Seed & Grain New Zealand

April 2025

Young Radicles

35 years and under in the New Zealand Seed and Grain Industry

You've opened the first Young Radicles newsletter! We'll send these out every few months to update the group on what's happening in the industry, and let you know what events are coming up. We've also included a couple of interviews from a few Young Radicles committee members, and from some inspiring over 35's.

Thank you to PGG Seeds Oceania CEO John McKenzie and SGNZ Chief Executive Sarah Clark for speaking to us about their role within the seed industry and how they got there.

Enjoy the read and pass it on. To be added to the Young Radicles mailing list please contact Sharon. If you've got news or an event you'd like to feature in our next update please get in touch

Quick Bits

Gene Technology

SGNZ made a submission back in February on the proposed Gene Technology Bill. It's a big one that notes GE tech poses both risks and opportunities to our industry. In summary, we want to be able to maintain our trade with GE sensitive markets, but also understand how it could benefit us through improved gene technologies. Having a system to enable reliable tracking of gene edited products may help to manage risk to market access, but there are many unknowns, and it's important the SGNZ has an active role in the conversation. It's a very meaty topic! So meaty we've decided a webinar on it would sort fact from fiction and help us to understand the direct impact on our industry. John Caradus, Chief Executive of Grasslanz Technology, has kindly offered to give us a run down on the bill and answer all our burning questions. This session will take place at 8:30am on Wednesday 14th May. Register here.

Seed Business

The SGNZ and ASF have joined together in the best across-the-ditch colab since Phar Lap to bring us the 2025 Seed Business conference.

Taking place 25-28 August at Te Pae Christchurch Convention Centre, the program has been crafted to inspire and innovate, with a number of expert speakers and field trip options. Yes it's suitable for those of us just starting to grow in the industry. Stay on our mailing list to hear what Young Radicle's are planning for the event.

Tariffs Chat

Now that the economic uncertainty from the red team taking charge of the USA is spilling into our corner of the world I'm starting to wonder what effects a 10% tariff is going to have on our arable sector? Now I am not an economist, but fortunately there are some pretty intelligent people out there who've put some interesting reports together. Check out this report from RNZ, or this one from MinterEllisonRuddWatts if you're curious. In summary, at this stage the world's economy is probably going to hurt a little (remind me not to look at my Kiwisaver), but NZ is getting off lightly when it comes to tariffs in comparison with other USA trading partners (think of the EU at 20%), which may give us a small relative advantage. But who really knows.

Chemical regulations update

As we come off the good news of having the bird repellent Avipel approved by the EPA we turn our attention to the insecticide chlorpyrifos, which is on the chopping block over concerns on the risk to human health and the environment. SGNZ have partly agreed to the current proposal to ban cholpyrifos, requesting that EPA fast track alternative options and consider a 5 year phase out period for SuSCon Green, so don't rejoice to early grass grubs! Following the recent hearing, SGNZ was asked to get more information on the impact of grass grub on arable, forage and vegetable seed production. Keep an eye on your email for more information from SGNZ.

For the Calendar:

Young Radicles Webinar - GE with John Caradus
An informative session on the GE bill and its implications on the seed and grain industry.
Wednesday 14th May 8:30am
Register here.

Annual Industry Golf Tournament
Let's get a YR team together. Register for the event here, and contact Sharon to be part of a YR team.
Thursday 15th May
Tinwald Golf Course
$45 pp; includes pre match BBQ & post match food

Women in Seed Forum
For more information
Tuesday 27th May 2025
Chateau on the Park, Christchurch

Young Grower of the Year
If you're under 30 and a full time grower, with vegetables as part of your farm system you may be eligible to compete. Contact Chelsea for more information.
Regional competitions held May - July
Final held 10-11th September @ Lincoln Event Centre

Short Seed Courses
Register here
Introduction Course 10 - 11th June, Templeton
Advanced Course 17 - 18th June, Palmerston North

Seed Business 2025 (SGNZ and ASF)
View interim program and register here
25th - 28th August 2025
Te Pae Christchurch Convention Centre

Radicle Beginnings

The interview series where we chat careers, choices, and what captivates us about the seed industry. If you'd like to be featured please get in touch

John McKenzie:
PGG Wrightson Seeds/DLF Oceania CEO

Who are you and where do you come from?
I am a Lincoln University graduate who began my career in agricultural consulting before moving into farming and purchasing my own property. In 1985, Agricom was founded, originally to export Evening Primrose seed to the UK. However, we identified early on that pastoral farmers were not getting the product they needed to finish animals quickly and that the role of endophytes was very poorly understood so we expanded the scope of the business. We grew quickly, I was involved in everything from research and development, seed production, right through to sales.
Agricom was later purchased by Pyne Gould Guinness in 2005 who eventually merged with Wrightson to become PGG Wrightson Seeds. In 2019, PGG Wrightson Seeds was acquired by DLF Seeds.

