

# GIVING CLIMATE ACTION THE GREEN LIGHT

By Anna Dunlop



South Wairarapa Veterinary Services is the winner of the NZVA's inaugural Environmental Sustainability Award. *VetScript* talks to two of its veterinarians, Richard Kirton and Jane Ough, on the initiatives implemented, the benefits they've seen and their hopes for the future of veterinary practice.

### What's the history of the practice?

**Richard:** South Wairarapa Veterinary Services (SWVets) was incorporated in 1980 in Carterton, and was initially a veterinary club for farmers. It's since grown to cover the whole of Wairarapa, with clinics in Featherston, Martinborough and, more recently, Masterton. It's always been run by people who are part of the community and care deeply about their clients. We currently have five shareholders, and they are all actively working in the business.

### What animals do you see?

**Richard:** Ours is a full mixed practice: we have five production animal veterinarians, four equine veterinarians and eight companion animal veterinarians. The small animal side is growing as Wairarapa urbanises and we see population drift to rural areas.

### How do you feel about winning the NZVA's inaugural Environmental Sustainability Award?

**Richard:** It's awesome that the NZVA is recognising the importance of environmental sustainability and it feels great to have won. Ultimately, though, what we most want is more recognition and awareness of the climate crisis; we don't really care if we win the race, we just want to see more and more competitors take part.

**Jane:** I agree – the first step to solving problems is to recognise them, which the NZVA has done by creating this award. The work our practice is doing can only make sense if everyone in the veterinary profession gets involved and works collaboratively. Next year I'd like to see a lot of people competing for this award.

### How did the business's sustainability journey start?

**Richard:** Jane's passion for the environment is what really kicked things off. She's been the main motivator and influencer for me, and probably the rest of the team too. She shares her enthusiasm and knowledge with staff through everyday conversations, and all the shareholders have accepted the science and are on board.

**Jane:** Things really started during a cat spay in July 2021, when I told Richard that the Amazon rainforest was emitting more carbon than it was absorbing. He was then pivotal in helping me to convince the board to take climate crisis action. In August of that year we engaged Ekos, a New Zealand not-for-profit, to measure the practice's carbon footprint. It was a substantial spend, but the result gave us the big picture and showed us where we needed to take action.



The practice's estimated emissions in the financial year 2020–21 totalled 321.53 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent. That's when the shareholders decided to invest in lowering the business's emissions for the next few years, and we'll repeat the carbon audit once we've made substantial progress. **Richard:** Our next step was to form an internal climate action group, which

comprises six team members from across the business. We meet once a month, sometimes more often. The business elected to try to reduce the practice's emissions rather than pay to offset them; if we'd done the latter we would have had no influence on our staff or the community. So we're doing it ourselves, with no experience but plenty of passion and enthusiasm. Our goal is to be carbon neutral by 2028.

**What initiatives have you implemented?**

**Jane:** The first thing we did was plant trees; it was something we could do straight away while we figured out what other actions we could take. We've had two official work tree-planting days and two volunteer weekend tree-planting days, with 6,000 native trees now planted. These events have been very popular with our

staff, clients and suppliers. We also have a clinic green space with an arboretum, and a flower and vegetable garden, which all our staff can access.

Waste is another area we've addressed; we look at everything we do and see if there's a better option. For example, the practice has replaced disposable gowns, drapes and hats (which produced mountains of waste) with washable, reusable cotton ones that can be sterilised. We recycle everything we can and work with suppliers, such as Zoetis, SVS Veterinary Supplies and Royal Canin, who recycle their packaging. We're also working with the Agrecovery rural recycling programme to develop options for recycling animal health medicinal products. We compost food waste and animal hair, too.

**Richard:** Our carbon footprint measure indicated that 91% of our emissions came from travel, with 61% of that from our practice's fleet of 14 vehicles and 30% from staff commuting. We're now looking at transitioning our fleet to low-emission options. We aim to change our existing five equine vehicles to plug-in hybrid electric vehicles by the end of this year, and we're now discussing options for our production animal fleet.

We also surveyed our staff to identify the barriers to commuting using low-carbon transport, and we're now trying to remove them where possible. For example, we're working with Waka Kotahi and the local council to enable safer commuter cycling, and



## KEY FACTS

**PRACTICE:** South Wairarapa Veterinary Services (SWVets)

**PRACTICE TYPE:** Mixed animal

**PRACTICE LOCATIONS:** Carterton, Featherston, Martinborough and Masterton

**SHAREHOLDERS:** Adrian Evans, Katie Grant, Richard Kirton, Jen Patrick and Aidan Smith

**STAFF:** SWVets has 56 staff: 17 veterinarians, 14 veterinary nurses, five veterinary technicians and 20 support staff

**SINCE:** 1980

**SERVES:** Wairarapa

**Main image:** Tracey, one of the practice's support staff, in the vegetable garden.

**Clockwise from top left:** Richard and veterinary nurse Sam now cycle to work; Jane and Richard in the operating theatre; equine veterinarian Sam with one of the plug-in hybrid electric vehicles; the climate action group meets monthly to plan projects.

last summer the practice held its first low-carbon summer cycling challenge, in which our staff clocked up over 2,000km in cycling to work. At least seven staff members now regularly cycle to work, and we try to place staff at their nearest clinics to minimise their commuting.

