

All grass system a challenge

SITTING at the foot of west-Waikato's most dominant landmark, Mt Pirongia (959m), is Sam Fear and Linda Evens' 165ha Te Pahu dairy farm.

The farm's effective size is 125ha and it milks 377 cows, predominantly crossbreds. The property has a rolling contour, including a large valley, and is divided into three separate blocks.

Before June 2009 the farm was run by a 50:50 sharemilker. But a change in operating structure at the beginning of the season meant 380 cows were bought in and 25-year-old Tony Fischer was appointed to run the farm.

Tony is responsible for day-to-day milking, animal health, and pasture management.

For Tony, the move to Te Pahu represented new beginnings on various fronts – this was his first shot at managing a predominately all-grass system.

"It's a lot more challenging because it's a new system to me – up until now I've only really worked on high-input farms," he says.

"Here, we don't use many supplements to fill feeding gaps. Admittedly

we did feed about 70 or 80 tonnes of maize over winter to ensure we had good spring cover.

And we've also planted out 12ha of chicory, which I plan to feed off for the summer.

"But this is essentially a pasture-based system and that means getting feed balances right all-year-round."

Being flexible and on your toes is one of the keys to successful pasture management on this land, Tony says.

"A few months back there was a sudden flush of early spring growth, but the rate of pasture development seemingly disappeared as quickly as it had arrived. It really peaked at the end of September but then crashed badly.

"We ran a bit short of feed with all that cold weather and bloody snow on mountain (October 6), and we've been in catch-up mode since then".

"Also, this is a high rainfall area, so on the flat it got really soggy there for a while. When the wet came, pasture utilisation in this area went down by 20 to 40%, but I kept a handle on pugging by using the feed pad."

Tony says last winter he set a rotation length of 120 days (approximately

a hectare a day). By October/November the rotation length had dropped to a 20-day round, meaning the cows got about 6ha a day.

In the middle of November the paddocks were fertilised in preparation for summer.

"It'll boost growth rates," Tony says. "The fertiliser has got nitrogen loading as well – it's quite a grunty combo of DAP, muriate of potash, cobalt, and selenium.

"Fertilising is carried out twice a year for maintenance purposes, and to strike a balance in growth rates," Tony says.

Next year he'll tweak the amount of supplementary feed needed to plug gaps.

"I'll look at using palm kernel so we don't have to use as much maize – I'll feed the maize with palm kernel as a mix. This kind of a balance should work well for the stocking rate this farm holds, which is about three cows/ha (average stocking rate 2007/8 was 2.83 cows/ha)."

Another first for the farm this season was the introduction of a new method of monitoring pasture levels.

After seeing a display at the National Fieldays in Mystery Creek, Sam, Linda, and Tony saw the potential benefits of investing in the C-Dax pasture meter. The drawback was the large amount of accurate information about pasture that can be collected in a short space of time.

The product combined well with Farm-Keeper mapping technology, Tony says, which served to amplify the potential benefits of the information: "There's a huge variety of farm management reports that are available within the software," he says.

"For me, the biggest plus is the greater accuracy about what's going on with the grass, and it just saves so much time."

"Farm walks used to be done here to monitor pasture levels. It was really labour-intensive because of the rolling nature of the property. The walks used to take about two days and relied totally on the eye, so accuracy was no doubt



Farm manager Tony Fischer (right) and farm worker Ellis Evans are happy with C-Dax pasture meter.

compromised on occasion. Because of the time factor I'm guessing monitoring was done on an ad-hoc basis."

"But with this electronic system I just ask Ellis (the farm worker, Sam and Linda's son) to do the measuring and it takes him about three hours maximum. I've done monitoring on a weekly basis right through winter until spring."

Ellis says the system is easy to set-up, attach, and use: "It's just a case of riding the bike. Some spots are hilly but the contours don't affect sensor readings."

According to C-Dax, bikes can be driven at up to 20km/h: At this speed the meter will take up to 200 measurements a second, or 18,500 readings over a single 500m pass.

Tony says the data collected is transferred via bluetooth and uploaded on to Sam's laptop, ready to be used with FarmKeeper.

"I ask Sam to run FarmKeeper re-

ports – mainly feed wedge reports at this stage. It's useful because I can easily identify where the surplus is. FarmKeeper produces an excellent feed wedge (graph) – it shows my longest grass to all the way down to my shortest, with precise numbers all the way along it.

"It's good for gaining an understanding of growth rates and what rotation lengths to apply. I sit down and work out my paddocks and pasture management from there."

According to Dairy NZ's website, plotting a weekly feed wedge is essential in achieving high pasture utilisation: "Plotting a weekly feed wedge has been a key tool in the Lincoln University Dairy Farm in Canterbury lifting ME (metabolic energy) from an average 11-12.2 during the past three years."

Tony expects C-Dax and FarmKeeper to play an increasingly important role in farm management over the next year or so.

"To use it more effectively we really need to put in our grazing residuals, as well what days our paddocks have grazed. This will give us accurate growth rates, and what the cows are grazing the paddocks down to.

"When we go to upload the data, say on a weekly basis, it'll help over the whole farm because different lengths of grass are going to grow at different rates. Plus it'll give us average growth rates over whole farm."

Tony, Sam, and Linda also aim to load FarmKeeper with other pasture-related information such as fertiliser levels, re-grassed areas, and soil test results.

With about 25ha of the farm receiving effluent irrigation, comparisons between paddocks will be able to be made and more-informed decisions will result, Tony says.

"It's just a matter of getting organised to extract better information from FarmKeeper."

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