

The waterway system centres on Thomsons Creek, which receives water from the Sluice Channel, a key drainage pathway carrying runoff from the intensive valley floor. This runoff includes agricultural sources, road drainage, resuspension of sediment within the waterway, and impacts from historic gold mining activities. This configuration creates both challenges and opportunities for water quality management, as interventions at strategic points can provide catchment-wide benefits.

Environmental challenges include water quality degradation, habitat loss affecting native species, and limited natural biodiversity. The area's environmental significance extends beyond local concerns, with Central Otago roundhead galaxiid populations (*Galaxias sp. D*) representing critically important biodiversity values under threat from habitat modification and invasive species pressure

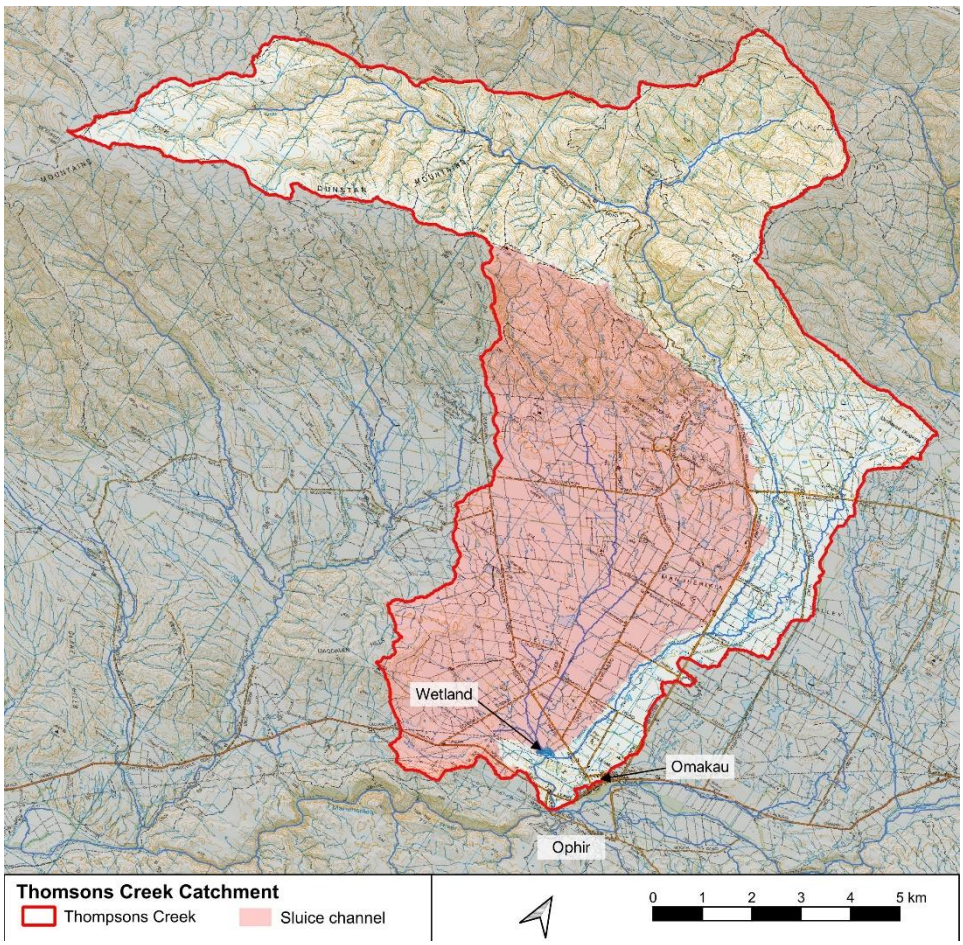

Figure 1: Thomsons catchment, in the Manuherekia Catchment, Central Otago

Strategic Context and Genesis

The project emerged from the Manuherekia Exemplar Catchment initiative, designed to provide practical learnings for broader catchment management across the region. Crucially, the project built upon existing farmer engagement established through Dairy New Zealand and Beef + Lamb New Zealand programmes, creating a foundation of trust and collaboration essential for success across diverse farming systems.

The initiative's development was fundamentally collaborative, driven by local landowners who actively sought assistance from stakeholders, agencies, and experts to understand complex water quality issues and develop practical solutions. This approach recognised that sustainable environmental improvements require genuine community ownership and that technical solutions must be embedded within social frameworks supporting long-term stewardship

Photo 2: Thomsons Catchment meeting October 2022

Building on Strong Farmer Stewardship

The project built upon significant environmental improvements that farmers had already implemented across the catchment. Prior to project commencement, farmers had proactively undertaken extensive riparian fencing initiatives, upgraded irrigation systems to efficient technologies and completed comprehensive farm environment plans. These efforts demonstrated their strong commitment to

environmental management and established an excellent foundation for the project's collaborative approach.

Philosophical Approach and Design Principles

Community-Centred Methodology

The project's success stemmed from its commitment to community-centred approaches that prioritised local ownership over externally imposed solutions. Rather than presenting predetermined interventions, the project team facilitated community-led identification of problems and development of solutions, ensuring that the resulting initiatives reflected local knowledge, priorities and capacity.

