

STOCK

MIX AND MAXIMISE

Ross and Tracey Laing breed
60% of their herd to Hereford to
maximise dairy-beef calf sales.



Stock sales can hold the boat steady for dairy farmers when the milk price is low. Inseminating rising heifers for excess replacements or breeding valuable dairy-beef calves to sell into the market can provide a sizable pay cheque to boost profits. Waikato farmers Ross and Tracey Laing told **Sheryl Brown** how they maximise their Holstein-Friesian herd by breeding more than half the cows to Hereford bulls.

Ross and Tracey Laing mate up to 60% of their Holstein-Friesian pedigree herd to Hereford every year to maximise their dairy-beef calf sales. This season, with Fonterra dropping the forecast milk price for 2014-15 to \$6/kg milksolids (MS), every calf they sell will be a bonus.

“Our stock sales are well and truly a significant part of our business,” Ross says.

This year they will sell anywhere between 450 and 500 Hereford-Friesian

calves, leaving them with about 150 Friesian heifer replacements and 150 Friesian bulls.

Whiteface calves are generally always in high demand and contribute a big part of their annual income, he says.

“Compared to Friesian bulls, where the sales this season are really down on past years and have been quite disappointing, the whitefaces seem to be really holding their value.”





Hereford calves are holding their value every year in the market.

KEY POINTS

Location : Waerenga, Te Kauwhata

Area: 350ha effective

Production target: 430,000kg milksolids (MS) (870 cows)

Production record: 305,000kg MS (620 cows)

Stud: Stud Silverfern, Holstein-Friesian pedigree herd

BW: 48/28

PW: 60/18

Farm dairy: 50-bail rotary, in-shed feeding, automatic cup removers

Supplement: 1.5 tonnes meal cow/year. 1t maize /cow/year

Effluent: 60ha irrigation

System 3: 15-21% feed imported.

we've built up a big enough base to stay here," Ross says.

The land is relatively flat, differentiated into two blocks by soil type. There is a 180ha block of consolidated peat country, while the remaining land is a heavier clay soil.

The peat can handle the cows in winter, but the district tends to dry up quickly in the hot summers so they switched to a winter milk system 15 years ago, which suited the original peat country block.

"We have really dry summers here and we struggled to do 300kg MS/cow. When we switched to a winter milk system we started doing 400kg MS/cow."

They can feed the cows well in winter on the peat, which is free-draining and ultimately more forgiving during wetter months.

"You have to be able to feed them and you can always make things happen in winter by putting urea on, and supplement feed which the cows respond to well when freshly calved.

"The great thing about winter milking is you can focus on harvesting any surplus during spring for use in winter."

They started leasing Ross's brother's block 10 years ago. It has a clay soil and wasn't ideal for winter milking so they purchased a spring-calving herd to bulk up cow numbers and established a split-calving operation. The split-calving system works well. This year they autumn-calved 600 cows and spring-calved 270.

Building a feedpad gave them even more flexibility and allows them to keep the dry spring herd at home in winter and extend their days in milk (DIM).

The autumn herd ranges from 310 to 315 DIM while the spring herd averages 270 to 280 DIM.

"Our focus is on that winter milk, that's where our money comes from, from March to December."

If they get a dry summer, which Waikato seems to have every year now, they can dry off the autumn cows earlier rather than spending more money on feed and trying to push them through, he says.

They bought a neighbouring 100ha potato and onion growing block this year and have increased the cow numbers by 250. They will need to increase to 900 cows next year when the soil structure has

Hereford-Friesian calves are fetching premium prices early this spring, with four- to eight-day-old calves making \$280-\$340/head in Waikato. (Visit www.agrihq.co.nz for current sale prices.)

Ross and Tracey farm at Waerenga, nestled 10 minutes east of Te Kauwhata in the upper Waikato.

Ross started out farming in Dargaville where he sharemilked at Pouto then leased a farm in Turua on the Hauraki Plains for three years. Ross and Tracey moved to Waerenga in 1992 to farm next-door to Ross's parents and brother.

Since then they have expanded their farm from 100ha to a 350ha milking platform, including 118ha which they lease from Ross's brother.

"It's a great area. We've shifted a lot during the years, but since shifting here

➔ 119

➔ **from 116**

improved and the new block is growing more grass, Ross says.

