



Absolving the sins of emission: The politics of regulating agricultural greenhouse gas emissions in New Zealand



Mark H. Cooper ^{a, b}, Christopher Rosin ^{b, *}

^a Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin–Madison, United States

^b Centre for Sustainability: Agriculture, Food, Energy, Environment, University of Otago, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of emissions trading as a standard feature of national climate mitigation strategies is commonly considered to be evidence of the neoliberalisation of environmental governance. The New Zealand Emissions Trading Scheme is distinctive among national climate mitigation programmes in its attempt to establish a financial liability for greenhouse gas emissions arising from agricultural production. This attempt, however, has been politically contentious, with strident and vocal opposition from some members of the agricultural sector. Drawing on the concept of “environmental subjectivities” this study explores farmers’ contestation of the policy programme and ascribes the foundering of emissions mitigation in agriculture to the attempt to merely assign financial liabilities rather than cultivate subjects disposed to managing emissions in pastoral production. When discussing climate change and greenhouse gas mitigation during qualitative interviews, pastoral farmers directly challenged the aims and attributes of the ETS, often referring to how the scheme conflicted with existing objectives for farming and how the scheme confused financial liability with environmental responsibility. New Zealand’s experience reveals potential contradictions between the political and economic justification for market-based instruments and the unruly subjectivities of market actors. The findings of this research suggest that market-based instruments alone may fail to cultivate environmental subjectivities and highlight the need for agricultural and environmental governance to address the social and cultural foundations of farming practices.

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1. Introduction

The recognition of and response to environmental degradation increasingly involves the valuation of ecological impacts, goods and processes through market-based policy instruments. The creation of markets for ‘commodities’ such as ecosystem services (Robertson, 2004; Shapiro-Garza, 2013), fishing rights (Mansfield, 2004) and emissions credits (Lansing, 2010; Frame, 2011) is now commonly recognised as an essential feature of the neoliberalisation of nature. Agri-environmental governance has taken a prominent role in such neoliberalisation processes as states face the challenge of coordinating the actions of diverse farming populations to promote more environmentally appropriate management. Constituting a fundamental shift in the form and political foundations of rural governance, the use of market-based instruments in agri-environmental regulation seeks to reassemble

the subject positions of participants by aligning their economic interests with environmental behaviours.

This translation of market logics to human-environment interactions is, however, open to contestation arising from the unruly subjectivities of targeted populations. For example, emissions trading – a common form of market-based instrument – appears more likely to encourage debate regarding the legitimacy of action on climate change than to enable a rational valuation of emissions as a cost of production (Skjaereth and Wettstad, 2010; Betsill and Hoffmann, 2011; Bullock, 2012). New Zealand’s pastoral farmers, for whom labouring within a liberalised agricultural sector is a strong element of their identity (Rosin, 2013), provide a particularly insightful case study for examining the extent to which unruly subjectivities can unsettle the attempt to reconfigure environmental practices through market-based instruments. In this paper, we examine farmers’ response to the New Zealand Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) which is distinctive among national climate programmes in its inclusion of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions arising from agricultural production – notably methane and nitrous oxide. We argue that the intensity and durability of political

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: chris.rosin@otago.ac.nz (C. Rosin).

discord regarding the inclusion of agriculture in the ETS has been due, in large part, to the incongruity between farmers' prevailing subjectivities and the environmental subjectivities necessary to engage in GHG mitigating activities.

Since its proposal in 2007 and establishment in legislation in 2008 the ETS has been a vexed political issue. Although agriculture is the largest source of GHG emissions in New Zealand (responsible for almost half of total emissions), the inclusion of "biological emissions" arising from livestock and arable farming has been especially contentious. We examine the governance of agricultural emissions within the ETS as a case in which a market-based environmental policy instrument foundered, neither attaining political durability nor realising its intended environmental effects.¹ In contrast to cases in which the neoliberalisation of rural natures is made to "work" by reconfiguring the subjectivities of relevant actors (Higgins et al., 2008) or where environmental scepticism cohabits with the adoption of particular low-emissions behaviours (Jepson et al., 2012), New Zealand's attempt to regulate agricultural GHG emissions reveals contradictions between the subjectivities of market actors and the political and economic justifications for market-based policy instruments.

Advocates of market-based policy instruments characterise emissions trading as providing environmental outcomes at least equivalent to those of directed regulation, while being more "flexible" (minimising the cost of compliance for producers) and "efficient" (minimising the total cost of compliance to the economy) (Lane, 2012; Paterson, 2012). Such claims, though, have done little to moderate political opposition to the ETS, especially within the agricultural sector. Attention to the environmental subjectivities of relevant actors is critical for understanding the causes and the intensity of this opposition. While the high-politics of climate change, including the composition of New Zealand's Parliament and Government, are the final authority in the constitution of policy programs (Bullock, 2012), we analyse the response of pastoral farmers and representatives of agriculture sector organisations and firms to explain the roots of political opposition "on the ground" (Lowe and Ward, 1997, 256).

