

# The Northland nurserymen of beef

Beef farmers Jeff Martin and Helen Linssen fatten Friesian bull calves and want to be in on a nation-wide farm assurance plan. **Glenys Christian** reports.



Winners are grinners: Northland beef farmers Jeff Martin and Helen Linssen by the solar panels installed in 2017 to pump water from their Foster block lake. Photo: New Zealand Farm Environment Trust.

**N**orthland beef farmers, Jeff Martin and Helen Linssen, describe themselves as nurserymen. They take 100 kilogram Friesian bull calves bought from rearers through to about 350kg liveweight before selling them on, usually in the following December.

They're strongly of the view that the New Zealand Farm Assurance Plan Plus (FAP+) needs to extend to their vital part of the beef supply chain, having worked towards this aim for over five years.

"The story alone is fantastic but you need traceability," Jeff said.

"We're the next step down. FAP+ is the mechanism by which we'll get a premium.

We want to be able to make that offer to farmers so they can take their stock further."

He believes FAP+ is a way to differentiate product and give conscious foodies what they want.

The couple are the Northland Ballance Farm Environment Awards supreme regional winners for 2020.

Jeff is on the Beef + Lamb NZ Northern North Island farmer council as well as being a member of its nationwide environment reference group (ERG).

Jeff and Helen also belong to a RMPP action network group under which aims to reduce animal losses and increase liveweight gains.

They buy bull calves predominantly from one Waikato rearer who they know well, who also supplies Pamu (Landcorp).

"He has a high M bovis protocol to reduce any risk so we pay a premium price," Helen said. This means they have been M bovis free so far.

They used to buy calves from the South Island but with the arrival of theileria in the area became wary. Through a tickicide trial they participated in, they learned a lot more about the disease.

"And the calves didn't adjust well to the long travel," she said.

So in 2014 they switched to their current rearer and keep the connection strong with annual visits between their farms.



## Sifting through stock

Last summer 975 Friesian calves arrived on the three properties which make up Te Karoa Farms through November and December with the last arriving in January. Two thirds were contracted to give them security, but the remaining one third were bought on the spot market.

They see the logical next step as building the same close relationship with buyers of their stock.

"We've had a long relationship with our stock agent and his same clients come back and buy our cattle every year," Jeff said.

"But the returns are dictated by the schedule price and our prices are an equation of that. We can't forward contract well but we have talked about receiving a percentage of the schedule price."

Once the calves arrive on their farms, they go on to transitional feeding with a 20% protein meal used by rearers fed in plastic troughs in paddocks to up to 35 different mobs.

"They can be very delicate or robust," Helen said.

"You've got to be around them constantly."

The calves are all weighed at the end of February and May to identify individual animals which aren't putting on weight. They can be susceptible to worms up until nine months old but as they get older they can clean up pastures after them on their cell grazing system. They did try using cows behind the calves but found them too

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heavy for their soils.

"We try not to over-drench by keeping an eye on which animals need it rather than doing them every 28 days," Helen said.

They used to carry out faecal egg counting but found sometimes the results would indicate that drenching wasn't required when visually it appeared as though it was. Animal health costs are between \$16 to \$18/calf or \$4/su.

Jeff and Helen admit they probably don't weigh their stock as much as they should but have recently upgraded their scales and tag scanner. And they're well aware of what the record-keeping requirements are that the farm assurance programme they would like to see in place would require.

They will generally speed up their rotation in August, even though there's sometimes a feed pinch in September or October, to keep good quality feed through to December.

"Spring can be a bit of a fizzer and sometimes we're growing more grass in July than in October," Jeff said.

"The only reliable season is winter."

Flexibility is required in getting stock off the farm, which Helen refers to as sifting,

where stock are repeatedly weighed to get the greatest amount of consistency in each truckload sold.

"Because we're trying to get a tight weight range we'll go through 150 bulls to get 60," she said.

"We'll weigh a lot of bulls then."

The animals are carefully inspected before they leave with the couple's marketing skills coming to the fore.

## Bought their first farm in 2001

The couple were both born in the north but didn't meet up until they attended Massey University. Jeff studied a Bachelor of Agricultural Economics and Helen a Bachelor of Business Studies, majoring in agricultural and horticultural business and marketing. They both ended up in the horticultural sector with Jeff working for Turners and Growers both in exports and imports, then South Island-based company, Demeter Pacific.

Helen worked in Auckland for two years, travelled overseas, then worked for KeriFresh in Kerikeri, managing packhouses and local marketing. They realised after meeting in the 1990s that she'd been in charge of processing squash for Jeff's company. After five-and-a-half years she left to set up one of the first environmentally friendly drycleaning businesses in the country in Kerikeri.

Jeff's father fell ill, so he returned home. His father had a 474ha farm at Mangamuka, further west of where they are now, where



Jeff and Helen switched from finishing big bulls to younger bulls to protect their soils. Photo: NZ Farm Environment Trust.



he ran an Angus stud and Romney sheep. In 1995 Jeff bought 100ha nearby and was able to lease two other blocks where he ran 120 breeding cows. They were living in Kaeo using one vehicle to get to and from their different businesses and life was only going to get busier.

They bought their first farm together in the Otangaroa Valley, northwest of Kaeo, in 2001, after selling Helen's house. It's 92ha with about 40ha effective, the balance being in native bush which has been fenced off for over 20 years. By this time Jeff was running a forestry gang after pruning and thinning blocks he'd started planting at 11 on his father's farm and they had two toddlers, Mary-Jane, now 22 and Oscar, 19.

