

Then and now – looking back on the last seven years

By Graeme Peters

By the time you read this, Agcarm will have a new chief executive. This column is the last under my name.

After seven years as column writer for Agribusiness, it's time to look back. Not in a boring way. Not in a smug "what-a-great-job-done" manner. There have been wins, sure, but in other areas progress has been excruciatingly slow.

Seven years ago, there were some important – some would say glaring – gaps in membership.

We've lost count of how much Agcarm has grown in terms of sheer number of members, including New Zealand owned and operated companies.

The number by itself doesn't matter. What's important is that Agcarm now has a powerful constituency. When Agcarm turns up at the Environmental Protection Authority or Ministry for Primary Industries and announces "this is what industry says", we do so with the confidence that pretty much all the responsible players in the market are standing with us.

An Agcarm submission speaks for 80 percent of animal health manufacturers, so government takes note, especially as we know that all members, be they New Zealand or international, mostly share the same concerns and want similar things. The percentage is slightly lower for the crop protection market, but still more than enough to turn heads.

More subscription income while controlling costs has in turn allowed growth in the Agcarm secretariat, with event management and communication roles added in the last few years.

Having an excellent website, policy wins, and great events is important and has a snowball effect on membership. On more than a few occasions I've received a phone call from a non-member saying they want to sign up, convinced during a conversation with an Agcarm member.

In addition to growth in membership, Agcarm's achievements include the development of a group standard for veterinary medicines in small pack sizes, an upcoming law change on data protection, and an online solution providing access to safety information.

The group standard created a streamlined process for approving many animal medicines. It has cut red tape, which means less cost, more efficient regulation, and increased access to medicines for farmers and pet owners.

Manufacturers will also be pleased that we are moving closer to a law change in protection of scientific and safety data. This will allow three years protection for new uses and formulations of agrichemicals and veterinary medicines. Firms will have the incentive to invest in newer and more targeted technologies needed by farmers and growers. An influx of new products in distributor stores and for vets will result from this.

Though it's pleasing that data protection is coming, this has taken far too long, and the three years protection offered by government is too short.

Data protection is important because it comes back to the rights of people to protect what belongs to them.

The lack of protection resulted in a significant growth in sales of generic chemistries. With little opportunity to cut prices any further, the end result is the destruction of any value in the market.

Even the generics companies (with the exception of bargain basement traders), support intellectual property protection. Bring it on.

Another parting remark could label me as a bit of a wet, but it has to be said.

I've worked in a range of industries such as media, financial markets, and property, and the agricultural compounds crew are the least arrogant and most approachable.

Taking a responsible approach is integral to this industry. A culture of care is ingrained among Agcarm members. It's demonstrated in the research to finding softer chemistries, adopting and supporting product stewardship schemes, and supporting health and safety initiatives.

Some Agcarm members have extensive experience and amazing memories. Among the younger people, there is so much enthusiasm and commitment to making a difference to agriculture, farming and companion animals.

It's apparent that there is an incredible amount of collective brilliance in the industry – both amongst Agcarm members and its stakeholders.

Needless to say, my time with Agcarm has been rewarding.

Agcarm's new chief executive, Mark Ross comes with a strong background in advocacy and policy, and reminds me of an old fashioned saying - 'a man for the time, and a time for the man'. He's what Agcarm needs right now and I wish him all the best.