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Using data to drive decisions

Sally and Malcom Lee, Waikato, North Island, New Zealand

Sally Lee is a part-time beef and sheep consultant and farmer in the New Zealand North Island centre. She farms in Waikato in partnership with her husband Malcolm, a business partner in an Equity Partnership.

They bought the main hill country property block with an equity partner in 2008 and have invested in fencing, water supply and soil improvement in order to increase pasture production and stocking capacity.



Sally and Malcom they lamb 1800 ewes, which graze over 496 hectares. They also contract graze 115 dairy weaners from December, through to two year olds the following May, and 50 dairy cows for six weeks over winter. The pair also finish between 125 and 200 friesian bulls. They have a flexible trade steers policy depending on the season.

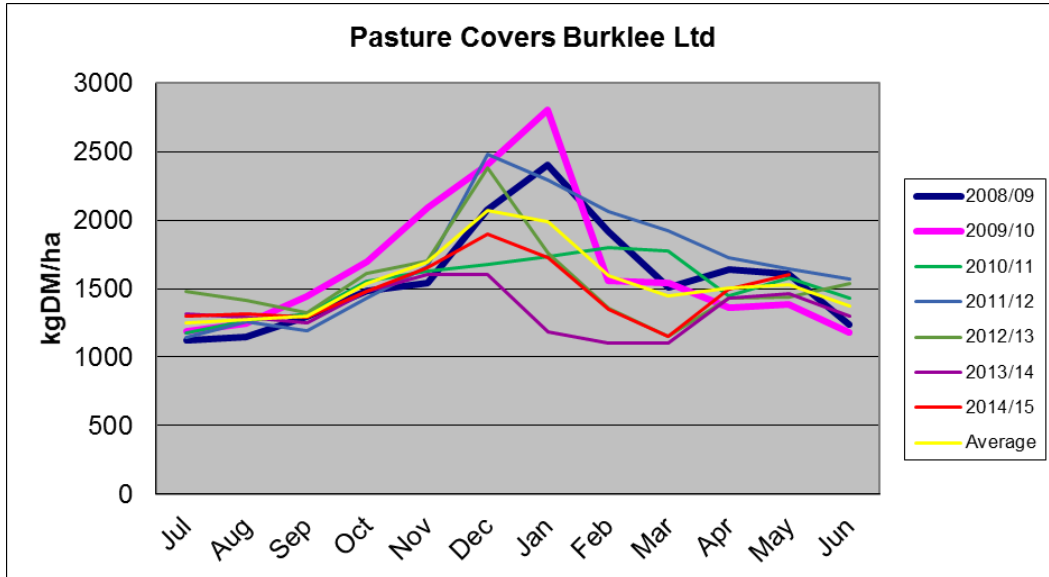


Three tools that have been invaluable to the developments they have made – Farmax, Microsoft Excel and Wheresmycows (farm mapping software). It is not possible to farm entirely from the computer screen, but spending time collecting and looking at data can help strategic decision-making on farm.

Farmax

Farmax is a decision support tool for farmers in New Zealand.

They use Farmax in a unique way – Sally acts as the consultant and Malcolm enters the day-to-day data (e.g. grass cover measurements, stock sales, weights and reproductive outcomes). They now have seven years of data on Farmax to give an average grass cover curve (see graph). Although this will vary year-to-year, the average gives a good guide. Farmax is used for modelling various scenarios and making tactical decisions. For instance, they can determine whether a nitrogen application is needed before the grass looks as though it needs a boost, which is often too late. They also compare long-term plans for the farm with their actual data in Farmax to see whether they are on track.



Microsoft Excel

Sally uses spreadsheets to meticulously calculate the cost-benefit of any investment, from potash application to a full reseed, to make decisions based on the likely gain in grass and ultimately carcass weight and dollars.

Wheresmycows

'Wheresmycows' is a GPS mapping programme used to determine areas for all field management practices such as cropping, fertiliser, stock rotations and spraying. The property was mapped at the very beginning and it has proved to be an invaluable tool as the property has undergone development. They strategise the farm fencing with this software to get optimal-sized paddocks to improve grass utilisation. The technology has also assisted in the setup of a water reticulation system.



Although Sally and Malcom still have a way to go to reach some of their specific performance targets (e.g. produce 310 kg product/ha/year, achieve \$800 gross farm income/ha), their collection of specific data and use of tools and targets helps them keep on track to optimise their farm business.

For more information read the BRP manual
[Planning grazing strategies for Better Returns](#)



Three things NZ farmers do differently

Poppy Frater has spent the last five months in New Zealand to gain a better understanding of sheep and beef farming in the Southern Hemisphere.

With a three-month placement at Farmax, farm events, seminars, visits to key industry players and a small farm placement, she has had a good introduction to the industry.



Although we can endlessly argue the similarities and differences between NZ and UK farming, there is no doubt that there are lessons to be learnt from either side. A different perspective is always good, it challenges current strategies and opens the mind to new opportunities.

I have noticed three key differences.

Emphasis on fencing

For newly-purchased developing farms, investment is made in permanent fencing to subdivide large fields. This helps control the grazing pressure during rotational grazing to improve pasture utilisation and therefore species composition. Although farmers still use temporary electric fencing, the more that is done with permanent fencing, the easier the management. From the highly precise beef techno grazing to the standard winter daily ewe flock shifts, rotational grazing is mainstream here. Fencing is expensive, but by increasing the grass utilisation by up to 30 per cent, it pays for itself in two or three years' time.

External advice

The use of consultants and discussion groups ensures that the farmer's practices are continually challenged. Although no one knows the specific intricacies of the farm like the farmer, they embrace other perspectives to bounce ideas, challenge and help build upon any areas of weakness in the farm business. Many more NZ sheep farmers use consultants than in the UK. It is expensive but their fee should be offset by improvements in profitability.

Lifestyle

Profitability is not always the only goal in the farm system, the ability to take time off is important too. From my perspective, NZ farmers feel more comfortable taking a weekend off here and there, and that is because they have set their system up to allow them to do so. For example, weighing up the financial implications of keeping fewer sheep and maintaining their condition might be just as profitable and easier maintenance than a larger sheep flock.

With great pride in the UK's sheep and beef farms and acknowledgement of the different strengths and challenges, there is still potential to steal some lessons from our kiwi counterparts to continually improve.

Poppy previously worked within the AHDB Beef and Lamb Research and Development team and now works in New Zealand.