This methodology required significant investment in relationship building, trust development, and capacity-building activities that extended well beyond technical implementation. The approach recognised that environmental improvements are ultimately social processes requiring sustained community commitment to achieve lasting success.

Integrated Catchment-Wide Solutions

The project's effectiveness came from recognising that meaningful water quality improvement requires coordinated interventions across multiple scales and intervention types. The combination of constructed wetland treatment at the catchment outlet, strategic fencing to reduce direct stock access, targeted planting in priority areas for riparian filtration, and innovative sediment management plans addressing on-farm sources created synergistic benefits exceeding the sum of individual interventions.

This integrated approach addressed both point sources and diffuse sources of water quality impacts, recognising that agricultural catchments require multiple intervention types to achieve meaningful improvement. The design created benefits across multiple scales, from individual farm improvements to catchment-wide water quality enhancement and regional biodiversity conservation

Photo 3: This project has successfully brought together experts and local landowners. Early on, our civil engineer, Brendan Sheehan, and water ecologist, Matt Hickey, met with local landowner Elliot Morgan to discuss an issue and find solutions.

Comprehensive Achievement Analysis

Objective 1: Constructed Wetland Development

Technical Implementation and Design

The project's centrepiece achievement involved establishing a sophisticated 5-hectare constructed wetland that significantly improves freshwater quality as the Sluice Channel flows into Thomsons Creek. The construction progressed through carefully sequenced phases from initial drainage and willow removal (December 2022) through physical construction (February-June 2023), strategic planting campaigns (October 2023, April 2024, September 2024, April 2025), and culminating with creek restoration (February 2025).

The wetland's design incorporates advanced water treatment features, including three strategically positioned sediment traps leading into a 970-metre treatment pathway. This design reflects careful consideration of hydraulic residence time (the duration water remains in the system for treatment), sediment settling dynamics, and biological treatment processes essential for effective water quality improvement in agricultural drainage systems.

Photo 4: The Constructed Wetland in February 2025 shortly after the creeks had been returned to the wetland

Ecological Establishment and Performance

The wetland's ecological establishment exceeded all expectations, with comprehensive planting of 44,000 native plants. This included 41,000 *Carex secta* (purei) in wetted bed areas and 3,500 additional

native species on islands and surrounding areas. This substantial vegetation establishment provides both treatment functionality and critical habitat restoration.

Preliminary water quality monitoring, conducted in partnership with Omakau School students over the project's 3.5-year duration, demonstrates that the constructed wetland effectively reduces suspended sediment export from the Sluice Channel. Although water was only returned in February 2025, early results already demonstrate strong positive trends. While comprehensive analysis requires additional time for system maturation and data collection, initial trends strongly suggest the wetland is performing as designed and delivering measurable water quality improvements.

Photo 5: Carex secta in the Wetland

Biodiversity Outcomes and Conservation Significance

The wetland generated extraordinary biodiversity outcomes that exceeded all projections. Within two months of completion, it attracted over 1,000 black-billed gulls (conservation status: declining) at peak numbers, with several hundred chicks successfully produced. This remarkable colonisation demonstrates the wetland's immediate value as critical breeding habitat for declining species, where suitable alternatives are extremely limited in the modified agricultural landscape.

The 2025 season recorded the first local sighting of marsh crake, another declining species, alongside established populations of stilts, pūkeko, scaup, and long-finned eels. This biodiversity response indicates the wetland's broader ecological significance as a landscape-scale habitat node supporting

multiple native species while providing ecosystem services including water treatment and flood mitigation.

Photo 6: Black billed gulls breeding on the floodway rocks summer 2023-2024

Protection and Sustainability Measures

Long-term wetland protection has been secured through a QEII Trust restoration agreement covering 7 hectares, ensuring conservation of environmental values and preventing future development pressures. Supporting infrastructure includes a viewing platform, interpretive panels, and a 30-metre pathway facilitating community access and educational use while maintaining ecological integrity.

Photo 7: Robyn and Peter McLoed with QEII CEO Dan Coup, and local QEII rep Rob Wardle with members of the Manuherekia Catchment Group and Thomsons Catchment committee October 2024 signing of the Restoration Agreement

Objective 2: Galaxiid Habitat Protection

Strategic Fish Barrier Implementation

Photo 8; Central Otago Roundhead Galaxiid found at Mawhinney Road, Thomsons Creek

The project successfully protects Central Otago roundhead galaxiid populations through the strategic construction of fish barriers and targeted removal of invasive species. The primary intervention involved constructing a concrete weir fish barrier in Thomsons Creek at an optimal location protecting over 4.5 kilometres of waterway extending from the barrier to Mawhinney Road.

This barrier, completed in March 2023, represents a pilot project trialling concepts potentially applicable across Central Otago's waterways facing similar invasive species pressures. The barrier's design incorporates hydraulic considerations, ensuring effective fish passage prevention while maintaining natural flow regimes and avoiding upstream flooding impacts.