What is your role in your business and what does it entail?

I am currently the CEO for DLF Oceania, overseeing operations across New Zealand and Australia. Previously I have been involved in our South American business but following the DLF acquisition, I am now focused on the Oceania region.

A major area of interest for me is research and development, which is a core part of the business. It is where a significant amount of investment goes, and it plays a crucial role in ensuring the company stays ahead in a fast evolving industry and that we can create meaningful options and improvements for pastoral farmers.

When Agricom was run independently, I was heavily involved in all aspects of the business, especially in product development.

Now with the scale of the business it is necessary to involve a wider team of specialists to see the opportunities and requirements of the marketplace and to bring new varieties to market.

"A major area of interest for me is research and development, . . . it plays a crucial role in ensuring the company stays ahead in a fast evolving industry"

How did you get into the seed industry?

I am foremost a farmer. My deep connection to the land and the agricultural industry has always driven my work. Early on I saw a significant gap in the market with products and I felt seed merchants at the time were not treating farmers as fairly or transparently as they should have been. That sparked a desire to make a change.

There was a real opportunity within New Zealand to develop and grow quality seed products tailored to the needs of local farming systems. Introducing new products has now become more complex, and the focus has shifted toward creating solutions that work within evolving farm systems and on farm. I am passionate about this challenge and continuing to drive innovation from a farmer's perspective.

"The agricultural and seed industries are incredibly diverse, and the best way to find your path is by exploring different areas and gaining experience across the board."

What excites you about the future of the seed industry?

The ongoing development and innovation within the seed industry. It is an industry that is constantly evolving, especially in response to environmental challenges and the increasing demands placed on sustainable farming practices. While these challenges can be complex, they also present great opportunities to make a real difference. Developing a new variety today takes much longer than it used to, and there is far more to consider, from regulatory requirements to the impacts of climate change and environmental sustainability but that is what makes it rewarding.

What would you tell a graduate you?

It is important to start with a broad understanding of the industry, do not expect to map out your entire career from day one. The agricultural and seed industries are incredibly diverse, and the best way to find your path is by exploring different areas and gaining experience across the board.

Once you have had the chance to get that wider exposure, you will naturally gravitate toward what interests you most. That is when you can start to specialise and build deeper expertise. Stay open, stay curious, and do not be afraid to take a few unexpected turns, they often lead to the most rewarding opportunities.

Sarah Clark: SGNZ Chief Executive

Who are you and where do you come from?

I'm a life-long learner, a leader and connector. I'm a gardener, a hiker, a book-club goer, a sewer, a recent gym-goer. I'm a mother of two daughters in their early 20's, living their best lives as University students.

I trained as a Biochemist & Molecular Biologist, was a researcher, a university lecturer, and then had a career as a public servant in the Biosecurity system, with expertise is risk assessment and risk management, and regulatory experience in the import and export of plants.

I'm from Wellington, that's where I've spent the last 20 years and brought up my kids. Originally, I'm from Otago, and lived in Dunedin for many years. I grew up on a sheep and beef farm near Balclutha in the 70's and 80's, and lived a thoroughly rural farm-kid life, helping with all the different types of farm work. My first job which funded me through university was as a rousie in a shearing gang; I did that for 5 summers.

What is your role in your business and what does it entail?

I'm the Chief Executive of two associations pivotal in the seed industry –Seed and Grain New Zealand, and the New Zealand Plant Breeding and Research Association.

