

# NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN

Not content to do the same thing, veteran beef farmers Stephen and Jane Hayes are still refining their farming systems after 44 years. **Glenys Christian** paid them a visit. Photos by Rob Owens.

Some Northland farmers thought Stephen and Jane Hayes were too old when they were selected as hosts of a Beef + Lamb New Zealand monitor farm back in 2010.

But a decade on the couple, who farm 583 hectares just south of Kaeo, are still refining their farming systems, putting to good use what they describe as a very positive experience. And they're more than happy to pass on their knowledge to those just starting out in the industry.

Stephen has been on the farm of which about 400ha is effective, all his life, seeing some big changes in that time.

"There are 100 sheep now, down from 3000 which used to produce 100 bales of wool a year," he said.

The farm was deliberately planted in gorse back in the 1800s to produce good quality seed, with gorse and blackberry harvested and chaffed for work horses. But after Stephen and Jane married in 1977 his regular annual work schedule became six months of fencing followed by six months of gorse spraying.

"Then we got a loan to get contractors in to do the spraying."

While they had run beef cows previously, it was Jane who first got involved in rearing a few bull calves.

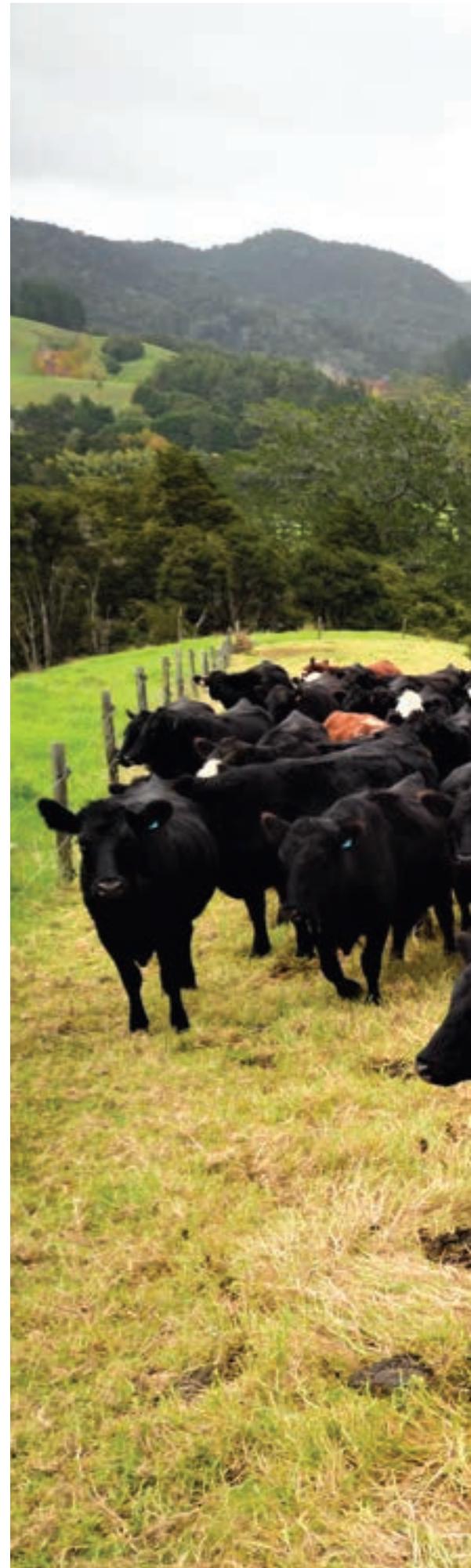
"My father was a farmer near Kaitaia so I knew all about rearing calves," she said.

Initially she did a deal with a neighbouring dairy farmer for colostrum, taking 20 to 30 calves suckled on nurse cows through to yearlings. That slowly built up to 100 to 140 a year as they were sending more cattle off finished and less store. A few of their calves are now reared on milk powder fed via calfeteria. After trying hay they now make sure every calf has meal available in their pens, with all of them being yard weaned. Jane's a fan of molasses blocks which she said the calves really like.

"And it keeps them quieter."

They now have about 30 Friesian nurse cows rearing up to 100 Hereford Friesian cross bull calves which they buy in at four days old. Last spring they all came from one local farmer but the Hayes will top up from the saleyards if they're short. They aim to get them to 120kg at weaning with a good start and their Friesian genetics paying off later on.