Invasive Species Management and Population Recovery

Following barrier installation, Otago Regional Council staff conducted five electric fishing operations, removing 392 trout and 3 perch from the protected area. The effectiveness of these efforts is demonstrated by declining trout numbers, from hundreds of fish in early operations to just 11 trout in the final May 2025 round, while galaxiid observations indicate healthy populations.

The Otago Regional Council continues to monitor the weir's effectiveness, particularly during high-flow events, where some uncertainty remains regarding the barrier's ability to completely prevent fish

passage. Future barrier designs may incorporate greater height to enhance effectiveness during flood conditions. However, overall, the combination of the physical barrier and systematic trout removal has proven highly successful in creating excellent refuge conditions for the Central Otago roundhead galaxiid.

This integrated approach has created excellent opportunities for galaxiid population densities to increase within the protected reach and potentially disperse downstream, establishing this site as a critical conservation refuge for the species.

Photo 9: Thomsons Creek Fish Barrier (above) and Photo 10 below Pete Ravenscroft (ORC) electric fishing Thomsons Creek

Complementary Barrier Installations

Supporting the main barrier, the project installed two perched culverts (elevated pipes that prevent fish passage while allowing water flow) in small tributaries of the Sluice Channel sub-catchment in December 2023. These installations prevent sports fish access to two smaller galaxiid populations and serve as additional pilot trials for broader application across similar habitat types.

Photo 11: One of the two perched culverts installed on tributaries of the Sluice Channel sub-catchment

Habitat Enhancement and Riparian Protection

Supporting fish protection measures, the project completed 4.5 kilometres of fencing around galaxiid sites and planted 1,230 native plants at three riparian locations in September 2

024. These interventions provide critical habitat enhancement while demonstrating integrated approaches combining structural barriers with ecosystem restoration for comprehensive species protection.