I'm responsible for providing leadership of the two associations, managing our small team of staff, and advocating for the industry. I've only been in the role for 3 months and so I'm still learning the full extent of what it entails, but I've been enjoying diversity of the day to day work, It has ranged from back-office administration tasks, meeting with members and understanding what's going on in the industry, particularly the challenges and opportunities; staying abreast of relevant legislative changes impacting the industry; advocating for the industry (meetings with government officials, ministers, select committee presentations); liaising with other industry organisations; networking and connecting with people at industry events and conferences; and supporting the Executive Councils. We have a busy events programme across the two associations, and I've been helping with the planning and decision making for the annual conference, the Women in Seed and Plant Breeders Forum. And I've had the wonderful opportunity to help get the Young Radicles committee up and running.

How did you get into the seed industry?

I got involved with the seed industry through my work with Biosecurity New Zealand.

My first exposure to the industry was at the annual conference which was held in Brisbane that may have been in 2016, and I gave a presentation about a system MPI developed to detect emerging biosecurity risks. I've been involved regularly since then, liaising with SGNZ about import and export issues, particularly import requirements for seed.

My team at Biosecurity New Zealand made several changes to the seed import requirements to either remove unnecessary/unjustified requirements or add new requirements to manage emerging pest risks. A lot of the new risks have been viruses affecting tomato and capsicum.

"Get yourself a mentor and have an open-learning mindset to any feedback you get. Feedback from your colleagues, your boss, your clients is a gift."

What excites you about the future of the seed industry?

I'm excited to see the impact of a generation of young digital-natives on the industry over the next 10-20 years. Young people are emerging from school and University with fluency and capabilities in AI and technology, and digital media and connectivity that didn't exist 20 years ago. What opportunities does that create for the industry? I don't know, but I'm excited to see the positive impact it can have.

I'm excited by the opportunity for the industry to explore avenues for additional high value seed crops. The growth in the high value vege seed segment in the last 20 years is an example of how the industry can diversify and grow in value. Despite the unsettling geo-political changes going on in the world today, I wonder if there's more value and trade to be gotten from existing free trade agreements, and I'm excited to see what the opportunities are for seed exports to growing economies like India.

An interesting opportunity, but equally a challenge, across all segments of the seed and grain industry is how gene technology might be applied.

The Gene Technology Bill intends to modernise the regulations, but we don't know what the details will be and how it might affect the seed industry.

If the Bill is enacted the challenge for the industry is going to be figuring out how to protect current exports that rely on GM-free status, and provide choice to all participants about what is grown and traded.

"Young people are emerging from school and University with fluency and capabilities in AI and technology, and digital media and connectivity that didn't exist 20 years ago. What opportunities does that create for the industry?"

What would you tell a graduate you?

Be bold and brave, take opportunities. Don't be afraid to get beyond your comfort zone.

Figure out what your strengths are early in your career – these days there are online tools available to help, or you can ask the people around you what they think are your strengths. Find work where you get to use your strengths every day – you'll enjoy your work more, and you will flourish. But don't ignore your weaknesses, they can become a handbrake.

Get yourself a mentor and have an open-learning mindset to any feedback you get. Feedback from your colleagues, your boss, your clients is a gift.

Fred Milford-Cottam: Young Radicles

Introduce yourself, who are you and where do you come from?

Hi I am Fred Milford-Cottam, I grew up on Auckland's North Shore attending Westlake Boys High School and Massey University in Palmerston North. I was one of only a few kids from Westlake to study agriculture at University.

I was hired out of University by Paul Oliver and now work for H&T Agronomics and have held a range of roles over the years.

The regions have been my home for my working career which suits my lifestyle. I now live in Gore and call Southland home.

What is your role in your business and what does it entail?

I am the South Island Manager for H&T Agronomics.

H&T has been operating in the South Island for a couple of years now having previously serviced the North Island. After Covid we decided to set up H&T in the South Island. I put my hand up to take on the challenge. I drove to Gore and set about building a client base.

I manage a great team of Forage and Cropping Advisors based in Canterbury, Otago and Southland. Managing people is really rewarding and seeing the guys develop their businesses is something I am enjoying.

I work with a number of farmers with day to day agronomic advice. H&T's supplies seed, crop protection inputs and looks after planning, management and implementation of farm forage systems.
I am involved with H&T's R&D work, H&T specialises in seed enhancement technologies and have developed Optimised, RAPPEL and recently AlwaysN. I have been involved with these projects getting them up and running, trialing and assessing them around NZ.
I am currently chair of the management committee of CHT Seeds, a brassica seed breeding company. We are trialing, assessing and selecting new brassica material for the NZ market.