They've also bought in 100kg weaners for the past two years to make their lives easier, although the quality might sometimes not meet the high standards they set. They weigh youngstock regularly, wanting them to reach 600kg by 20 months before their second winter. With most autumn-born







The rolling hills of Stephen and Jane's property, south of Kaeo in the Far North.

#### FARM FACTS:

- Stephen and Jane Hayes
- Situated on SH10, just south of Kaeo in the Far North
- 583ha (400ha effective) on both sides of the highway
- 40ha of flats where hay and silage can be made and cattle grazed intensively, the rest hilly
- 100 Friesian bull calves reared on 30 nurse cows, some weaners bought in
- Carrying 320 rising one-year-olds with 44 autumn-born
- Subdivision has improved pastures so more stock can be finished than sold store as previously
- 100 Texel-Beltex cross ewes run in rough gullies.



calves reaching 400kg at a year old, a good proportion of them can leave the farm by October or November at 600kg. Last year one of their bulls sold before Christmas for \$1700.

"That makes a big difference," Jane said.

"They're not the easiest. They have their moments."

They did try running dairy grazers for four years but found they were too demanding.

"Give me a bunch of bulls any day."

For their breeding herd they try to buy in good quality short gestation bulls which will produce low birthweight calves with two or three a year usually coming on to the farm.

"We used to use Charolais bulls but their progeny had to be well fed all the way through," Stephen said.

#### Switch made to Hereford

The switch was made to Hereford bulls as a terminal sire and calving has been moved back from August 1 to September 1 to better match feed supply.

"It was one of those eureka moments," Stephen said.

"We should have done it sooner."

They don't sell any calves at the local autumn calf fairs any more but have become wary of getting committed to carrying them through the winter when wet conditions can be a problem. A decade ago they would carry 100 weaners through winter but now they carry up to 350. Stock numbers are 320 rising one-year-olds with 44 autumn-born which are over 350kg going into winter.

They sell their steers in spring but after thinking they were a bit light last year boosted their liveweight by about 20kg each with some recording an impressive 2.9 to 3kg daily weight gain through "feeding them like dairy cows".

They credit their time as a monitor farm hosts for getting them to study more closely every aspect of what they were doing.

"We learned to farm differently and look deeper," Jane said.

"You could pick out the bits that worked for you."

They lifted production by subdividing their flats as well as a plateau area higher up on the farm. This increased grazing pressure and allowed them to up the number of

cattle they both carried and finished rather than selling them as store.

“It was subdivision, subdivision, subdivision and we’d already done heaps,” she said.

Paddock size now varies from about 1ha on the hills at the top of the farm down to smaller blocks on their flat land.

“Some had only been split up with polywire but we replaced that with the Kiwitech system,” Stephen said.

“Only one wire will keep the cattle in but the sheep can get underneath. So we put in some two-wire fences which the calves will stay behind.”

They trialed two fencing systems on their flats, both developed in Northland. The first, by Kawakawa farmers Geoff and Dinah Cookson, created 1ha sections with permanent wires, and if necessary, smaller areas with temporary fencing. Stock are moved every one to two days which the Hayes found less daily work compared with the second system, developed by Arapohue farmer, John Blackwell. Here small mobs are held on less than 0.5ha and stock are shifted by temporarily lowering the fences.

The next stage was to improve the stock’s water supply. One 35ha paddock they’d already chopped in half was split into a number of smaller areas with a new water system installed over the last 10 years due to dry conditions from November. Now they have a totally reticulated water system there which involved installing 25 kilometres of pipes and 150 new troughs.

Plans for the coming winter are for a solar-powered pump on the higher hilly country where a creek feeding into a dam dried up. This will ensure two sources of water supply for stock grazing there at all times.

“You can do without grass but not without water,” Stephen said.

Rainfall can vary from a low of 1.2 metres a year to an all time high of 3m. The past summer has been a good example of just how variable rainfall can be with 28mm falling in November, nothing in December or January then 160mm in February.

Diversity is one of the strengths of their farm they believe, with different microclimates meaning it can be warm and sheltered in the valleys while it’s raining on the higher country.

“In an average year we have a flood and a drought,” he said.

“You’re watching the weather the whole time. It can flood on our 20ha of flats even if it doesn’t rain here.”

There were some suggestions made at



monitor farm open days that were rejected such as the idea of Stephen taking out fencing he’d spent long, hard hours putting in once electric fencing was in place. His response was to ask what would happen when there was a power outage which isn’t an uncommon event in the area.