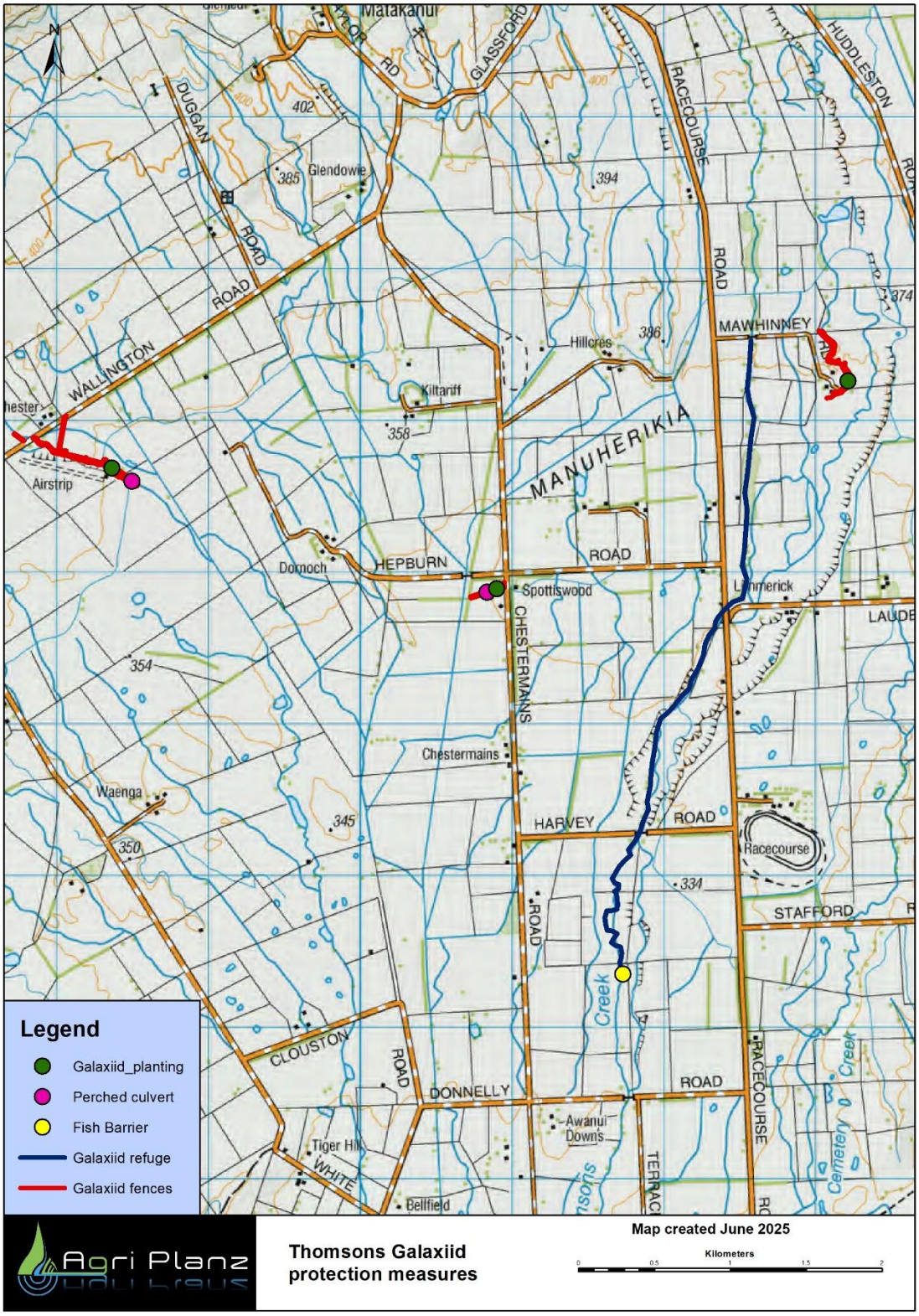

Figure 2: Galaxiid protection measures

Photo 12: Just seven months after planting, plant expert Jo Wakelin showcases remarkable growth, demonstrating the power of effective conservation efforts.

Objective 3: Biodiversity and Water Quality Enhancement

Catchment-Wide Fencing Implementation

The project achieved substantial improvements in catchment-wide water quality protection through comprehensive fencing initiatives. Over the project period, 52 kilometres of riparian fencing were completed, increasing catchment waterway protection from 87% to 96%. The remaining unfenced waterways primarily represent areas that are difficult to fence, have minimal stock access, or utilise temporary fencing systems.

The project provided 50% funding support for farmer fencing initiatives, investing $300,000 in direct grants. Remarkably, farmers contributed an additional $290,000 in kind, through contracted labour and direct construction effort, demonstrating exceptional community commitment that nearly doubled the project's effective investment in fencing infrastructure.

Photo 13 Riparian fencing on one of the tributaries of Thomsons Creek

Photo 14: Riparian fencing was undertaken on the lowland catchment valley floor up into the low hills of the catchment.

Photo 15: A number of lifestyle block owners, including Dan Beck and his family, took up the opportunity to fence their creeks as well.

