INTENSIVE DAIRYING IN TARANAKI

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INTRODUCTION

I believe this conference is about New Zealand's greatest asset. It concerns the growing of grass in a "grassland" country. I believe too, that as farmers, we have a tremendous responsibility to use this asset to the best of our ability.

I am fortunate to be farming in South Taranaki on the Waimate Plains. This area was originally fern covered which made development easier, and has been established for dairying for about 100 years. The soil type is free draining Egmont black loam. Our rainfall varies from 30-50" a year.

I like to think myself as a true grassland farmer concentrating on these five points:

(1) Growing the maximum amount of pasture.
(2) Managing a dairy herd to eat all the pasture I grow.
(3) Maintaining a high quality herd.
(4) Obtaining the milk they produce in a simple efficient manner.
(5) Having good staff relationships.

During the development of this farm I have put these points into practice.

A 48ha dairy unit adjacent to my home property was purchased in 19'70. At that time it was producing 9000 kg of butterfat. In my first season it produced 14,000 kg from 125 cows and last year it produced 28,180 kg from 160 cows, (Figure 1) with 35 heifers grazed off from May to May.

DEVELOPMENT OF A HIGH PRODUCING UNIT

1. PASTURE GROWTH

I knew the soil type for it was next door to our home farm. My first task was to make good its deficiency in phosphate and potash by applying 1250 kg/ ha of 30% potassic super in the first year, and 875 kg/ ha in the following years (split in two dressings). For the last three years about 40 kg N/ha of nitrogen have been applied — 4 to 4.5 tonnes of urea split into, April and August dressings.

To utilise all possible areas to grow grass, huge boxthorn hedges were cut back and a very wide race narrowed to 12 feet. Also a river flat plantation on the boundary was cleared and grassed, which now provides an emergency grazing area when winter pugging threatens in other paddocks.

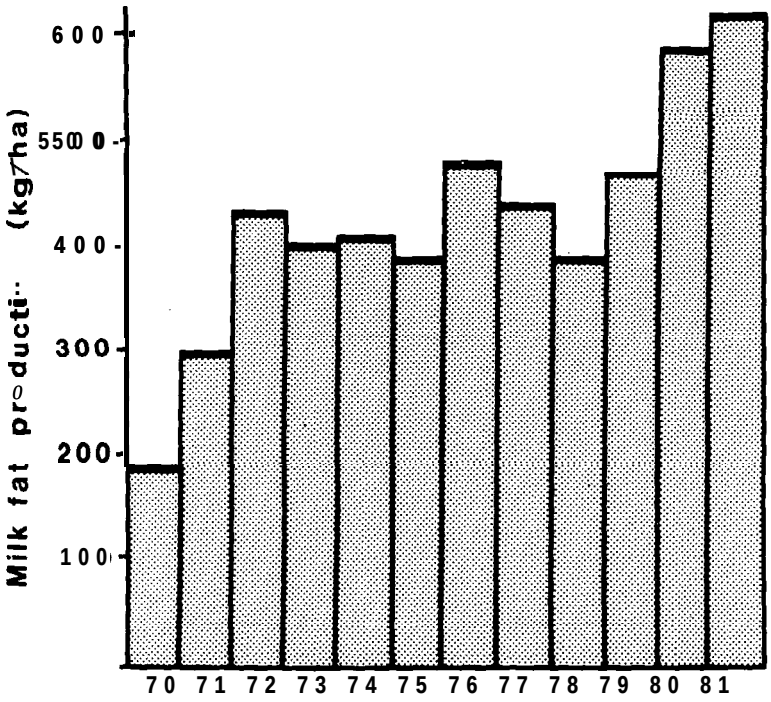

FIG. *I: Production per Total Hectare*

Grass grub and porina are our main pests with porina the major one in our light soil. Two years ago I sprayed pastures with Fenitrothion to control porina. This gave a great improvement in grass growth in late autumn and early winter. This is a critical period, for it governs the amount of hay I require and the stock number I can winter.

