PROBLEMS OF A DAIRY FARMER IN WESTLAND

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Hari Hari

OUR FARM is situated in the Hari Hari District, 75 miles south of Greymouth on the right bank of the Poerua River. The farm is part of the original homestead block from a large estate of the original settler who commenced farming in the area about 85 years ago.

When we took over the property in 1939, the area of the original homestead block had dwindled through family subdivision to 315 acres ; 155 acres of this area were completely unsuited for farming, being very steep hill country, bush covered and impossible to develop. The other 160 acres is good, free-draining soil but, at taking over, only a small area was in rough pasture with the rest in heavy and light bush. We gathered together 48 nondescript cows and produced 5,300 lb butterfat in the first year. Through various "ups and downs", we have progressed to 35,000 lb butterfat from 140 acres as 20 acres are still not developed.

The herd is predominantly Jersey, and, although we have always used Jersey bulls, the herd still shows various colourings of other ancestry. Artificial breeding has been used continuously since it was started in the locality with good conception rates and with an apparent improvement in production — although this has not been the case with all farmers in the district.

Last season, 95 cows were milked with a return of approximately 32,500 lb butterfat. This was a reduction of about 2,500 lb butterfat on the previous season which was attributed to "teething troubles" resulting from the introduction of a new herringbone milking shed and coolroom part way through the season. The present stock comprises 146 cows in milk for this season together with 50 calves as replacements; another 50 to 60 calves will be saved in the current year to allow for the usual culling for low production, loss through accidents, bloat, calving, etc. Wastage from these causes is comparatively light on the West Coast.

Bloat has been a big worry for the last six years and reached a very high peak last season. There were many lost hours and much worry until the practice of spraying pastures with paraffin was instituted.

With the help of Marginal Lands finance, an interesting method of clearing bush to grass was started a number of

years ago. Bush was crushed with heavy bulldozers, left to lie and partially rot for 18 months to 2 years, then 'dozed into windrows and the area sown down in semi-temporary pasture. After a 4- to S-year period, the windrows were scattered with a 'dozer, rubbish collected and the ground ploughed to permanent grass. It is of interest to note that when money was "tight" some years ago, the practice was to sow expensive and many types of grasses, but in recent times, with money much easier, the procedure has somehow changed to light sowings — as light as 17 lb to the acre of basically ryegrass, clover and some timothy. The cost per acre of bringing this class of second growth bush country to permanent grass has been:

Crushing scrub	£3 10s. Od.
Levelling and stumping (average)	£5 10s. Od.
Giant discing	f3 2s. 6d.
Bush and bog	El 12s. 6d.
Root raking	f6 5s. Od.

Ruakura Research Centre field days and conferences have been of considerable influence and we have based farming practice, with reservations, of course, because of climate, soil types, etc., on Dr C. P. McMeekan's recommendations.

Farm management over the years has changed from wintering the herd for three months on bush feed and roughage, to winter cropping and narrowing down the dormant period of growth by topdressing through to a present system of all-grassland farming- of silage conservation and winter-saved grass.

This change from winter cropping to all grass was occasioned by the difficulty of establishing pasture in the spring following the winter crop with its heavy infestation of weeds, docks, etc. Increased topdressing and saved pasture has narrowed the winter gap down to a period comparable with North Island dairy districts. The herd is dried off in early June and calves early August.

For three years silage was made but the feeding of it was not satisfactory until self feeding was tried. Although the feeding part of the process was a great success, the sacrifice paddock was really sacrified. Last year, a-feeding-out policy was adopted — this proved tedious and many. hours of winter maintenance work were lost. This year, self feeding is being reintroduced, with improved methods. The system followed is all stock on to silage at drying-off time and, when this is finished, break-feeding on winter-saved grass.

Because of good autumn growth, it has not yet been necessary to open the silage stack before the season is finished. With ever increasing cow numbers, it is hoped that this will need to be done before long, as this would be an indication that we are at last farming to capacity. Each year, about 30 acres are used for silage which is harvested with two silorators and the stacks covered in the usual manner with plastic.