In 2004 they bought the Linssen block of 190ha (160ha eff) which was part of Helen's parents' farm 6km away. They used hand-held GPS and sticks and strings to subdivide from paddocks of two to five hectares in size down to 0.4ha cells giving 60-day rotations. They switched from finishing big bulls to younger bulls to protect their soils.

Three years ago they added the nearby Foster block of 207ha. The farm had grazed sheep and Santa Gertrudis cattle and been a dairy farm in the past but there was little infrastructure when they arrived. They flew a drone over the farm to give 20cm contour lines. This data was used by AgDesign to design a cell system down to 0.25ha as well as marking out riparian areas. That was also used to lay out ware lines and locate troughs. Development work included building a 5.5 million litre lake, fencing dams off and installing five tanks and five pumps across all three farms. So a total of 307ha is now in cell grazing, 23ha used for extensive grazing which may go into forestry, 133ha in bush and 43ha in riparian planting.

"It took two and-a-half years but it was so



Calves being fed after arriving at Te Karoa Farms.

much fun," Helen said.

Part of the design was making sure there was always pasture above riparian areas which extend up to the top of the hills in order to capture nutrient run-off.

"It was all built on the computer and precision marked with a GPS system much more complex than our earlier hand-helds," Jeff said.

"There are only two gates in each cell so staff members can't get anything wrong. It's farming by numbers."

Three-and-a-half years ago they took on their first employee, Matthew McGregor, who has now been joined by cadet, Tane Burns-Kingiwaiaua.

### Grazing and stocking

They tried regrassing but found that new ryegrass species were overtaken in a couple years by the predominant kikuyu. Jeff reasons that more grass might be grown per day if establishment was possible but

### FARM FACTS

- Finishing Friesian bull calves from 100kg to 350kg LW
- Area: 506ha, 307ha now in cell grazing,
- 133ha in bush and 43ha in riparian planting.
- Gross farm income is \$2850/ha
- Farm working expenses \$2000/ha, includes ost of buying stock
- The effective farm surplus is \$619/ha
- Animal health costs \$16 to \$18/animal, \$4/su

kikuyu would still win out over the whole season.

Their stocking rate is moving up slightly each year as pasture root systems develop more and the grazing cells allow stock to

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be moved regularly and enable long winter rotations. With a range of silt and clay soils on the farm numbers of stock can be varied by use of land management units (LMU) to manage pasture better.

“It’s practicality and science coming together,” Helen said.

They used to plate meter pastures but now believe they have a good idea of covers.

“You’re gathering information to make decisions and it’s up to you how you get that information,” Jeff said.

“Cell grazing tends to even it out because you can set the rotation then change the size of the cells.”

Gross farm income is \$2850/ha and farm working expenses (FWE) \$2000/ha, which includes the cost of purchasing stock. The effective farm surplus (EFS) is \$619/ha.

Thirty units of phosphate goes on annually, along with 26 units of nitrogen(N) and a small dressing of sulphur. It’s flown on by fixed wing aircraft from an airstrip situated between their farms. They might also add a side dressing of N in the spring if they think it’s needed. Lime will go on every three years as well as carrying out a herbage test for trace elements. Their soil’s pH is 5.8 and Olsen P level between 25 and 35 after using reactive phosphate rock (RPR) for some years.

Dung beetles have played their part in improving fertility after being introduced by entomologist, Dr Jenny Dymock, based at nearby Taipa, who they heard speak at a field day.

“We had some long conversations with her to make sure they wouldn’t kill off our worms,” Jeff said.

“We weren’t sure at the beginning.”

But now the beetles have spread six kilometres down the valley and they believe they’ll keep going until they reach a barrier of some type.

### Environmental awards

They’ve progressively fenced off native bush, wetlands and riparian areas with help from the Northland Regional Council as part of their farm environment plan.



Jeff Martin and Helen Linssen with farm cadet Tane Burns-Kingiwaiaua and employee Matthew McGregor. Matthew has worked for the couple for three-and-a-half years.

Invertebrates in the 18km of stream frontage on their farms feeding into the Wainui River they regard as “little scientists”.

“You can test on the day and that will give you a snapshot, but they’re doing it all the time,” Jeff said.

The couple is also acting as guinea pigs for Cloud Farmer, which is developing a new environmental part of its app, which they find particularly handy in coordinating the running of three different properties.

They plan to plant shade trees in the cells which don’t already have them with the debate continuing as to which species will be most suitable. And that includes the replanting of 10ha of recently harvested forestry, with an eye to natives or a different range of exotics.

“Poplars can fall over after 20 plus years,” Helen said.

“But we have planted some on steep slopes for erosion control. Research has been a big part of what we’ve done. We’ve learned from other farmers and we keep looking for new ideas to keep the passion. If you’re not going forward you’re going backwards.”

As well as winning the supreme environmental award for their region, they also received awards for water quality enhancement and agri-business management, including:

- B+LNZ Livestock Farm Award
- Bayleys People in Primary Sector Award
- Synlait Climate Stewardship Award
- WaterForce Wise with Water Award.

They were particularly pleased to receive the first of that slew of awards.

“There’s a lot of work looking after water from the top of the hill,” Jeff said.

“And it doesn’t have to be at a cost for us or our animals.” 🌱