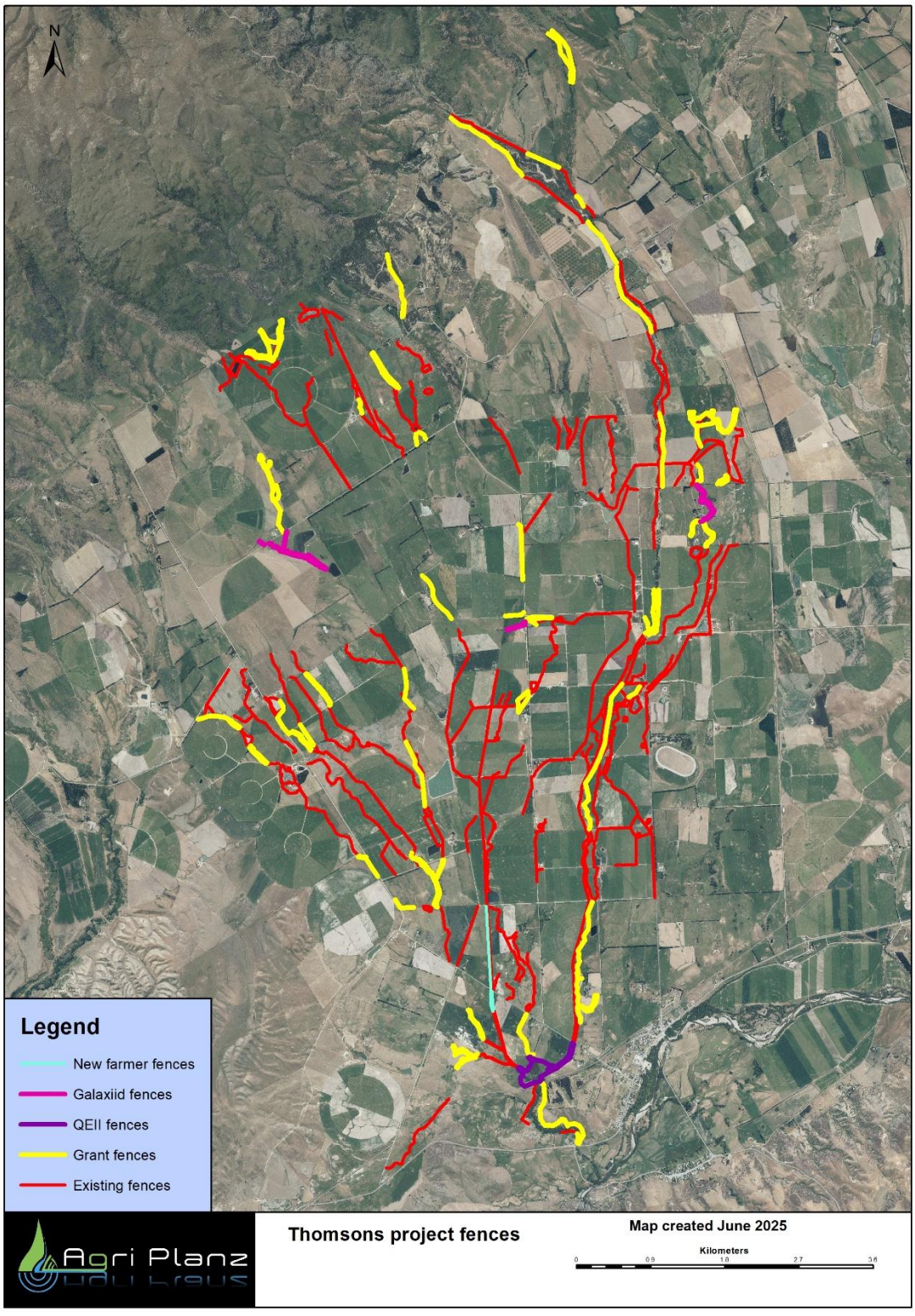

Figure 3: Fencing as at June 2025. Includes new farmer fencing (light blue) that has been 100% funded by the farmer after the purchase of a new block

Strategic Revegetation Programme

Across the catchment, over 51,000 plants have been established in total. The majority (44,000) were concentrated in the constructed wetland, with the remainder strategically distributed throughout priority riparian zones including the 1,230 plants at galaxiid sites and additional plantings at critical water quality improvement locations.

Rather than comprehensive catchment-wide planting, the project focused on areas where vegetation would have maximum impact, including galaxiid habitat protection sites and locations where riparian buffers could provide the greatest water quality benefits. This strategic approach ensured efficient use of resources while maximising environmental outcomes.

The project supported five propagation workshops that taught landowners seed collection and plant growing techniques, resulting in at least three operational farm nurseries within the catchment. This capacity building ensures ongoing local capability for future restoration efforts while building community expertise and reducing long-term restoration costs.

Photo 16: One of the native plant propagation workshops

Photo 17 & 18: Planting carex secta November 2023 in a newly fenced off site and current status June 2025 below.

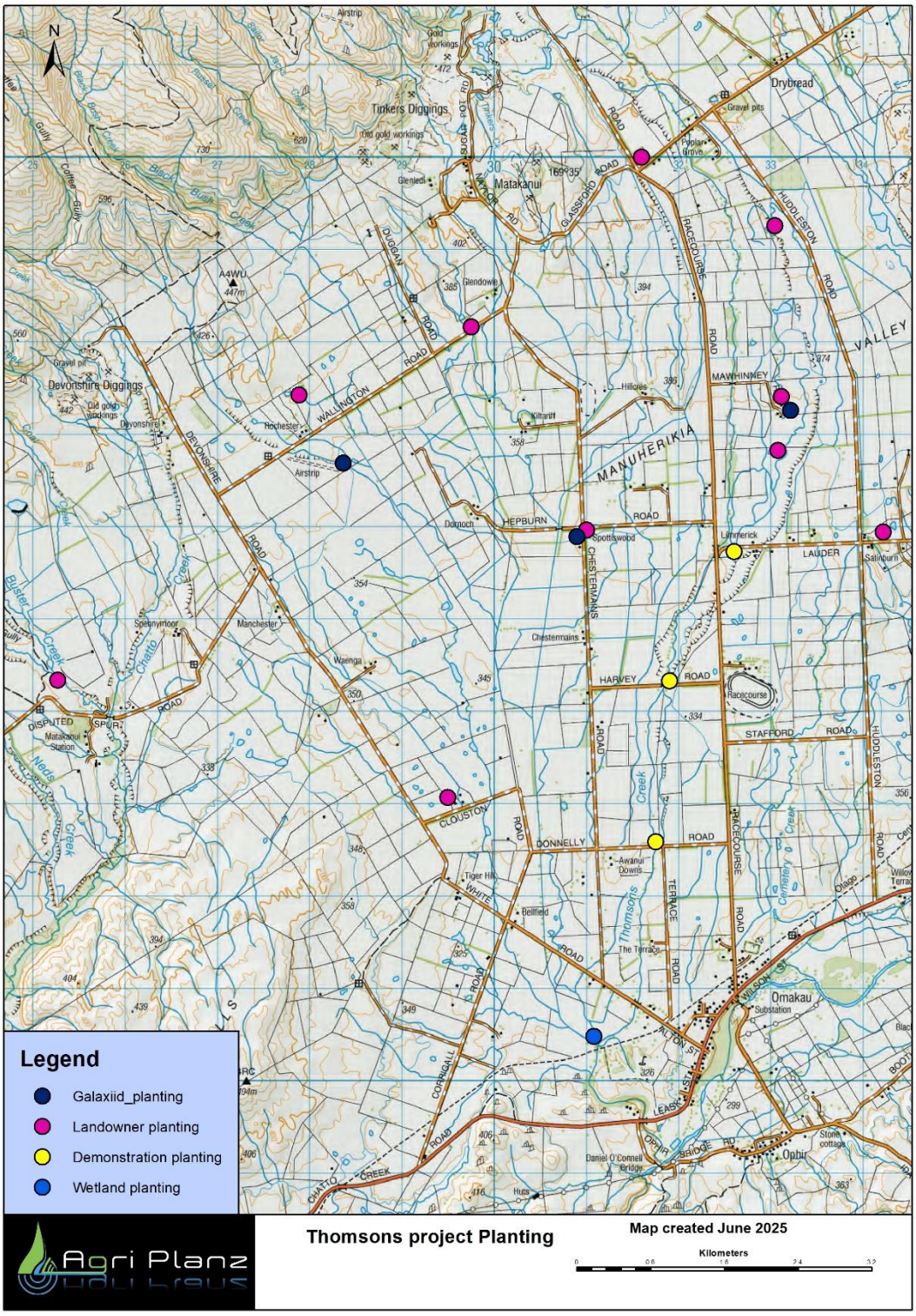

Figure 3: Planting sites across all the projects objectives

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Innovative Sediment Management Plans