In the early stages of development, the topdressing programme consisted of heavy dressings of lime, along with a little superphosphate. The programme has changed over the years -little or no lime has been sown for about 10 years, but superphosphate has been applied steadily at 6 cwt per year in two dressings, in spring and autumn. The pastures have shown no sign of deterioration through lack of application of lime. Trial sowings of various manures with potash mixtures have shown no advantage over straight superphosphate.

Early in the development programme, a strict system of rotational grazing was decided upon with no day or night paddocks. Now, with 33 paddocks, this procedure is still strictly adhered to. Calves go before the cows, yearlings after them. As the farm is long and narrow, this entails considerable time and effort. However, it is considered to be well worth while, although some farmers in the district get very good results using the "open gate" method.

One boundary of the farm is 1% miles of river frontage along the Poerua River. Along with neighbours, we have contributed towards past protection work along the river frontage and it is hoped, one day in the near future, to have a comprehensive scheme for the river to prevent further damage along both sides.

A big lift to morale and, indirectly, to increased production, came with the introduction to the Hari Hari district of the hydroelectric supply scheme by Amethyst Power Ltd. About 10 years ago, a private company was formed with the capital subscribed by farmers and settlers in the Hari Hari district, the power station was erected at Amethyst Creek and the district was reticulated, Out went diesel engines, coppers and wood ranges which were replaced by electric motors, waterheaters, shed washing hoses and all the many advantages connected with electricity.

Although rainfall is high -in our area at Hari Hari it ranges between 150 and 210 inches per year -sunshine hours are not low at round 1,980 hours per annum. One of

the main climatic disadvantages is that, during long spells of wet weather, development and maintenance work on pastures just cannot get done. It is thus extremely difficult, if not almost impossible for the area necessary in one labour unit to be maintained as it should be maintained to be economic. Because of the climatic conditions of the area, the maintenance of one dairy unit of 140 acres requires far more attention than similar units in other districts.,

Most of the problems encountered in South Westland dairy farming are, of course, common to other parts of New Zealand, and the answers to them are in the farmer's own hands. Research at Ruakura Research Centre, Massey University and Lincoln College is of immense value, and requires only practical application to climate, soil type, and geographical area to produce results. The high rainfall on the West Coast is really an advantage, not a problem. The main difficulty is to get the work done during the wet periods. Topdressed pastures grow on the free drained soils of South Westland extremely well during the warm rain periods, and stop just as quickly after about ten days of fine weather. The mild winters seem to reduce wintering problems considerably.

Remoteness from populated centres causes a lack of available farm labour. In addition, one's margin of profit is reduced by high freight charges, and this, together with the lack of interest of young farmers in buying developed farms in the province, are two other problems. It was disappointing to find that when three farms were offered for ballot by the Land Settlement Committee of Westland, only four applications were received. It must be very frustrating for the Department of Lands, after strong representations to purchase and develop the land, to find such little interest.

There are no large areas on the Coast suitable for development except the Pakihi swamp. If the Department could buy areas unfarmed, establish good pasture, erect fences and buildings up to the standard of those on the larger farm areas, and offer them to young farmers with the same conditions as farm settlements, it would be a great asset. However, there is the problem of lack of interest.

It would appear that finance is not the main handicap as the interest in applications to Marginal Lands Committee for assistance is practically nil. This must mean that farmers who desire advances to purchase or improve their holdings are catered for quite adequately by the usual lending agencies.

There are many farmers in the area farming their land well, and producing figures comparable with the better farming areas of New Zealand. Most of the farms are in the many valleys off the main road and are not seen by the passing public. Of course, there are many that are not so good. At such time as all of the good land is being farmed to capacity, the farming industry will take its place in the economy of the Coast. One of the greatest boosts to the industry would be the formation of three or four farm improvement clubs. This could be one of the greatest contributions to increased production in New Zealand.