And Jane wasn’t impressed at all when it was suggested that she would do better by not selling stock progressively through the year.

“I like the cashflow.”

However over the last three dry seasons they’ve destocked as they’ve been able to. Their 50-day rotation over winter generally works well through until when the normal August or September feed pinch arrives.

## Health and wealth

“We’ve kept on rotational grazing but anything that puts a foot wrong we’ve got rid of because we’ve had to prioritise.”

When it comes to animal health they were unfortunate enough to be one of the first places theileria reached in Northland, although they’re uncertain how it arrived. Drenching for liver fluke and using copper bullets in late autumn makes a big difference. Friesian bull calves are regularly drenched every four to six weeks with all youngstock treated for coccidiosis as early as possible. Their first and second calver cows are treated for rotavirus after they ran into problems with the disease.

“Who wants to lose an animal?” Jane said.

“We want them to thrive.”

This probably contributes to them having higher animal health costs than many



**Top:** Stephen and Jane Hayes farm 583 hectares just south of Kaeo (photo: Glenys Christian). **Above:** A trough for thirsty bulls.

farmers, at about \$21/ha.

For the 2018/19 year their gross farm income (GFI) was \$1,147/ha, or \$150 a stock unit (SU). Gross farm revenue was \$460,000 and farm working expenses (FWE) \$788/ha or \$103/su which is 68.7 percent of GFI. Effective farm surplus (EFS) was \$359/ha or almost \$47/su.

About 5km of riparian fencing has been carried out over the past three years as most of their river frontages had been fenced off some time ago. Planting hasn’t been needed as the abundance of native bush on the



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farm means rapid reseeded of species such as totara, punga and ti tree.

Wet areas on the 330ha of land across the main highway from the Bay of Islands to the Far North have been fenced off as well. There's a large swamp area where poplars have been planted then added to over the years. Now plans are to plant more ti trees so bee hives can be placed nearby.

Because of the traffic, stock movements across the road are kept to a minimum. The Hayes count themselves lucky to have installed a big set of the yards on the block over the road complete with a crush and scales.

"That makes life easy," Stephen said.

It was built four years ago by contractors with them agreeing that it was worth every cent of the \$57,000 it cost.

Their Texel-Beltex cross ewes do well on the rougher gullies on the farm which have also been fenced off with the help of a Far North District Council subsidy. The sheep only come out at mating in April and then at lambing, beginning on September 1, where 120-150% are regularly recorded.

"That's when the kikuyu starts to grow," he said.

"We tried lambing earlier but there just

wasn't enough grass."

They did experiment with Romneys on the farm but they didn't suit their farming system, prompting a move back to Perendales, then Texels, then the Beltex cross. Fat lambs are sold due to the lack of facilities to manage older animals, with that decision also made easier by recent dry weather.

The Hayes make 200 big bales of silage on their farm as well as 52 big bales of hay after good grass growth last spring, which is fed as required. They've regrassed 40ha of pasture in the last few years on their finishing block after Jane's sister and her partner grew maize there for their dairy herd.

Kikuyu is managed with topping, mulching or through grazing pressure, with the increase in heifer numbers being credited with keeping pasture quality high. The heifers get the bulk of the new grass but there's still the option to offload them through the year if required. The breeding herd tidies up behind them with bulls then is used as a flexible pasture management tool.

"The girls work but we still get 98% in-calf rates with rising two-year-olds and

rising three-year-olds with calves on them," Stephen said.

"We sprinkle Tama ryegrass in front of them and they'll hoof and tooth it in."

Then a small amount of nitrogen will go on to boost grass growth with a spreader towed behind their farm bike. Their maintenance fertiliser is 120 tonne of serpentine super with muriate of potash, sulphur, selenium and cobalt mixed in. Around 150t of lime goes on annually with soil tests carried out by Nutrilink most years. Herbage tests will also be carried out by the company with its reps visiting the farm two or three times a year. The soil pH is 5.9 and Olsen P an average of 20. A lot of reactive phosphate rock (RPR) has been used over the last 12 to 15 years with 40t of an RPR mix being flown on to their back block and 80t groundspread along with the lime.

Their part-time worker is Aaron Wood, who used to work on a neighbouring farm, who they say is great at tractor work and for "technical things".

In the future they're thinking of not rearing so many calves but instead buying in more yearlings after carefully checking their quality, Jane said. "I'm trying to retire from rearing calves. 🍷"