He has two full-time staff who have been on the farm for 10 seasons, and a part-time worker. They all know the operation well and share the jobs. Taking on the extra block this year and increasing cow numbers, they will probably have to consider another staff member in future.

Their stocking rate during winter is 2.5 cows/ha which is ideal to get through, but that makes them under-stocked during spring so they renovate 10% of the farm every spring to grow maize.

"It's a good system, you take your worst paddock, use it grow the most feed, and then turn it into your best paddock."

They feed 1.5 tonnes of maize and another tonne of meal per cow for the year. The meal, which is typically a high metabolisable energy feed, is fed through the in-dairy feeding system in the rotary dairy that was built eight years ago.

The maize helps to reduce nitrogen leaching and there are always a couple of effluent paddocks in the pasture renovation programme, Ross says.

They still have a compliant two-pond system, located at the old dairy, which will

eventually have to be upgraded, and they irrigate effluent on 60ha. The new block they purchased this year has irrigation pipelines, so they will be able to expand the effluent area to 120ha.

They have gradually reduced their stocking rate in the past five years from three cows/ha to 2.5 cows/ha, which balances out the environmental impact of the dairy operation.

But a lower stocking rate hasn't decreased production.

"When you put the cows in a paddock there is only so much production there. If you get that production from fewer cows, that's a better return," Ross says.

Their registered pedigree Holstein-Friesian herd, Stud Silverfern, averages 500kg MS/cow. The target is to average 600kg MS/cow.

Ross hasn't herd-tested in 20 years. He goes by his eye instead and culls hard.

The Holstein-Friesians are ideal to mate with Hereford bulls to produce valuable dairy-beef calves.

They start mating from June 1 and November 1, and only artificially inseminate for three to four weeks before putting Hereford bulls out for five weeks.

"The Hereford is a really good breed, they really suit our system. Putting

pedigree Hereford bulls across Holstein-Friesians will ensure they always throw a white face.

"You get the odd red one, but they are predominately black. Everybody knows what the whiteface calves are. They are a

➔ **120**

2012-13 figures with 605 cows on 250ha

Farm working expenses	\$3.64
Operating expenses	\$5.12
Gross farm revenue per ha	\$5119
Operating profit (EFS) per ha	\$3201
Milksolids per ha (kg)	1195
Milksolids per cow (kg)	486
Milksolids per cow as % of liveweight	87%
Pasture and crop eaten tonnes drymatter (DM)/ha	11.2
Imported supplements tonnes DM/ha	3
Total feed eaten tonnes DM/ha	14.2
Nitrogen (N) applied	168 units N
Nitrogen leaching	26 kg N/ha

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Tracey and Ross Laing with some of this year's calves.

really valuable calf for us. In our best year we sold four-day-old calves for \$404."

Another bonus is the Herefords are easy-calving and easily identified in the paddock.

Ross supplies the Tuakau sales every week with a trailer-load of four-day-old calves that generally weigh more than 40kg.

"They always do well at the sales. They generally always end up in the first two pens at the saleyards."

The autumn calves usually do particularly well because buyers only have to take them through one winter to finish them off.

Ross buys yearling bulls every year and keeps a team of 15 bulls onfarm. He keeps

the bulls for two years to get the value out of them.

"We buy well-bred bulls off local farmers Dean and Lisa Hansen which are all fertility checked."

Hereford bulls are valuable and expensive like their offspring, and they generally pay more than \$2000 for a bull.

"When you're paying that money you don't want them to fire blanks, so it's worth paying a bit extra to get the value out of them."

The rising heifers are bred to a Jersey bull rather than for replacements or Hereford-cross calves.

The calves are worthless, but it is more important to protect that cow for her future in the herd, Tracey says.

"That first calving is so important for that cow's longevity. Why damage a cow at that age? Let it spit it out rather than have to push it out."

The big Friesian heifers can easily push out the Jersey calves without help so when you see one calving, you don't have to worry too much, Ross says.

They graze their replacements with Scott and Jody Watson at Pukeatua on a weight-gain arrangement and the heifers come home at 530kg, just less than the main herd's 560kg average weight.

A weight-gain grazing contract means a bigger cost upfront, but the benefits outweigh the cost. The heifers come home in excellent condition, fit into the herd easily, and don't get bullied. □