How did you get into the seed industry?

Despite growing up in the city, I was fortunate to have a family batch towards Port Jackson on the Coromandel Peninsula. When I was twelve, I was hired by local farmer Alexander (Zand) Ward and worked for him during the school holidays. This work continued through my high school years. I chased sheep and cattle, fixed fences and was introduced to farming. I loved the work we did and the outdoor lifestyle farming created.
I have to thank Zand for this as without that intro to farming I probably would have chosen a different career path.
Growing up on the North Shore of Auckland meant returning to a family farm was not an option. I still remember visiting the Westlake careers lady and saying I wanted to study agriculture. She was shocked and found a 5 year old Lincoln prospectus and dusted it off before we began going through my options.

"Work hard, ask lots of questions, be sceptical of what you are told, form your own opinion and never turn down a cup of tea."

We decided that Massey University was the best option, and in my final year at Massey I was running motorbike coaching day in the Wairarapa and my now boss Paul Oliver (Managing Director H&T Agronomics) brought his kids along. Afterwards Paul and I got chatting about H&T and the seed industry. I liked what I heard and followed our chat up with an email inquiry, a couple of weeks later I had an interview and a job offer.
I was employed as a graduate and started my career in the seed industry with H&T Agronomics.
I've now been with H&T for 10 years and holding numerous roles, a forage and crop advisor, Optitech manager working in international business and now the South Island Manager.

What excites you about the future of the seed industry?

I love dealing with farmers, building strong relationships and being part of their farm businesses.
I am excited by new technology and the seed technologies H&T has developed over the last five years like RAPPEL and AlwaysN. Being able to bring new technology to farmers that solves problems.

I'm fortunate to be involved in CHT Seeds, a seed breeding company where we are looking at new brassica material that delivers improved agronomic traits for better animal performance.

What would you tell a graduate you?

Work hard, ask lots of questions, be sceptical of what you are told, form your own opinion and never turn down a cup of tea.

Introduce yourself, who are you and where do you come from?

Hi there, my name is Cassidy Sprott, and I've been with PGG Wrightson Seeds for just over two years now. I come from a non-rural school background, where studying agriculture wasn't really an option unless done via correspondence—which is exactly what I did. After finishing school, I went on to Lincoln University and completed a degree in Rural Land and Property Management.

Initially, I started out in a property management role after graduating but eventually found my way to PGG Wrightson Seeds. While I was at Lincoln, I had the chance to do some practical work at the Kimihia Research Centre, where I spent a summer working alongside a plant breeder.

What is your role in your business and what does it entail?

My role in the business is quite varied, which is something I really enjoy, this includes supply chain and customer service, and I also lead a couple of internal projects we're currently working on. The supply chain side of my role assists the Seed Cereal Department, where the main focus is preparing the cereal varieties for sale. It's a great mix of responsibilities that keeps things interesting and gives me the opportunity to learn and contribute across different areas of the business.

How did you get into the seed industry?

I've always had a strong passion for the agricultural industry, having grown up around it and been exposed to it through family who are involved in farming. That early connection really opened my eyes to how rewarding and diverse the industry can be. While I was at university, I completed practical work on a dairy farm as well as at the Kimihia Research Centre, where I got hands-on experience working alongside a plant breeder. Having ultimately led me into the seed industry- It felt like a natural fit for both my interests and background.

"The agricultural industry is such a great one to be part of—it's full of passionate, down-to-earth people from all walks of life."

What excites you about the future of the seed industry?

The future of the agricultural industry is shaping up to be both challenging and full of opportunity. As environmental constraints such as climate change becoming more pressing, the role of the seed industry will be more critical than ever. This presents exciting opportunities for innovation that are more resilient and adaptable to diverse growing conditions. The potential to make a real impact on global food source and sustainability.

What would you tell a graduate you?

Take each day as it comes and make the most of every opportunity. One piece of advice I'd really emphasize is to get out there and attend networking events. The agricultural industry is such a great one to be part of—it's full of passionate, down-to-earth people from all walks of life.

There are so many different pathways and roles within the industry, and you never know where a conversation or connection might lead. Some people have spent their entire careers in agriculture and the knowledge they have to share is incredibly valuable. Be open to learning from others, and don't be afraid to ask questions—there's always something new to discover.

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