



# Reviewing the management plan for the Wither Hills Farm Park Discussion Document



## Why is the Council undertaking this review?

The Wither Hills Farm Park is an iconic and highly valued backdrop to Blenheim and the surrounding lower Wairau Valley.

Since the original purchase of land on the Wither Hills in 1944 to address soil conservation issues, a huge amount of effort over many years by the former Marlborough Catchment Board and Marlborough District Council has gone into stabilising these hills to protect Blenheim. Today the Farm Park's role as a soil and water conservation reserve is as important as ever.

The current management plan produced in 2003 (2003 Plan), has been invaluable in providing the management direction for the last two decades. This 2003 Plan is available for viewing on the Council website. ([Wither Hills Farm Park Management Plan 2003](#))

However, much has changed over the 20 years since the 2003 Plan was written and a review of this document is now necessary to consider these changes when determining future management direction for the Farm Park. This will ensure that this important area best meets the needs for residents of Blenheim and the wider Marlborough community into the future.

It will be important that the objective of protecting and further improving the stability and resilience of this area from floods, erosion, drought and fire remains the primary purpose. This is particularly critical given the extreme weather events associated with climate change already being experienced in the district. Further providing for public use and enjoyment of the park and native habitat restoration may also be important priorities for the community.

## What process is being undertaken?

The community is invited to provide written suggestions as to what the future management direction should be for this area. Various objectives and functions of the park are discussed within this document, which we are interested in your views on.

These suggestions will be used in the development of a draft management plan. Once this is completed later this year, the community will be further invited to provide feedback on the draft plan through a written submission and hearing stage.

Any changes required in response to submissions will then be made to the draft plan before it is adopted by Council.

## What has changed since 2003?

- Management of the park has progressed from a period of widespread active and urgent erosion control to maintenance of most areas.
- Existing tree plantings have reached maturity with some reaching the end of life and starting to collapse.
- Effects of climate change are starting to be felt with more extreme weather events occurring (droughts and floods).
- Recreational use of the area has significantly increased, both in user numbers and in demand for a greater range of activities.



- Further subdivisions have occurred immediately adjacent to the park, resulting in sensitivities between adjacent rural and urban activities.

- Awareness and support for biodiversity restoration has increased, as has community interest in planting and pest control activities.
- The Te Tau Ihu Iwi Deeds of Settlement Act (2014) has been passed with increased recognition and acknowledgement of the values and aspirations of manawhenua iwi.
- The Proposed Marlborough Environment Plan was notified in 2016 with many provisions now being treated as operative.
- A regionally significant invasive species (Chilean needle grass) has been detected with control and spread risk mitigation commencing.

## What are the key issues to consider?

### 1. Overall purpose and objectives

The 2003 Plan identified 6 objectives for the park, the primary purposes being soil conservation and recreation:

#### Primary Objectives

- a) Soil Conservation
- b) Recreation

#### Secondary Objectives

- c) Sustainable and economic land use
- d) Preserve and enhance biodiversity and natural values
- e) Preserve and enhance aesthetic values
- f) Enable and promote use and accessibility

Soil conservation will remain the management priority for the park, given the significant risks to the Blenheim urban area from severe erosion.

However, the park also contributes to the quality of life for the community in a range of other ways, which are likely to have evolved from those identified in the 2003 Plan. Other objectives identified for the park will need be undertaken in a way that does not adversely affect slope stability and soil conservation, given that this is the management priority.

## 2. Management Approach

The management approach within the 2003 Plan was to divide the park into 4 Activity Zones based on the different physical characteristics and purposes of each zone. Various activities were then assigned a permitted, advisory, discretionary, and prohibited status depending on the suitability and appropriateness of the activity within each zone (Page 14 of the 2003 Plan)

There is likely to be continued merit in dividing the park into zones in some form to ensure the right management and opportunities occur in the right location and that different visitor types are adequately catered for.

## 3. Soil conservation and erosion control



The Wither Hills are particularly vulnerable to tunnel gully erosion due to the loess soils that occur in the area.

Since the 1940's a huge amount of effort has gone into addressing significant soil erosion issues. Methods used have usually involved cross-slope bulldozer gully infilling of affected areas, followed by resowing of either grass or exotic trees. This process to re-establish vegetation has been extremely challenging due to the dry climate and low fertility soils.

Continued efforts using this approach over many years have been effective in progressively stabilising slopes and reducing the movement of silt.

However, in some cases such as within the Sutherland Stream QEII covenant, the resowing of grass (after the Boxing Day 2000 fire) has had other consequences such as restricting the natural

recovery of the decimated kanuka forest within the covenant area.

Establishing and maintaining vegetation cover will continue to be an important part of managing the Wither Hills into the future. This is likely to remain a combination of tree cover and the use of pasture and grazing.

### The role of tree planting

A range of tree species has historically been used in the past to stabilise slopes and trap silt in valley floors. These trees include various species of Pine, Eucalyptus, Wattle, Tree Lucerne, Poplar and Willow. These trees were selected due to being fast growing and resilient in unstable, high salt and drought environments, producing strong and extensive root systems.