The concept of "environmental governmentality" has been embraced by researchers seeking to understand how human–environment relationships, more than merely affected, are thoroughly constituted by "the shifting grounds of politics, institutions, and subjectivities that together characterise government in the sense of the 'conduct of conduct'" (Agrawal, 2005, 7; Foucault, 1991; Braun, 2000; Brand, 2007; Li, 2007; Rutherford, 2007; Prince and Dufty, 2009; Whitehead, 2009; Dowling, 2010). Environmental subjectivities and the role of subjects in making and being remade by governmental power are a principal concern of this approach, offering the potential for unified yet dynamic analyses of change at multiple social scales (Birkenholtz, 2008; Larner, 2012; Nightingale, 2013). Examining the translation of governmental rationalities and techniques into subjectivities involves attention to both discourses and practices. In accounts that employ a governmentality approach, this typically involves an examination of governmental initiatives as an attempt to shape individuals' conduct (Barnett et al., 2008). The aim of this exercise of power is not to establish direct control over subjects, but to impart the inclination to govern their own behaviour in a manner consistent

with governmental aims. Governing therefore involves, "not just the ordering of activities and processes," but establishing within subjects a predisposition and capacity for governing themselves and the conviction that the aims of the governmental programme are right and proper (Miller and Rose, 1990, 18; Merlingen, 2006).

Our examination of the politics of regulating agricultural GHG emissions in New Zealand focuses primarily on subjectivities, rather than environmental governmentality as a whole, for two reasons. First, whereas resistance to the ETS was widespread (though not universal) among farmers and farmers' interest groups, agricultural firms' (i.e. milk and meat processors) responses ranged from moderate opposition to engaged acquiescence. The hostility and contentiousness present during the development of the ETS and the passage of legislation which established the scheme cannot be explained without attending to the conflict between the existing subjectivities of New Zealand farmers and the intentions of the ETS as a governmental programme. Foregrounding farmer subjectivities in the first instance likewise allows for recognition of the contingent nature of subject formation and attention to the array of conditions, contexts, and processes that affect farmers (Galt, 2013). Second, while other studies have examined the politics of carbon markets and their construction (Bailey, 2007; Knox-Hayes, 2010; Bullock, 2012; Paterson, 2012; Stephan and Paterson, 2012), emissions trading markets remain – with the exception of the New Zealand ETS – the domain of states, firms, and finance, rather than individuals. The subjectivities of professionalised actors who employ techniques of financial analysis may be dramatically different from the subjectivities of farmers and foresters subject to the ETS. Understanding how individuals engage with the prospect of trading emissions permits is of substantial importance to attempts and intentions to establish a global emissions market and universalise the presence of an emissions price across international economies (Cooper, 2011). Determining whether a market-based policy instrument might generate new environmental subjectivities responsive to GHG emissions therefore requires attention to individuals experiencing those market mechanisms in their daily lives. In the case of New Zealand, this requires attention especially to pastoral farmers, who by most accounts have developed neoliberal subjectivities in their engagement with international markets.

We begin with a brief review of the use of market-based policy instruments as a feature of the neoliberalisation of agri-environmental governance. We then discuss the utility of the governmentality approach, and the concept of subjectivity in particular, for understanding the shifting nature of the governance of rural natures. Following a discussion of the interview methodology, we detail farmers' reaction to the ETS and the regulation of agricultural GHGs in terms of their existing subjectivities and the political economy of agriculture in New Zealand. We find that the roots of political contestation of the ETS lie in the incongruity between farmers' subjectivities as they currently understand and express them and those necessary to establish responsibility for agricultural emissions. Finally, we note the contradiction between political justification and regulatory effectiveness in market-based programs and conclude that developing effective agri-environmental policy programmes will require attending to the political-economic and cultural foundations of farming practices.

2. Market-based instruments in agricultural and environmental governance

The use of market-based policy instruments is increasingly prevalent within agricultural and environmental programmes throughout the developed world (Le Heron, 2003; Mansfield, 2004; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Robertson, 2004; Bailey, 2007;

¹ Agricultural processors and fertiliser distributors are responsible under the ETS for reporting livestock numbers and fertiliser sales from January 2012. Methane and nitrous oxide emissions from livestock and agricultural soils were exempted from inclusion in the ETS (other than reporting) by amending legislation in 2009. At present it is unclear whether agricultural emissions might be included in the ETS in the future.

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