New Zealand Dairy Workforce Insights

Welcome to the first issue of **New Zealand Dairy Workforce Insights**, a regular short update for DairyNZ partners and interested dairy farmers. Each issue will take one workforce trend, unpack what the data is telling us, and translate it into practical implications for farm businesses and the wider sector.
The aim is to make workforce data easier to understand and more useful in decision-making: what is changing, why it matters, and where support, investment or conversation may be needed next.
We will share these insights monthly, keeping each issue focused, practical and easy to scan so they can support conversations, planning and on-farm engagement.

Coming next: We will look at how immigration has become a structural part of dairy workforce supply, and what that means for attraction, retention and long-term workforce resilience.

Issue 1 | Employment status: how the on-farm workforce has changed

Headline insight:

Dairy has shifted from an owner/operator-heavy workforce to a more employee-led workforce. The total on-farm workforce fell from 46,700 in 2000 to 38,000 in 2024, but the bigger story is the change in mix: employees increased from 13,300 to 22,500, while employers fell from 29,500 to 13,800 and self-employed people fell from 3,900 to 1,700.

Why this matters:

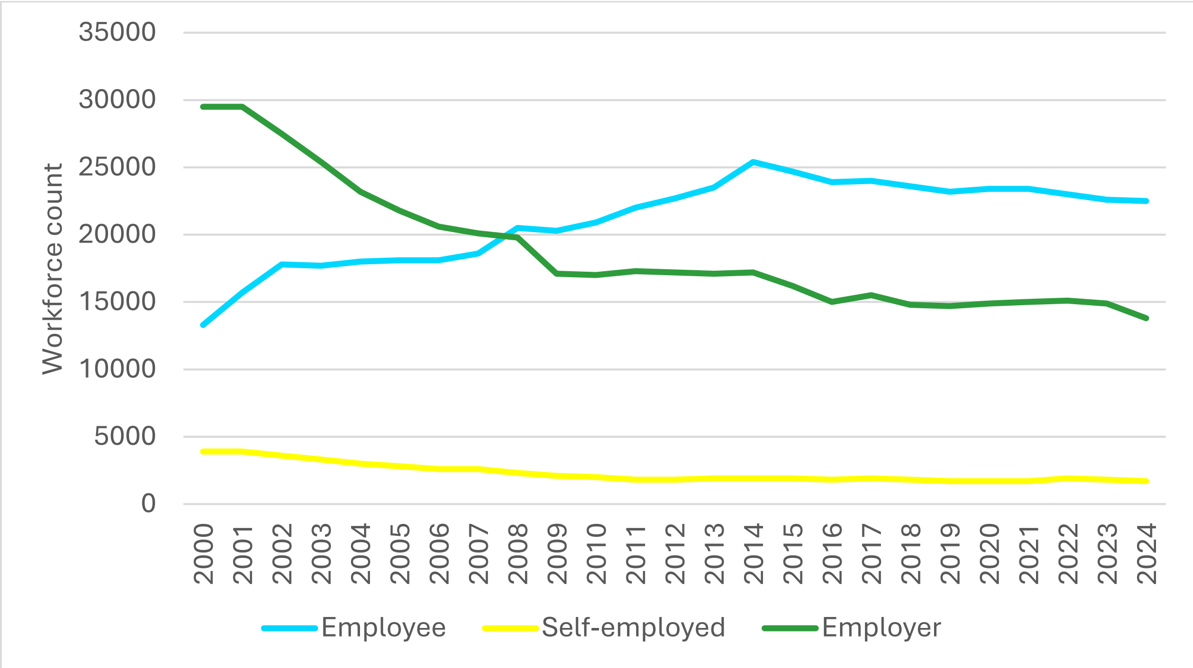
This shift changes where the sector's people risk sits. A larger employee workforce makes people management, leadership, employment practice, rosters, training, retention and workplace productivity more central to farm performance. At the same time, fewer employers and self-employed people may signal pressure on traditional progression and ownership pathways.

What the data shows:

The workforce has become smaller overall, but more reliant on paid employees. Employee numbers rose strongly between 2000 and 2014, peaking at 25,400, before easing to 22,500 by 2024. Employer numbers have fallen by more than half since 2000, and self-employed numbers have also declined steadily.

Graph 1: Workforce by employment status, 2000 – 2024

Line graph showing employees, employers and self-employed people over time.



Key message: Employees are now the largest workforce group, while employer and self-employed numbers have declined significantly.

Graph 2: Share of workforce by employment status

100% stacked bar chart comparing 2004, 2014 and 2024.

Key message: The workforce model has changed shape: hired labour plays a much bigger role than it did in 2000.

