

Transforming the Spreader Industry

-Challenges, Opportunities, and the Path Forward-

Article: Rose Hyslop | Images: Kylie Stenton

The spreader industry has undergone significant changes in recent years, with new challenges and opportunities shaping its future. In a recent discussion, Travis Churchill from Spread Test NZ shared insights on his journey, the hurdles he and his wife Julie have faced, and the potential for improvement within the sector. He sat down with Rose Hyslop, Executive Officer of Groundspread NZ, during the final stage of groundspread testing in Oamaru in February.



Building a Business from the Ground Up

As co-owners of Spread Test NZ, Travis and Julie Churchill have worked side by side to build the business from scratch. After returning from the UK in 2010, Travis re-entered the groundspread industry, frequently collaborating with Russell Horrell to test new and rebuilt fertiliser spreaders. Recognising the need for dedicated spreader testing in New Zealand, he and Julie took the leap and started Spread Test NZ together. From day one, they've combined their skills, experience, and passion to improve spreading accuracy, support operators, and raise industry standards. Their teamwork has been instrumental in growing the business and ensuring that Spread Test NZ remains at the forefront of the industry.

Advancing the Industry Through Research

Beyond their work at Spread Test NZ, Travis and Julie have been actively involved in the "Reducing off-target fertiliser application and increasing crop performance by improving blended fertiliser spread uniformity" project. This project is led by Allister Holmes, Precision Agricultural Agronomist at Lincoln Agritech, with Spread Test NZ conducting the field trials. The project aims to improve the efficiency and accuracy of fertiliser spreading to enhance crop yields and reduce environmental impact. The project has gathered valuable data on:

- ✓ Spreading accuracy
- ✓ Machine performance
- ✓ Environmental impact

By participating in field trials and data collection, they have contributed to groundbreaking insights shaping future industry standards. However, it hasn't come without its challenges. One of the biggest? The sheer number of trays used in testing. "I never thought I'd be picking up 18,000 trays—let alone 8,000 in the first week! But the data we've gathered is invaluable."

Despite the hard work, the results are undeniable:

- ✓ More accurate fertiliser application
- ✓ Better awareness among operators
- ✓ Improved machine efficiency

Challenges Facing the Spreader Industry

While progress is being made, there are still major challenges holding the industry back:

🚗 Inconsistent compliance – Some operators adhere to high standards, while others fall behind, leading to inconsistencies in quality and environmental impact.

👷 Ageing workforce – With many experienced operators retiring, there is a growing need for new talent, training, and recruitment.

🚚 Misconceptions about the trade – Spreading is often seen as just “driving a truck,” but Travis emphasises the reality, “People think spreading is just driving, but it’s a skilled trade. Precision and knowledge are key to doing it right.”

Opportunities for Growth and Professionalisation

Despite these challenges, the spreader industry is evolving, presenting new opportunities for growth:

🌱 Environmental regulations – Stricter regulations mean a greater demand for accurate spreading and compliance testing.

📊 Changing perceptions – Farmers who once overlooked the value of spreader testing now see the cost savings, efficiency, and environmental benefits.

🏆 Recognising spreading as a trade – Industry leaders are pushing for formal training, accreditation programmes, and professional recognition, ensuring that spreader operators receive the respect and credibility they deserve.



Industry Evolution and Business Growth

Since Travis and Julie launched Spread Test NZ in 2018, the industry has seen major shifts. Farming, which initially made up a small portion of the market, now accounts for 50% of the business. This is largely driven by environmental regulations, which encourage farmers to adopt better spreading techniques and testing practices.

The benefits of testing gear are undeniable:

- ✓ More precise fertiliser application = Less waste, better crop yields
- ✓ Cost savings = Lower input costs due to efficient spreading
- ✓ Regulatory compliance = Reduced environmental impact, less runoff
- ✓ Improved machine performance = Better maintenance and efficiency

Raising Industry Standards Through Compliance

To ensure all operators adhere to best practices, they have some suggestions:

- ◆ Mandatory membership in a professional body for operators purchasing fertiliser
- ◆ Industry levies to fund education and improvements

The Future of Fertiliser Blending and Accreditation

With growing demand for fertiliser blends, concerns over consistency and effectiveness are rising. The industry should be exploring solutions, such as:

- ✓ Setting clear standards for blended fertilisers
- ✓ Modernising the accreditation process – Moving from outdated audits to a more streamlined, digital system

Expanding the Team

As Spread Test NZ continues to grow, Craig Snodgrass has come onboard as an agent, based in the Waikato and covering the North Island. Craig brings valuable industry experience, having previously run his own spreading company. His expertise strengthens the company's ability to support operators across the country, ensuring more spreaders are tested and optimised for accuracy, efficiency, and compliance.

A Call for Collaboration

The key to a better future? Industry-wide collaboration. By bringing together spreader operators, farmers, and regulatory bodies, the industry can:

- 🚀 Raise professional standards
- 🌍 Enhance environmental sustainability
- 💡 Improve efficiency through innovation

Final Thoughts

The spreader industry is at a turning point, balancing long-standing traditions with the need for modernisation. By tackling challenges head-on, embracing new opportunities, and enforcing higher standards, industry leaders can drive lasting improvements.

With collaboration, innovation, and a commitment to excellence, the future of the spreader industry is looking brighter than ever.