That was my plan for growing the maximum amount of grass.

2. GRAZING MANAGEMENT

To utilize this pasture, the original paddocks of approximately 10 acres were halved with one wire electric fences. I used 50 x 50mm battens, minimising cost, placing them one chain apart for ease in calculating strip grazing areas. Two years ago I subdivided even further and I now have 32, 1.4 ha paddocks; a number I find convenient for grazing management.

My grazing plans are always flexible, suiting the weather and growth pattern at the time. This means constant study of pasture growth, trying to plan ahead and not just day to day. My main aim in management is to keep pastures with what I see as good milking grass. I think I am more concerned when grass is too long than too short.

Having said farmers must be flexible there is one area in which I am not flexible at all. I am against feeding supplements for milk production in early autumn or in a drought. At these times cows are grazed systematically on a three week rotation irrespective of weather conditions. I believe that in our worst drought (1977/ 78) stock were more contented by having a new area daily — even if it was only for the scenery.

Drying off is governed by cow condition — even if it is early in a drought year. When dry they are restricted on pasture and fed hay for IO-14 days. This assists with drying off and allows a build up of grass which enables us to then feed all-grass for approximately a month. From about 20th June to calving, cows are fed grass and hay with the addition of magnesium. Calving begins on July 5th and normally we have 2.5 cows/ ha in milk by July 31st. This early calving gives me about 2/ 3 of our total production by the end of December.

Cows are fully fed after calving, supplemented with hay when necessary. I begin with a 48 hour grazing per paddock and as cow numbers increase move to a 36 hour, then a 24 hour pattern and gradually to a 12 hour rotation by the beginning of September. When grass surplus appears (about October 10th) paddocks are taken out for hay which is cut six weeks later in November. It is important to get hay off early, and get good pasture recovery before a possible dry spell.

3. HERD QUALITY

The herd was originally made up partly from the home herd, plus bought in heifers. I can not emphasise too strongly the importance of using AB and herd-testing services to improve a herd. I have used these services for 25 years on the home farm and in every year on this property. 1 have culled the lowest Production Index cows each season, confident that replacement heifers from high Breeding Index bulls will be genetically better.

4. MILKING MANAGEMENT

The cows are milked in an 8-a-side herringbone shed by a married couple. With the ever present possibility of changing labour I have learnt that a simple efficient milking method must be adopted. So now we practise a non-wash "all cups on" and "all cups off" method.

To be able to use this method, milking machines must be efficient and checked regularly to maintain this efficiency. Electricity problems in the cowshed were discovered in the first season. Once this fault was corrected the following season's production lifted 5000 kg.

Again AB services have proved their worth. The breeding today is such that cows needing special milking treatment are a thing of the past. We also take great care of udder health — teat spraying at all times and using dry cow therapy.

5. LABOUR RELATIONS

Although last on the list, labour relations are in no way the least important. This farm has been developed with employed labour, consisting of a married couple. In the beginning there was a lot of work to be done so I made sure the home was in first class condition — a very important factor when both husband and wife milk.

I try not to dictate to staff too much but encourage them to put forward their own ideas and show some initiative in planning. As an example -- we made silage last season because my man was keen to give it a try. I have not made silage for 20 years.

CONCLUSION

1 am often asked why we produce more than the so-called average farmers. 1 believe farming is not about just stocking rate and fertilisers. It is all about the dedication of the individual to do that little bit extra, and to seek and adopt new farming technology. So many of us mean to do this but we never just get around to it.

I still feel the challenge to increase production and work on the principle that surely next year we can do better than this one.

What am I going to try in the future?

I want to keep a close watch of possible mineral deficiencies in pastures and stock. I also want to try covering stock in the winter, to see if cow condition can be improved. This may even lead to less pugging in wetconditions because stock move around less.

However my main aims will still be to.--

(1) Grow plenty of grass.
(2) Graze as much as possible.
(3) Have a genetically superior herd.
(4) Milk the herd simple and efficiently.
(5) Keep good staff relationships.