A cornerstone of the project's catchment-wide approach was the development of comprehensive sediment management plans, representing a significant innovation in improving on-farm water quality. Working directly with farmers, the project completed 11 detailed sediment management plans that identified practical, site-specific actions for reducing sediment loss and improving water quality across individual farm operations.

These sediment plans addressed multiple sources of sediment generation, including livestock tracking areas, cultivation practices, stock water points, and erosion-prone paddocks. The plans were tailored to the specific needs of different farming systems within the catchment, recognising that dairy, beef, sheep, and cropping operations each present unique sediment generation challenges requiring different management approaches.

Each plan provided tailored recommendations based on individual farm characteristics, land use patterns, and topographic features, ensuring that proposed solutions were both technically sound and practically implementable within existing farming systems. The sediment management plans integrated seamlessly with the project's fencing and planting initiatives, creating comprehensive on-farm solutions that addressed sediment loss through multiple intervention points.

The innovation and effectiveness of these sediment plans have attracted attention beyond Central Otago, with the approach being adopted and implemented in Southland, demonstrating the project's significant contribution to the development of national environmental management practices.

Photo 19: Fonterra Sustainability Advisor Brian Goodger with local farmer Mike White working through a sediment plan

Advanced Modelling and Decision Support Tools

Building on the success of the sediment management plans, the project collaborated with the Waiora Manuherekia project, another project of the Manuherekia Catchment Group, to develop sophisticated decision support tools for farmers. The project employed Collaborations, a specialised company, to

utilise LIDAR and other geospatial data to create an innovative online modelling tool that helps farmers identify hotspots for overland nutrient loss.

This cutting-edge tool enables farmers to pinpoint critical source areas where practices like constructed wetlands, detention bunds, and other Good Management Practices (GMPs) can be most effectively deployed to manage nutrient runoff. The modelling platform provides farmers with evidence-based information to support strategic decision-making about where to invest in water quality improvements for maximum environmental benefit.

Soil Health and Management Practice Development

Soil health received particular attention through two expert-led field days that explored soil management strategies appropriate to local conditions and farming systems. These events built farmer knowledge and confidence in adopting practices that deliver both production and environmental benefits, while supporting the practical delivery of sediment management plan recommendations.

The field days provided hands-on learning opportunities where farmers could see demonstration of best practices, discuss implementation challenges, and share experiences with peers. This peer-to-peer learning approach proved highly effective in building confidence and encouraging adoption of improved practices across the catchment.

Photo 20: One of the soils field days with soil fertility guru Professor Jim Moir and local farmers

Objective 4: Knowledge Transfer and Community Engagement

Community Engagement Excellence

The project's fourth objective, focused on increasing awareness and understanding to support the broader Manuherekia Exemplar Catchment Project, generated outcomes significantly exceeding initial expectations. The project established itself as a regional leader in community-driven catchment management, attracting attention from policymakers, researchers, and practitioners across New Zealand.

Community engagement was comprehensive and sustained, encompassing 14 community events that consistently attracted strong participation. Wetland-focused events regularly drew over 30 participants, while the final catchment celebration attracted more than 60 community members. The project's Facebook page grew to 466 followers, with 259 posts documenting project progress and community activities, with over quarter million views by 50,000 people.

Photo 21: One of the catchment fielddays to visit the developing wetland March 2023

Community Stewardship Development

The constructed wetland became a focal point for community stewardship, with volunteer networks developing around bird watching, predator trapping, and native plant propagation. These volunteer groups provide ongoing monitoring and protection while demonstrating deep community ownership of the project's conservation outcomes.

Photo 22: Some of the amazing volunteers with Jo Corrie (in green) from DoC on a session to discuss and get tips for the wetland trapping programme

Educational Partnership Development

Educational partnerships proved particularly successful, with strong relationships established with Omakau and Poolburn Schools. The University of Otago Aquavan visited the community in October 2022, providing hands-on learning opportunities that connected students with cutting-edge research and monitoring techniques.

Omakau School developed a comprehensive Year 8 monitoring programme that operated throughout the project duration and will continue beyond project completion. This programme completed 34 water quality monitoring rounds with support from Otago Regional Council and Enviroschools, providing both educational value and genuine scientific data contributing to project evaluation.

