

The More Summer Milk project – a participant's view

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Dairy farmer, Pokeno

We purchased this property at Pokeno as a dry stock unit and converted it to dairying. Production in the first season (1989/90) was 16 500 kg milkfat (29 500 kg milk solids).

Our farm is 60 effective ha (plus a large undeveloped area of the Mangatawhiri swamp), with a 20 ha runoff. The farm is 30 ha of stumpy peat soils, stopbanked but floodable from upstream ponding, and 30 ha of rolling Hamilton clay soils (75% mowable).

Development

A pumping system was installed in 1994.

Over 50% of the flats has been regrassed in a programme involving stumping or stump chipping, consolidation and regrassing.

Summer crops have been grown as part of the consolidation phase of development. These have included green feed maize, sorghum, Pasja, and turnips.

Early regrassing was done with Yatsyn, Pitau, Pawera mixes. We are currently using Embassy, Aran/Kopu, and Colenso.

A capital fertiliser programme has raised soil test data to respectable levels.

Management

Franklin District is commonly accepted as a dry summer area, and we have tried to manage the farm to fill the summer gap with crops that fit in with development, with silage when available, and with bought in feeds such as squash.

The More Summer Milk trial

When the More Summer Milk project was looking for farms for the 1994/95 season we decided to offer our property. We saw it as a chance to find out for ourselves, and from other farms in the project, how best to improve the summer production drop.

The trial involves running a split herd operation with a control herd and a trial herd. The aim is to supplement the trial herd with 4 kg DM per cow for 100 days over the summer. We have to finish the season with the same available feed on both farmlets and with both herds in the same condition score.

We have stayed in the trial for three years.

For the first two seasons we grew Barkant turnips. The trial required 10% of the trial farmlet planted by 1 November. We have grown turnips before, but in Year 1 the crop was not a success. The crop was badly infested with weeds, which had not been our normal experience. Turnip yields were between 5–6 t DM/ha at 100 days' growth. There was a small production response while the crop lasted, but the herd lost production before and after feeding, while the crop land was out of grass. The second crop in 1995/96 was better, at 10 t DM/ha, but the extra production from the turnips still did not make up for the losses while the crop grew, and while the new grass was established.

Year 3 we trialled nitrogen at 30 kg/ha in November with a 40-day summer grazing rotation. We did not effectively use all the available feed in November–December, but the extra production from the trial herd was still profitable.

Summary of trial

It has meant more work for us. Managing two herds, recording inputs, monitoring pastures, all take more time.

However, other farmers accept the results as "real". We have had good turnouts of 80 to over 100 people at the field-days over the three years, and I have been regularly asked how the trial was going, by people I didn't know, at all sorts of places.

Scientists get out to see that it's not a perfect world off the research station, and that farmers have many limitations they may not normally have to cope with. This includes such things as the ability to collect good data with limited people available, and problems of getting things done at the right time, whether this is fitting cultivation work into the rest of the farm work and the weather, or getting the silage contractor onto the farm when I want him.

Farmers involved in the trial have a lot more data available, such as pasture growth rates and average pasture cover data, botanical composition of pastures, and analyses of supplements.

There have been benefits from meeting other farmers involved in the trial. They may be running a different treatment, but the chance to discuss results and to understand why and how the results come out the way they do is very valuable.

Table 1 Monthly production data for four seasons.

	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97
Cow nos	168	166	181	164
Calving Date	15 July	1 July	25 June	15 July
kg milksolids				
July	425	1335	2326	590
Aug	4277	4771	4009	3883
Sept	6679	5703	4572	4960
Oct	7139	6278	6332	5806
Nov	7625	5772	5614	5890
Dec	7135	4295	5081	5604
Jan	4639	2440	4629	5152
Feb	2904	2536	3923	3583
Mar	1713	2765	2921	2909
Apr		1550	1470	1605
Season Total	42536	37445	40877	39982
to 31 Dec	35894	28154	27934	26733
1 Jan to end	6642	9291	12943	13249

Table 2 Farm production data for four seasons.

Farm area 60 ha	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97
Cow nos	168	166	181	164
Calving date	15 July	1 July	25 June	15 July
kg milksolids season	42536	37445	40877	39982
to 31 Dec	35894	28154	27934	26733
1 Jan to end	6642	9291	12943	13249

I understand the “control–treatment” approach to research much better after being involved, and being able to see the results for myself.

There has been personal motivation for us.

When we look at the results of the trial on our farm and our annual production figures, our conclusion is that it is going to be much more profitable to get the spring right first, perhaps use some nitrogen to carry some grass or silage into the summer, but not to spend up on bought in feed for the dry period. It is probably better to dry off at this stage. ■