Graph 3: Total workforce numbers by employment status since 2000

Bar chart showing the change in employees, employers and self-employed people between 2000 and 2024

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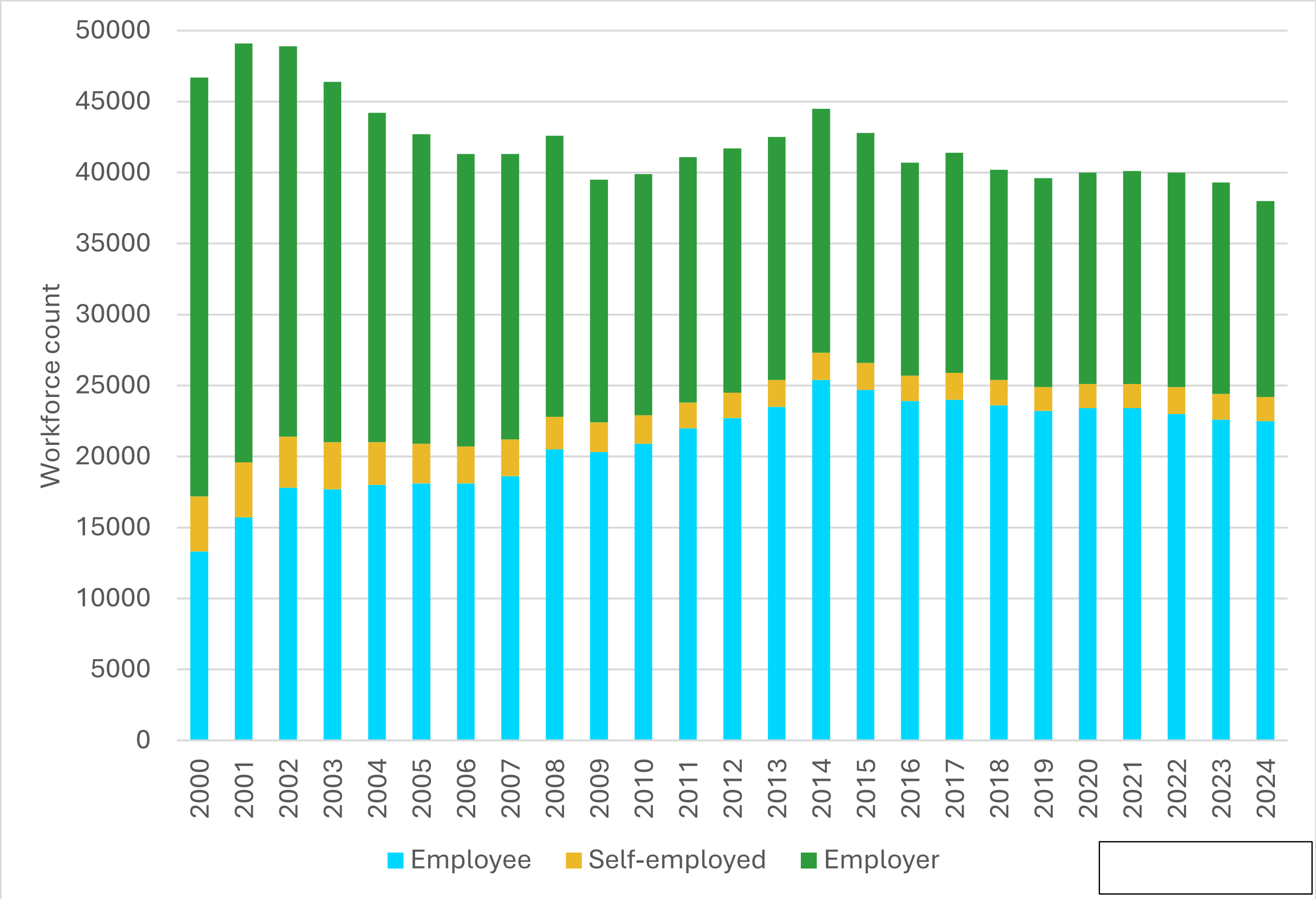

Key message: The rise in employees has not offset the full decline in employers and self-employed people, leaving the total workforce smaller overall.

Key trends:

- **The workforce is smaller overall:** total workforce numbers fell from 46,700 in 2000 to 38,000 in 2024, an 18.6% decline.
- **Employees have become central:** employee numbers increased from 13,300 in 2000 to 22,500 in 2024, after peaking at 25,400 in 2014.
- **The employer base has reduced:** employer numbers fell from 29,500 to 13,800, meaning there are fewer business owners/operators in the workforce data than two decades ago.
- **Self-employed numbers have also declined:** this group fell from 3,900 to 1,700, reinforcing the broader shift away from owner/operator-style labour.
- **Watch point:** the trend should be interpreted as a structural signal, not just a headcount change. It points to shifts in farm business models, labour use and progression pathways.

What this means for farm businesses:
For farm businesses, the trend reinforces the importance of good employment practices. As farms rely more on employees, performance depends not only on production systems but also on the quality of leadership, communication, roster design, training, onboarding, remuneration, accommodation and career conversations. Strong employment practice is no longer a “nice to have”; it is part of operational resilience and performance.

So what?

- **For farmers:** Treat people management as a core business discipline. The farms that plan well, train well, lead well and retain capable people will be better placed to manage pressure on workforce supply.
- **For DairyNZ and partners:** Support needs to focus on practical employer capability, workplace productivity, retention and progression pathways, not just attraction.
- **For the sector:** A smaller, more employee-led workforce increases the need to protect pathways into senior roles, contract milking, sharemilking, equity and ownership.

Bottom line:

The workforce story is not simply that numbers of people working on farm have reduced. It is that the dairy workforce model has changed. Dairy is now more dependent on employed labour, which makes leadership, retention, workplace productivity and progression central to farm business performance and sector resilience.

Data source: DairyNZ People Statistics dashboard. A calendar year count is obtained by counting the number of workers in each month of that year then taking the mean to get a single number for the year.

Definitions:

Employers:	Business owner (company director, shareholder, partnership or partner income) with paid employees
Self-employed:	Business owner (sole-trader or withholding or schedular-payment income) with no paid employees
Employees:	Earning wages or salary