Photo 23: The 2023 group of Year 8 Omakau students undertaking one of the regular water monitoring sessions at the wetland with ORC's Becky Clements

Media Engagement and Public Profile

Media engagement elevated the project's profile substantially, with 30 news articles published across local and national outlets including the Otago Daily Times, Central App, Central Otago News, and New Zealand Herald. Project manager Nicola McGrouther appeared on Jesse Mulligan's Radio New Zealand show, reaching national audiences and demonstrating the project's broader policy relevance.

The project attracted visits from four Members of Parliament, including David Parker and Andrew Hoggard, demonstrating its significance for policy development and political recognition of community-driven environmental initiatives.

Photo 24: MP Andrew Hoggard visiting the wetland July 2024

Recognition and Knowledge Products

Recognition of the project's excellence culminated in receiving the 2025 Otago Ballance Community Showcase Award, acknowledging outstanding contributions to environmental management and community engagement. The project produced nine factsheets documenting key learnings and maintains active web presence through mcg.org.nz and dedicated Facebook pages.

Innovation and Pilot Project Contributions

Technical Innovation and Replication Potential

The Thomsons Creek Catchment Project served as important pilot for multiple intervention types showing promise for broader application. The fish barrier design and construction approach provides a tested model for galaxiid protection that could be adapted to other Central Otago streams facing similar trout invasion pressures.

The constructed wetland represents one of the larger agricultural treatment wetlands in the region and provides valuable data on design, construction, and performance parameters applicable to similar settings. The integration of community access features with treatment functionality demonstrates how infrastructure can serve multiple objectives while maintaining primary environmental functions.

The perched culvert installations offer cost-effective approach to protecting smaller galaxiid populations and represent innovation in small-scale habitat protection that could be widely replicated where appropriate site conditions exist.

Community Engagement Model Innovation

Perhaps most significantly, the project's community engagement and partnership model provides a template for effective catchment-scale collaboration. The approach of combining technical expertise with genuine community ownership has proven highly effective in achieving both environmental outcomes and social acceptance.

The innovative sediment management plans developed through the project are now being adopted in Southland, demonstrating the broader applicability of locally developed solutions and the project's contribution to national environmental management practice.

Challenges and Adaptive Management

Stakeholder Engagement Complexities

The project encountered several significant challenges requiring adaptive management approaches. Iwi engagement, while initially strong during project development, became more difficult to maintain due to capacity constraints within rūnaka organisations. The project team addressed this through regular monthly updates and maintained open communication channels, though acknowledging that more intensive collaboration would have been beneficial.

Community Opposition and Response

A local advocacy group expressed strong opposition to the project, characterising it as "greenwashing" and expressing broader opposition to intensive farming practices. Rather than allowing this opposition to undermine project objectives, the team used it as motivation to strengthen community

communication and build broader support networks. This challenge ultimately contributed to stronger community cohesion and more effective storytelling about project benefits.

Regulatory and Technical Challenges

Technical challenges included navigating complex consent processes, with 21 resource consents required for various project elements. The project team successfully managed this through early engagement with regulatory agencies and thorough planning that anticipated potential issues.

Weather and seasonal constraints affected construction timelines, particularly for wetland establishment and planting activities. The project adapted through flexible scheduling and close coordination with contractors to optimise available working windows.

Economic Impact and Financial Sustainability

Investment Leverage and Job Creation

The project successfully leveraged its initial Ministry for the Environment funding to attract additional support and establish ongoing funding streams. With $2.8 million total investment over 3.5 years, the project created 8 full-time equivalent jobs while supporting over 78 contractors and suppliers throughout the project duration, generating substantial additional economic activity through contractor engagement and material procurement across the local and regional economy.

The substantial in-kind contributions from farmers ($290,000) demonstrate strong community commitment to ongoing stewardship and suggest a willingness to continue investing in catchment improvements. This community ownership is crucial for long-term project sustainability and continued environmental benefits.

Ongoing Funding and Support Systems

Secured funding includes Otago Regional Council Eco Fund support for wetland weed control in 2025-2026 and Ministry for the Environment transition funding for project facilitation. A $50,000 contingency fund has been established with Ministry for the Environment, sourced from savings from the project, to support any required mitigation works during the wetland's first operational year. The QEII National Trust is providing $10,000 in funding for the wetland project to be determined in conjunction with Rob Wardle, the local QEII officer, as the perimeter fencing was installed by the project instead of QEII.

The project established a donations system enabling ongoing public support and developed a comprehensive database of funding opportunities for future applications. This infrastructure provides a foundation for sustained community fundraising and strategic grant applications supporting long-term environmental management.

Environmental Monitoring and Outcomes

Water Quality Improvements

Early monitoring results demonstrate the wetland's effectiveness in improving water quality, with preliminary data showing reductions in suspended sediment export from the Sluice Channel. While comprehensive analysis requires additional time for system maturation and data collection, initial trends are highly encouraging and suggest the wetland is performing as designed.

Biodiversity Conservation Success

The biodiversity response has exceeded all expectations, with the wetland quickly establishing itself as critical habitat for both common and declining species. The rapid colonisation by black-billed gulls, and their subsequent successful breeding, represents a significant conservation outcome given this species' declining status and the rarity of suitable breeding habitat in modified agricultural landscapes.