Oaks have also been effectively used to create a woodland effect on lower slopes and high public use areas.



Decisions regarding future tree planting will additionally need to consider other attributes such as:

- species flammability
- risk of spread to other parts of the Farm Park and to other areas
- contribution towards natural ecosystem restoration
- potential impacts on landscape values
- ability to store carbon.

### The role of farming and pasture

Farming has been used very successfully within the park as a means of both managing grassland and the associated fire risk as well as reducing erosion risk through building soil fertility and pasture cover.

It has also provided a further point of interest and education for park users as well as enabling economic activity.



The way that soil and pasture are managed, and where, how, and what type of livestock is farmed, will affect how well wider objectives for the park are met.

#### 4. Fire risk management

Fire remains a significant risk both to soil conservation and to the safety of users of the farm park. Recent fire risk management modelling undertaken confirms the speed and severity of a fire occurring within the park under high and extreme fire danger conditions.



Those that recall the Boxing Day 2000 fire will be aware of the risk that fire presents.

Specialist advice suggests a range of actions aimed at reducing the chance of fires starting and if a fire starts, reducing its damage potential. Improvements to both management practice and vegetation cover will assist in reducing fire risk.

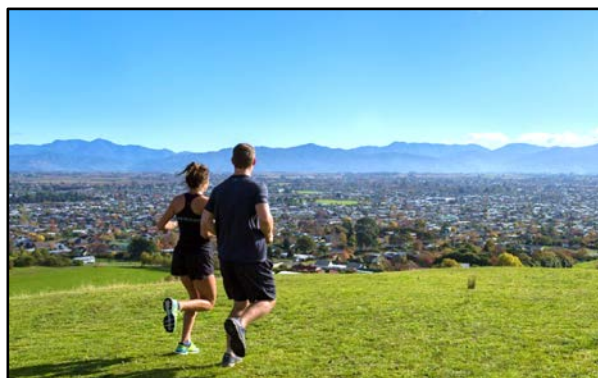
Actions could include:

- Coordination with Fire and Emergency New Zealand for public awareness of fire risk.
- Controls on spark hazardous activities within the park linked to fire danger levels.
- Removal of all Eucalyptus species and Gorse.
- Underplanting of other exotic forest areas with either broadleaf hardwoods or lower flammability species.
- Expansion of existing native planted areas.
- Commence transition of other high flammability species to lower flammability species.
- Manage farm tracks and roads to assist in reducing fire spread.

Other key elements include continuing to provide and improve firefighting infrastructure such as access tracks and water supplies as well as retaining and enhancing the public awareness and access closure system to manage public safety risks. Additionally fire modelling for the farm park is currently being undertaken and will be publicly available when the draft plan is notified for submission.

#### 5. Provision of recreation opportunities

The Wither Hills has seen a significant increase in community use and enjoyment over recent years. Diversity of use has also increased, with mountain bikers, walkers, runners or those having a stroll or a picnic all now enjoying the park.



To accommodate these different and increased uses, and ensure visitor experience and safety are maintained, tracks and farm roads have been identified as bike-only, pedestrian-only, or shared, to reduce the potential for conflict or safety issues.

These categories may be viewed on the Council Smartmaps system:

### [Wither Hills Walking and Cycling Tracks](#)

A dedicated mountain bike park off Taylor Pass Road has also been in place for some time with strong operations and maintenance support provided by the Marlborough Mountainbike Club.

With the construction of a pump track and recent Council approval for a mountain bike skills development area in the Rifle Range Carpark area, mountain bike use in this part of the park is also increasing.

The highest visitor use of the park occurs from the Rifle Range and Redwood Street entrances with the Rotary Lookout circuit, Sutherland Stream and Mount Vernon loop tracks being particularly popular.



Other activities such as horse riding, four-wheel driving, hang gliding and parapenting are permitted from time to time to organised groups.

Access for dog walking was considered as part of the 2021 Dog Control Policy and Bylaw review with dogs prohibited through most of the Wither Hills Farm Park except for the Redwood Street entrance carpark which provides access to the Sutherland Stream Reserve for dogs off lead.

The use of drones in the park has been increasing over recent years, with the need to consider whether any management controls are necessary to maintain the visitor experience for others.

Toilet facilities are currently located at the Rifle Range and Quail Stream carparks and in the upper Quail and mid Sutherland valleys.

The Redwood Street carpark currently does not have toilet facilities provided, nor does the Mountain Bike Park carpark.

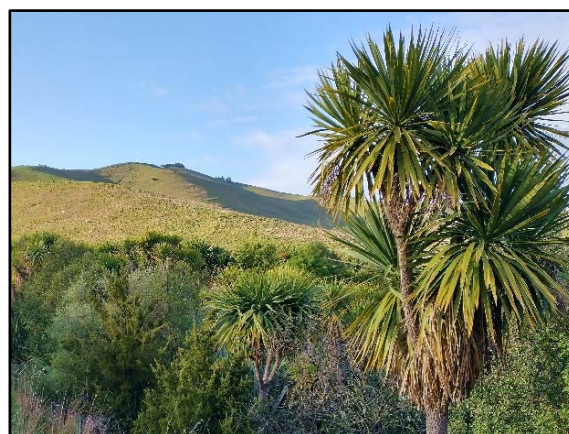


While the park has a good range of recreational opportunities and facilities it will be important for the management plan to consider where any improvements may be required. This may be in the form of capacity to accommodate increasing visitor use or provision to accommodate different types of uses, visitors experience needs and capabilities.

