

Reviewing the management plan for the Wither Hills Farm Park

Summary of first round of feedback June 2023



A discussion document on the upcoming review of the Wither Hills Farm Park Management Plan was published on 23 March with written feedback invited until 27 April. This period was extended until 15 May to provide further opportunity for input from the community. There were 94 submissions received in total.

The feedback received clearly indicates the value that the Wither Hills play in the quality of life for the residents of Blenheim and the wider Marlborough community. Submissions were positive of the progress to date over many years in erosion control, planting and in providing for a variety of recreational activities. However, they also identified a range of opportunities to further improve and enhance the park into the future.

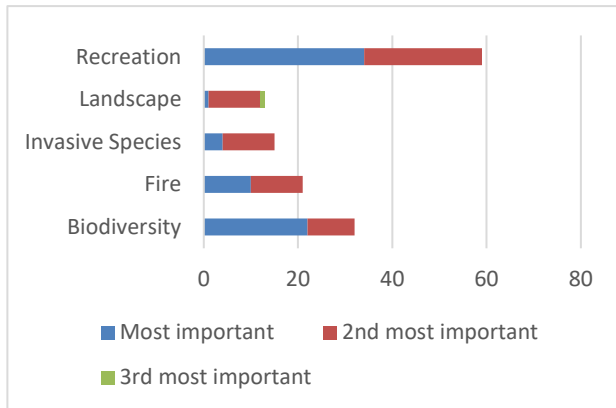
A copy of all feedback received is available on the Council's website at <https://www.marlborough.govt.nz/recreation/parks-and-open-spaces/parks-and-open-spaces-plans-and-reports/wither-hills-farm-park-management-plan>.

The suggestions made in the submissions will be considered as the management plan is developed through its various stages.

Overall Management Objectives

After soil conservation, what do you think are the next two most important objectives for managing the Farm Park into the future?

As expected, the community recognises the importance of a range of management objectives for the park with recreation and biodiversity restoration considered the most important after soil conservation.



Themes from comments:

- The importance of the Wither Hills in the visual, recreation and cultural identity of the community and the need for a long-term vision for the park.
- Strong support for changing the planting strategy to a greater use of natives to achieve erosion control, manage fire risk and restore biodiversity.
- That further effort should be directed towards restoring the dryland forest ecosystem within the QEII covenant and surrounding areas.
- Some support for further Oak/exotic hardwood woodlands on lower slopes.
- The Council has a responsibility to showcase good land management and farming practice.
- The opportunity that the park provides for the community to come together and participate in shared restoration and development activities.
- That effective fire risk management and pest control are critical elements to ensure all other objectives are possible.
- The need for the further development of recreational opportunities as the area becomes more popular.

Farming as a management tool



Do you have any views on the farming activity in the Farm Park?

Significant interest in the farming operation was expressed with just over three quarters of respondents providing feedback regarding this area.

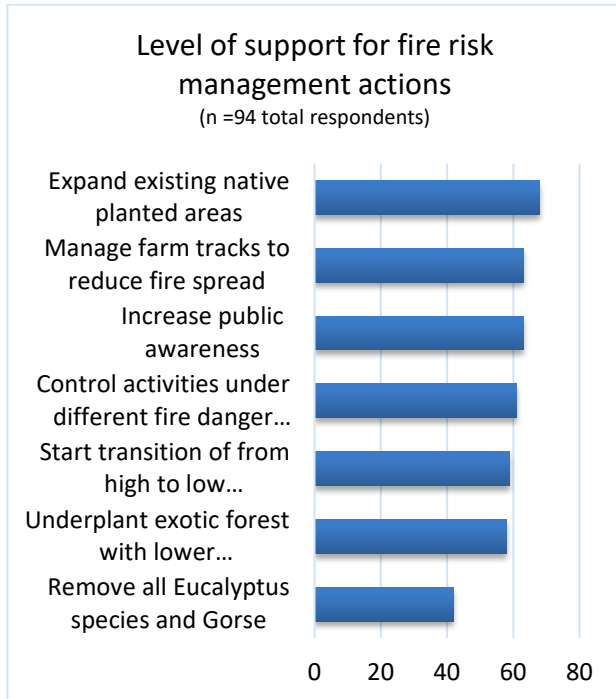
Themes from comments:

- The value of being able to see and experience a working farm for urban residents.
- Farming should be seen as a management tool to support other objectives, rather than an objective itself and it should be accepted that this may reduce the suitability of a commercial lease.
- The need to provide for the removal of grazing in some areas to allow for outcomes such as forest/biodiversity restoration, erosion control etc.
- The opportunity that farming presents as a learning resource for schools and other educational institutions, providing opportunities for students to learn about agricultural practices, sustainability, and other related topics.
- The need for upgraded farm infrastructure (fencing, yards, woolshed, water supplies).
- Best practice technical support through a farm advisory committee or other suitable dryland farming specialists is necessary.
- Concern regarding the compatibility of cattle in terms of land damage and mountain biker and walker safety.
- A few submissions also wished to see farming activity cease altogether.

Fire Risk Management

Do you agree with the suggested following actions to manage fire risk?

Most respondents completing the questionnaire supported all or most of the fire risk management options provided.



Themes from comments:

- Whether it is necessary to remove gorse given its function as a nursery crop, or eucalyptus - which is attractive to birds (removal of low branches instead).
- Focus should be on long grass as the primary threat for fire spread rather than isolated areas of other vegetation.



- Concern regarding the effectiveness of farm tracks as fire breaks and the erosion risk that would result by widening these with machinery.

- Support for active risk management activities to be undertaken to allow for the park not to be closed as much over dry summer months.
- Suggested improvements to water storage on the western side of the park and to enlarge the existing dam in Sutherland Stream (for fire control and livestock drinking water).

Community Access and Use

What is your primary entry and exit point to the Farm Park?



*Other access comprises entry or exit via Grigg Drive or from Harling Park/Howick Road.

The responses regarding the use of the access points to the park are consistent with existing use data reinforcing that:

- The Rifle Range (and NW side of the park more generally) is the highest use area.
- The Redwood St entrance and Sutherland Stream is the second most significant entry point.

Recreation Facilities



What improvements to existing facilities within the Farm Park do you think are necessary?

Themes from comments:

- Need to further differentiate biking and walking tracks with clear signage.
- Expansion of well graded biking and walking tracks to suit users with less mobility as well as those with pushchairs, buggies, wheelchairs etc.
- Improvement to the maintenance standard of tracks is needed through a well prescribed maintenance plan.
- Provision for use of the park by horses including bridle trails.
- Both support and opposition expressed regarding the proposed the new skills area for mountain bikes.
- Identify suitable areas to walk dogs on a lead (or conversely have an annual dog friendly day in a specified area).
- Changing 'climb over' styles to gates to improve access for a wider range of users.

Do you think there are any additional facilities for Farm Park users that may be needed?

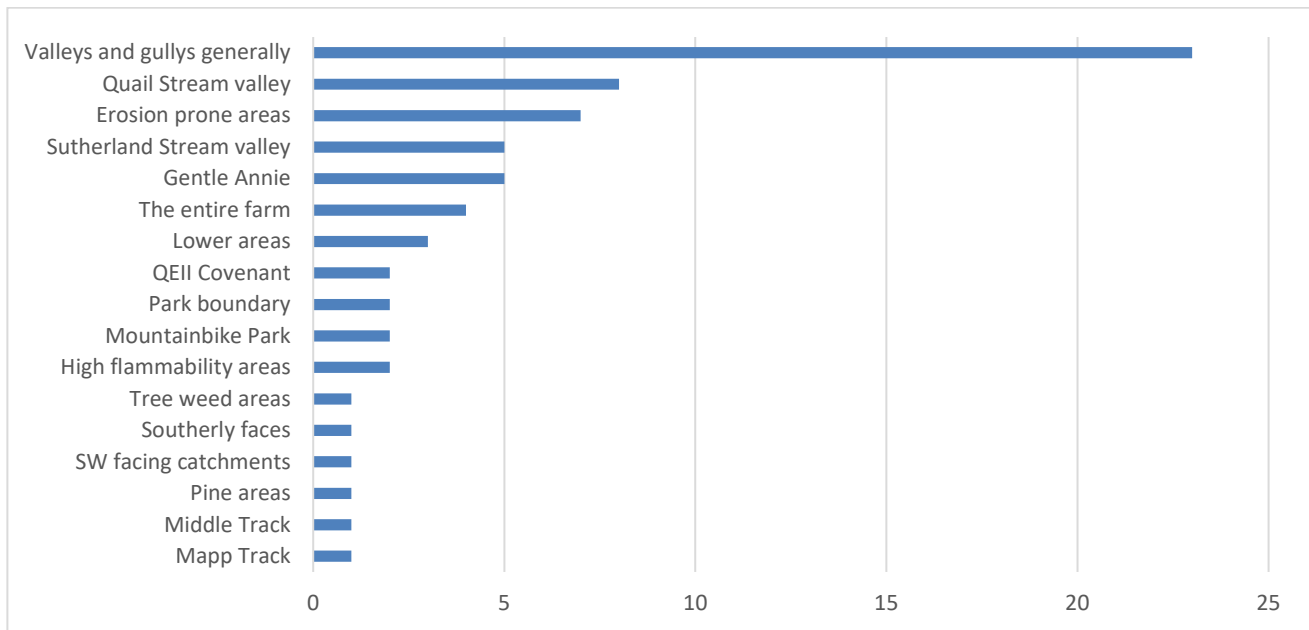
Themes from comments:

- New toilet at Sutherland Stream/Redwood Street carpark.
- Play area sunshade.
- Fully fenced dog park.
- Additional seating at key locations that meets the needs of older and disabled people.
- Provision of drinking fountains at key locations.
- Additional education panels or QR code markers that provide interesting information regarding the history of the park.
- Additional bike cattle stops.
- Wayfinding signage from surrounding suburbs to direct visitors to the park entrances.
- Some support for permanent vehicle access to a viewing point, or alternatively provide for organised 4WD access to lookout areas from time to time for non-walkers.



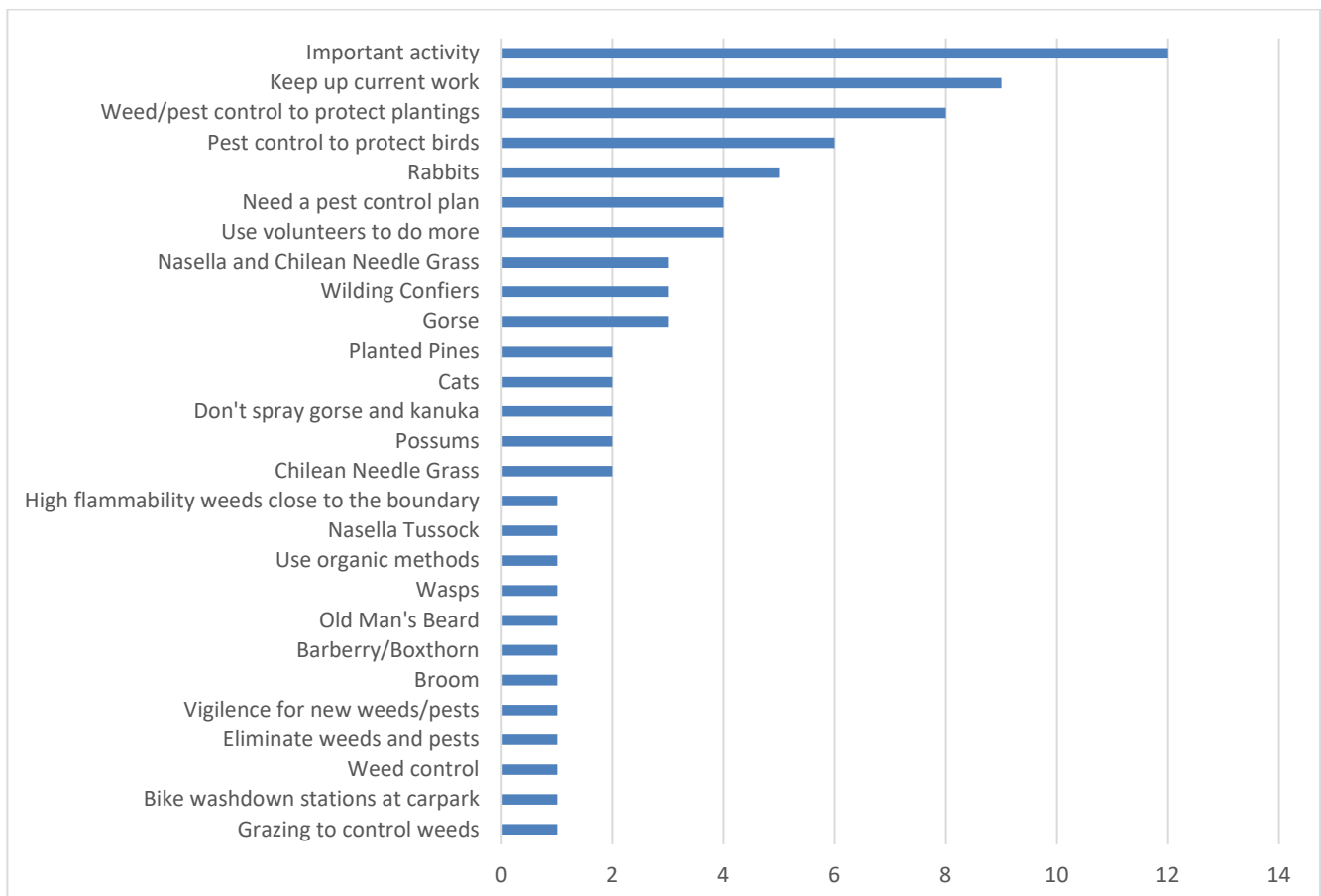
Restoration of native habitats

Where do you think the focus should be for native restoration planting on the Wither Hills?



Weed and Pest Control

What is your view of the management priorities for invasive species (weeds and pests)?



Landscape protection



How important is maintaining the current landscape of the Wither Hills to you?

A total of 65% of respondents considered maintaining the current landscape as being important.

There was a predominant view that the current view of the hills behind Blenheim and surrounding vineyards is iconic to Marlborough.

Themes from comments:

- Buildings, structures, roads, and exotic plantings detract from the landscape.
- Opinions were divided on the visual effect that additional native plantings and a long-term transition to forest would have on the landscape. Most considered a gradual change in this direction - particularly with a focus on restoring valleys and gullies leaving ridgelines clear, would be acceptable.
- It was pointed out by several submitters that the hills were originally covered in dryland forest and the grass covered hills we see today are a symbol of our damage to the natural environment, rather than anything to be celebrated.

Commercial Facilities and Activities

Do you think there is a role for recreation concessions or hospitality services within the park?

A total of 63% of respondents considered that there is a role for recreation concessions or hospitality services within the park.

Themes from comments:

- Support for simple 'coffee cart' or 'ice cream van' type opportunities at the Rifle Range and/or Redwood St entrance points.



- A lower level of support for the development of buildings and other facilities to accommodate a café or restaurant, with some active opposition to this type of development.
- There was an expressed lack of clarity regarding what comprised a 'recreation concession', however there was strong overall support for a range of recreational activities to be provided for.

Other Feedback

Do you have any other feedback on matters you would like to see addressed through the management plan review?

- Support for the management plan review and the refocusing of future development direction for this important area.
- Suggested planting of edible trees on lower slopes adjoining the urban area (fruit and nuts).
- Care is needed to ensure that the landfill does not adversely affect park values.
- Important to actively manage and maintain water courses and stormwater intakes to protect the urban area.
- Greater opportunities for community partnerships are needed.
- Controls are needed on motorised vehicles/vehicles given the greater range of offroad equipment that exists today.

- The 'permitted', 'discretionary' and 'prohibited' categories that are attached to the four zones in the current plan have resulted in the management of the park becoming too regimented – the new plan needs to be more flexible.
- Need to engage with youth regarding plan development.
- Need to use and promote the *Environmental Care Code* and *Tiaki Promise*.
- No use of drones should be permitted within the park.
- Enable nighttime access rather than discourage it.
- The management plan should provide more detailed standards regarding track development.

Next Steps

The suggestions made in these submissions will be considered as the management plan is developed.

Once a draft management plan has been completed, this will be considered by the Council prior to being approved for release for a further round of submissions by the community.

If you wish to speak with someone about the review, please contact Linda Craighead at the Council on 03 520 7400 or by email at witherhills.planreview@marlborough.govt.nz.