The volunteer trapping programme has played a crucial role in supporting biodiversity outcomes at the wetland. By actively managing predator populations, volunteers have created safer nesting and foraging conditions that enhance breeding success for native species, particularly vulnerable ground-nesting birds like the black-billed gulls. This community-driven conservation effort demonstrates the significant impact that dedicated volunteer involvement can have on ecosystem restoration success.

Riparian planting across the catchment is contributing to habitat connectivity and water quality improvement, through reduced bank erosion and enhanced filtration of surface runoff. The establishment of over 51,000 plants represents substantial investment in long-term ecosystem restoration that will provide increasing benefits as vegetation matures.

Species Recovery Monitoring

Galaxiid population monitoring indicates successful protection of these threatened native fish species, with declining trout numbers and healthy galaxiid observations suggesting effective habitat restoration. The pilot nature of these interventions provides valuable data for potential replication across Central Otago's waterways.

Future Directions and Sustainability

Identified Research and Management Priorities

The project has identified several important areas requiring continued attention and potential future investment. Historic gold mining impacts on contemporary water quality represent significant knowledge gap requiring research collaboration with the University of Otago and other institutions. Understanding these legacy effects is crucial for developing appropriate management responses and setting realistic water quality targets.

Ongoing support for farmers to understand their impacts and track improvements from changing land management practices represents critical need for sustaining project benefits. This requires continued monitoring and feedback systems that help farmers see results of their efforts and adjust practices accordingly.

Infrastructure and System Development

Road maintenance practices and their contribution to sediment loss have been identified as important issues, with the project initiating dialogue with local council and roading contractors who have committed to modifying road grading practices. Future engagement is needed to support implementation of these improved practices, as addressing sediment loss from extensive gravel road network could yield significant additional water quality benefits.

Collaborative modelling work currently underway will help identify optimal locations for additional smaller wetlands, detention bunds, and critical source area management. This analysis will provide guidance for strategic placement of future interventions to maximise cumulative benefits.

Long-term Monitoring and Adaptive Management

Long-term monitoring and adaptive management systems need establishment to track changes over time, monitor restoration success, and identify emerging issues. This includes both technical monitoring of environmental parameters and social monitoring of community engagement and capacity.

Knowledge Transfer and Broader Impact

Regional and National Influence

The Thomsons Creek Catchment Project has successfully fulfilled its role as a learning platform for the broader Manuherekia Exemplar Catchment and wider catchment management community. The documented approaches, measured outcomes, and identified challenges provide valuable guidance for similar initiatives across New Zealand.

Key transferable learnings include the importance of genuine community ownership, the value of integrated technical and social interventions, and the effectiveness of combining infrastructure development with capacity building and education. The project demonstrates how environmental improvements can be achieved while strengthening community cohesion and building local stewardship capacity.

Technical Replication and Scaling

The pilot interventions tested through the project, particularly fish barriers and constructed wetlands in agricultural settings, provide technical models that can be adapted to other locations with similar challenges. The documented costs, performance data, and construction approaches offer practical guidance for replication efforts.

The community engagement strategies and communication approaches developed through the project provide templates for effective stakeholder involvement and public support building. The combination of technical excellence with compelling storytelling has proven highly effective in building broad support for environmental initiatives.

Photo 25; Celebration of the project and the opening of the wetland viewing platform, April 2025

Conclusion

The Thomsons Creek Catchment Project stands as compelling evidence that ambitious environmental goals can be achieved through collaborative approaches that recognise the essential role of community ownership in driving sustainable change. Its success provides both practical guidance and an inspirational example for the critical work of restoring and protecting New Zealand's freshwater environments while supporting productive agricultural landscapes.

The project's achievements extend far beyond its specific technical objectives, demonstrating how environmental initiatives can strengthen community cohesion, build local capacity, and contribute to broader policy and practice development. The remarkable volunteer engagement, consistent farmer participation, and broad public support indicate that the project has achieved the social sustainability essential for long-term environmental success.

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Looking forward, the project has established strong foundations for continued environmental improvement through secured funding streams, active volunteer networks, and robust institutional partnerships. The identified priorities for future work provide clear direction for building upon achieved successes while addressing remaining challenges.

The project's influence extends well beyond the Thomsons Creek catchment through its role in policy discussions, research collaborations, and knowledge transfer to other communities facing similar challenges. As New Zealand grapples with complex freshwater management challenges, the Thomsons Creek Catchment Project provides a proven model for achieving environmental improvements through approaches that honour both ecological integrity and community values.

The documented success of this initiative offers hope and practical guidance for similar efforts across the country, demonstrating that collaborative, community-driven approaches can deliver transformative environmental outcomes while building the social foundations essential for long-term sustainability. In an era where environmental challenges require unprecedented collaboration and innovation, the Thomsons Creek Catchment Project stands as exemplary demonstration of what is possible when technical expertise meets genuine community commitment.