### **6. Restoration of native habitats**

The dry, tussock-covered hills of southern Marlborough including the Wither Hills were once forested with kahikatea and cabbage tree in the wetlands, matai and totara in the drier areas, and at higher elevations, beech.

A long history of first Māori occupation and then European pastoralism has resulted in the loss of most of this forest cover.



In recent years there has been an increased effort going into the restoration of valley floor and wetland habitats within the park.

The 2003 Plan identified large areas for tree planting (Appendix 2) although this may not be practical at this scale. There is, however, potential for the progressive further enhancement and expansion of indigenous vegetation on lowland flats, valley floor and lower flanks. This would provide a transition away from exotic tree species - some of which are now reaching the end of their lives.

The fire modelling that is occurring with different vegetation options could have beneficial biodiversity outcomes in addition to reducing fire risk.

## 7. Invasive species management

Introduced invasive species (weeds and pests) within the district are a significant risk, to biodiversity and primary production sectors.

The Wither Hills Farm Park has an ongoing programme to manage longstanding infestations of nassella tussock in the Regional Pest Management Plan obligations. Additionally, an intensive management programme is also carried out to manage the more recent and significant threat from Chilean needle grass. Other weed issues such as gorse, broom and old man's beard are also subject to weed control effort.



Control of rabbits has historically been undertaken through night shooting, poisoning and the release of biological control agents, however, this is becoming increasingly difficult to undertake safely given the significant recreational use of the area. Possums, mustelids, rats and magpies are also subject to control programmes.

Given our national history of introductions of plant and animals creating subsequent invasive species issues in the long term, careful consideration in selecting species for future planting will be required to ensure further weed issues are not created. Similarly, the use of stringent hygiene procedures will be important when machinery and equipment are used for Farm Park management to prevent new incursions or further weed spread within the park.

## 8. Landscape protection

The Wither Hills form a distinctive backdrop to Blenheim and the wider Wairau Plain. The golden undulating form of the hills is mostly free from buildings with noticeably clear ridges and spurs.

The Marlborough Environment Plan (MEP) recognises this by including this area within the *High Amenity Landscapes* and *Significant Ridgelines* layers with associated development controls.



While the MEP provides controls on landscape protection, it will be important that the management plan also provides this management direction and that any structures, plantings or other reserve development do not adversely affect these values.

## 9. Other economic land uses

### Forestry and carbon farming

As part of the One Billion trees assessment for the Government, the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI) identified the Wither Hills as an area potentially suitable for forestry.

While exotic trees may have historically been used in the past for land stabilisation purposes, future planting will most likely only occur on flanks and valley floors and be native, providing suitable species can achieve the soil conservation and fire management objectives for the area.

Exotic forestry is also fire vulnerable and has the potential to adversely affect existing landscape values.

## Tourism

The Wither Hills Farm Park is providing a valuable recreational destination for Blenheim and Marlborough residents. However, increasing domestic and international tourism over recent years has contributed to additional use of this area by visitors.

At present, there are no commercial recreation concessions in place for activities or for hospitality services such as food and refreshments.

## How do I participate in the process?

In considering the information provided in this discussion document the Council would like your thoughts on the questions below. The Council also welcomes feedback on any of the issues discussed within this document or on any other matter you would like to see addressed in the management plan review.

### Questions

1. *After soil conservation, what do you think are the next most important objectives for managing the Farm Park into the future?*
2. *Do you have any views on the farming activity in the Farm Park?*
3. *What are your thoughts on the proposed actions to manage fire risk?*
4. *What is your primary entry point and exit point to the Farm Park?*
5. *What improvements to existing facilities within the Farm Park do you think are necessary?*
6. *Do you think there are any additional facilities for Farm Park users that may be needed?*
7. *Where do you think the focus should be for native restoration planting on the Wither Hills?*
8. *What is your view of the management priorities for invasive species (weeds and pests)?*
9. *How important is maintaining the current landscape of the Wither Hills to you?*
10. *Do you consider there is a role for recreation concessions or hospitality services within the park?*

## How to make a submission

You can make a submission online at [www.marlborough.govt.nz/your-council/have-your-say-consultations](http://www.marlborough.govt.nz/your-council/have-your-say-consultations) or by email to [witherhills.planreview@marlborough.govt.nz](mailto:witherhills.planreview@marlborough.govt.nz).

You can also download a submission form from the Council's website (or pick up a form from Council offices or libraries). Completed forms can be submitted by hand to Council offices, emailed, or posted to Parks Planner, Marlborough District Council, PO Box 443, Blenheim 7240. The submission period closes at 5pm on 15 May.

Once a draft management plan has been prepared there will be a further opportunity provided for submissions.

If you wish to talk with someone at the Council about the review, please contact Linda Craighead on 03 520 7400.

