

Factsheet 2: Grazing Management



These fact sheets contain information shared through discussions with 20 Hawke's Bay farmers during the 2008/09 season.

STOCK MANAGEMENT

"I like my sleep, I draw lines in the sand and if there's no rain by a date then the stock go. I'm as hard as that. There's no second guessing or 'what if.' They just go. If they go and it rains the next day well that's just tough. I'd rather sleep."

Responses

- Breeding flocks/herds have been reduced with an increase in trading stock.
More trading stock gives greater flexibility for de-stocking.
Lower stock numbers in the summer.
There is no clear 'rule' for de-stocking. Those who are proactive are looking ahead two to four weeks, make their decisions and stick with them.
- Sheep/cattle ratios are now in favour of cattle. Ratios range from 75/25 to 0/100, with an average of about 60/40.

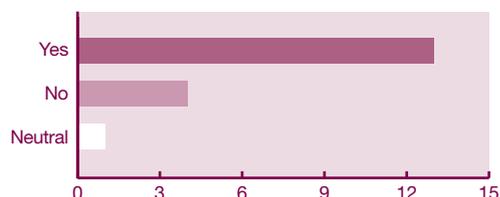
Higher pasture covers are attained with less sheep/more cattle.

- There is a much greater focus on per head performance than in the past.
Profit over production; quality, not quantity.

"What's evolving at present isn't a sustainable system long term. We have passed the point where there is going to be enough breeding."

- Some farmers are exploring, and acting on, options to take advantage of safer rainfall areas for breeding stock:
 - joint ventures
 - relocation
 - buying another farm

Is your focus more on per head performance than in the past?





The future

“The next generation have to get their heads around where the finishing country is and where the breeding country is.”

Where the finishing country is in future will be determined by economic/market forces, and physical limitations of the land and local climate. Stock policies will need to be matched more closely to the productive potential of each farm.

PASTURE

“We need to start growing some of these grasses that are grown in other parts of the world that would thrive in this sort of climate and then stock our farms accordingly.”

“When I ask seed merchants for something that will work here I just get a blank stare. When at Massey I never learnt anything other than getting an aeroplane to fly around and do an over-sow.”

Responses

- More farmers are maintaining higher pasture covers over summer.

Ties in with lower stocking rate and sheep numbers.

There are benefits to soil moisture and carbon.

- Some monitor pasture covers with Farmax, others prefer to rely on a combination of experience and observation.
- Alternatives to ryegrass are being sought by some.

Strong disillusionment with recent pasture breeding programmes and the lack of independent advice (people coming through the gate are selling products rather than sharing ideas and advice).

- Locally acclimatised pasture species are often the most reliable during a drought.

Some are focused on low input or biological soil management to improve soil condition and therefore pasture quality, increased rooting depth, and increased drought resistance.

- There is on-going experimentation with diverse species (a number using pasture mixes) and management.

Alternative species being grown include fescues, chicory, clovers, plantain, prairie grass.

- The use of supplementary feeding depends on circumstance.

“I remember watching my neighbour who was a pretty damn good farmer. He was listening to his advisor very closely. As we were going into this drought he was advised to hang onto his stock and buy food in. So he bought hay and he bought hay and he bought hay and then the hay all ran out and in the end he was buying truckloads of carrots and anything that was considered food. The end result was he couldn't buy any more food because he'd run out of money and there wasn't much food available. He sent his cows to the works and I thought well what a bloody waste of time. Maybe it wasn't managed properly but it's always stuck in my mind that I'd rather get rid of the animals than buy food in. Everyone else makes money out of it except the guy actually doing it. The carriers and the guy who makes the food make some money, and the bank makes some money on the movement of it. Everyone seems to get rich except the cocky, who was doing it so super conservative.”

The future

Changes to pasture management, including experimentation with different species that are available, are already happening. More regionally focused, and on-farm, research is needed on suitable plant species and management regimes. Such research needs to build on and support what farmers are already doing.



SOILS

“As farmers we’ve kept trying to push nature, and make it do this and make it do that, we pour urea on, we squirt things down their throats because we’ve bugged up the stock mix and we have put more urea on because we’ve overstocked and done this and done that ... we’ve actually got to learn how to just let it happen and start learning to work with it rather than try to modify it all the time.”

Responses

- Many farmers are focusing on lower fertiliser inputs. This is mainly because of cost, but some also have environmental concerns and a desire to find alternatives.
- There is increased interest in alternative fertiliser regimes.
 - More use of lime or lime-based products.
 - Biological/organic approaches.
- There is an increased focus on soil moisture retention, building soil organic matter and improving soil health.

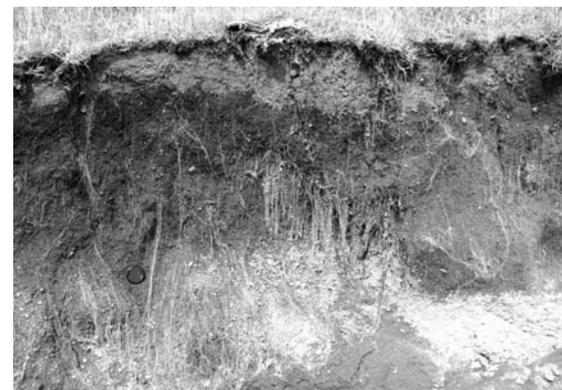
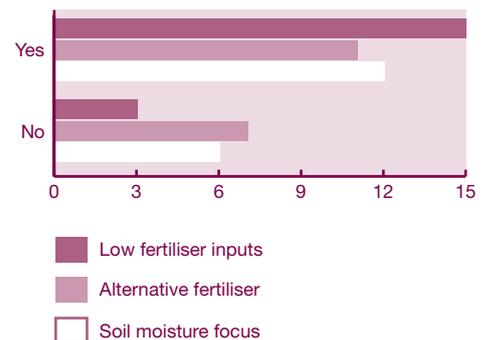
“One of the things about biological farming is that deep down you know that what we’ve been doing is not right and we’ve got to change.”

- A few are focused on intensification of alluvial flats, with drainage.
- Many are aware of erosion risks and are being proactive with conservation plantings, some not as much as others.
- There are mixed views regarding cultivation and conservation tillage.

The future

Farmers are already driving change through adoption of alternative soil management regimes. Increasing fertiliser costs and environmental concerns will be drivers for change in the short term. Visible success stories are already influencing farmers to change, and will increasingly be an influence as more farmers seek alternatives. There is a strong need for independent research, information and advice, particularly relating to soil biological and low-input management and the observed benefits that arise from such an approach. As with pasture changes, this research needs to build on and support what farmers are already doing.

Are you using less fertiliser, alternative fertiliser, and focusing on retaining soil moisture?





Written by:

Gavin Kenny, Garth Eyles,
Mike Halliday

Produced by:

Earthwise Consulting Limited
709a Duke Street
Hastings 4120

Tel: 06 870 8466
www.earthlimited.org

Funded by:

Sustainable Farming Fund
PO Box 2526
Wellington

Phone 0800 008 333
www.maf.govt.nz/sff/

Hawkes Bay Regional Council

Private Bag 6006
Napier 4142

Tel: 06 835 9200
www.hbrc.govt.nz