We also now stock climate-friendly products: pet food made in New Zealand, such as Genius; and locally made, fully compostable pet toys from Ruff & Woolly. These are doing very well and raising awareness of environmental issues among our clients. Stocking these eco-friendly products will be a focus for us going forward as more become available.

**Jane:** Client awareness is very important. We've put posters in our consult rooms on the actions we're taking (they've proved great talking points) and we regularly update our website and social media. We're also aware that veterinarians are trusted advisers to their clients, and that those relationships can be used to drive change.

## How have you incorporated sustainability into your business model?

**Richard:** Our goal has always been to get the business focused on sustainability from the top down, and to have that focus fully embedded in our processes and decision-making. Decisions can't just be made from a financial or human resources perspective, they must also consider our carbon emissions. We've recently established a monthly climate action group meeting in the

working day (we used to meet outside work) and that's been useful in highlighting the importance of what we're doing.

**Jane:** We're at the stage where we need to formalise our processes and make them part of business protocols. SWVets is a big business with the usual staff turnover rates, so it can be difficult to keep the momentum going. We're planning to address questions such as 'Should we be setting formal targets and/or monitoring?' and 'Should our climate initiatives be part of our induction process for new staff?'

## What benefits have you seen?

**Richard:** The mental health benefits have been huge. I think a big part of mental resilience is simply doing something and taking action. For example, I'm cycling more, spending more time outside in nature, getting more exercise and fresh air, and engaging with the community. These are all well known as good for our mental health.





The veterinary profession is a tough gig, and the sustainability work our team is doing gives them something to focus on other than ‘being veterinarians’.

We held a planting day in May, and some staff said it was one of the best days of work they’d had – it ticked so many boxes for people.

**Jane:** Implementing these initiatives has really lifted team spirits; the vegetable garden in particular has been a real success. We’ve seen economic benefits too: the plug-in hybrid electric vehicles use a quarter of the fuel of their predecessors and produce 84% less carbon dioxide per kilometre. Switching to reusable drapes and gowns has also seen cost savings – and while we haven’t quantified these yet, savings come naturally with more sustainable habits.

**Do you have advice for other veterinary practices looking to become more sustainable?**

**Jane:** Jump straight in and calculate your carbon footprint. It will tell you where you are, your big area(s) of emissions and what

**“Our carbon footprint has proved a very powerful tool; we come back to it all the time and it holds us to account.”**

you need to tackle first. Our carbon footprint has proved a very powerful tool; we come back to it all the time and it holds us to account.

**Richard:** Obviously, getting a carbon footprint calculation depends on the shareholders/owners of the business being on board. I feel for people who are concerned about their environmental impacts – often younger, less senior staff – when those who own the businesses aren’t really interested in doing something about them. How do they get the businesses on board and drive action? It can be a real challenge, but employees have more power than ever so it’s important to keep striving for change.

**Jane:** I agree – find out who at your practice has similar concerns, then approach management as a group. Many voices have more power than one lone voice. I would also encourage veterinary practices to

engage with their local communities on issues that will help them to become more sustainable, such as installing commuter cycle paths and improving recycling collection.

**What do you see as the future of veterinary practice?**

**Richard:** I think that very soon we’ll see new graduates and young veterinarians and veterinary nurses incorporating practices’ sustainability/ environmental credentials (or lack of) into their decision-making when applying for roles. At the NZVA conference last year we had several young veterinarians telling us that they were struggling with their workplaces not taking environmental sustainability seriously. Additionally, our human resources manager recently advised that we are seeing more and more candidates choosing us as their preferred employer

due to our climate change and sustainability work; this is particularly evident in attracting and retaining our younger workforce.

Eventually, environmental sustainability is going to become as important as wellbeing – which is currently a hot topic – as the two are intrinsically linked. You don’t have to look too far into the future to see that if you’re not doing anything for environmental sustainability you’re not going to attract staff.

**Jane:** In the next decade I’d like to see the veterinary profession looking very hard at what it can do to reduce not only its own emissions but also those of its clients. For example, I’d like to see more teleconsults and the use of mobile clinics so clients don’t have to travel. We have a vital role in guiding, encouraging and advising people on this topic, and we need to step up. 🌱

**Above from left:** staff recycle as much as possible; the team has so far planted 6,000 trees in the local QEII covenant; the clinics stock Ruff & Woolly pet toys, which are locally made and fully compostable.