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**MEDIA RELEASE**

**Driver Training for Farming Career Switch**

Students taking the wheel of tractors and trucks are creating a new stream of workers for New Zealand agriculture and primary industry.

There are seven intakes for Telford’s new Agricultural Contractor Training Course in South Otago. Supported by Case IH machines loaned by a local dealership, each intake does about 40 hours of training and the first round of training should be finished by September. It’s a template for a new approach to driver training in New Zealand farming, supported by industry.

The students get two weeks training at Telford’s training site and a further two weeks of training with Richardson Group, where they also drive trucks as well as tractors.

Case IH dealership Agricentre South has loaned Telford three tractors for the training while Chris Hughes from Hughes Contracting has provided two trainers. After two weeks with Richardson Group the students have a two-week work placement.

Agricentre South saw the initiative as a great for their community involvement in the Southland Youth Futures programme, which the dealership joined as a founding member. Case IH sales manager Richard Clapperton said supporting the Agricultural Contractor course was a natural way to promote the primary sector to Southland students. “We see it as a responsibility for businesses like us to promote this sector as a great opportunity to build a successful and rewarding career,” he said.

The Case IH machines give students experience with a variety of vehicles: a CVT, a full powershift and a semi powershift, range-change powershift.

Telford tutoring co-ordinator, John Hughes, said some trainees in the Ministry for Primary Industries-funded course already had good basic knowledge “but we lift them up a couple of levels.”

The driving starts with gentle drives up and down driveways, progressing to practical skills tied to NZQA student standards, like credits for machinery health and safety. Depending on a trainees’ licence class, they can go on to learn feed management and road safety, for example.

Tutoring caters to existing skill level, Hughes said. “If their skill level is up, then they become peer support for the ones who aren’t there yet. So, you’re trying to lift everyone up from wherever they are at.”

Hughes, a long-time machinery contractor, is a former national president of the industry body, Rural Contractors New Zealand. He hopes Telford can serve as a template for similar training in the North Island. However it’s done, it must be thorough. “You can’t do this thing and have them well assessed, competent and safe to drive in a week or 10 days,” he said.

Telford has 18 to 20 students at any one time. In some cases, trainees have found work before completing the course, including a few who found work in original jobs, like tourism or hospitality.

Graduates are assessed and placed in jobs on a trial basis. “There’s a template here and our first working intake is now out in job placement. But placement’s no guarantee of getting a job; what we’re about is getting people together with these trainees and seeing if they suit each other – and if they cut the mustard. And if it works, they get a job offer.”

Some of Telford’s students have had a tough time since losing work in the Covid-19 economic slump. The first intake really felt that pain. “They were guinea pigs for us a bit. You had to realise that they’d been through a bit of trauma. But they’re more than grateful; they see the opportunity that has just jumped out.”

Some of the trainees are foreigners who came to New Zealand on visas for other work, but who are now eyeing careers in agriculture. “If we can get anyone into, not just into agricultural contracting but into rural machinery operation and farming, then it’s going to help,” Hughes said.

For many, practical training like this could serve a student better than, say, a university degree. “That degree might be something they never use. Why don’t they get trained in the agricultural sector?”

In farming, nothing beats on-the-job learning. “Personally, I find you can have certificates and diplomas up the boowai, but if they can’t do the job, then they can have as much as they like on their CV.”

It was satisfying seeing trainees learn skills for a lifetime and the course is a reminder of agriculture’s value to the country, Hughes said.

Farming is New Zealand’s bread and butter, so comprehensive heavy-vehicle training for farming and other industry is essential, he says. “What didn’t change when Covid hit? The rural sector didn’t change. We’re seeing the opportunities here and I think it needs to bed in. It’s one of those catalysts for changing the mindset of secondary schools and training institutions,” he said.

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1. Telford ag contractor driver training course-1.jpg
2. Telford driver training-2.jpg
3. Telford driver training-3.jpg