



Ian Sharpe, Inglewood, Taranaki

These days Ian Sharpe runs 150 Friesian cross cattle beasts on his 53ha hilly North Taranaki farm. But he got there through an interesting mixture of careers. Originally an engineer he moved on to fertiliser sales and contracting — interacting with chemical engineers — selling to famers before deciding to become one himself on the hard slopes of northern Taranaki. ‘The rolling landscape isn’t natural dairy,’ he says: ‘But it grows grass.’

He made a start with BioAg 6 years ago — one of the reasons being that he had continuously low calcium coming through in the cows late spring: ‘I used to have a few “downers” — lost one or two at that time’ he says and has now involved the whole farm in the BioAg system.

‘I’ve seen an improvement over the six years’ he says, ‘but I’ve had other issues I’ve been able to address with the help of Steven Haswell of BioAg. ‘It’s been quite interesting: we lost a couple of young cows which after much enquiry we put down to the changes that were taking place.’

It was some two years ago and modifications to the regime seem to have cleared up the problem — whatever it was — as there have been no repeats. ‘I think there’s a mixture of sciences at work here. Some of its traditional and some might be in the soil biology.’

He points out the metabolic balance is all-important: the cow could be low on calcium, or magnesium, or trace elements, all or any of which can impede the proper functioning of cells: ‘Calving every year is a huge event for the cow, with great swings of minerals at that time. It’s a big issue for them.

Lameness has also been an issue, and Ian feels that diet is very much a control factor. He’s stepped outside the biological system for a ‘quick fix’ on this one, and says he sees the biological approach very much a long-term philosophy. Vitamins are an obvious accessible recourse and he uses Biotin as a source of ‘B’ vitamins helpful to the rumen, what he calls the cow’s ‘engine-room.’ The tendency for lameness to arise more than normal in a herd is related to nutrients, he argues. The hoof material has to grow properly to be able to withstand sharp edges and stones — particularly applicable in Northern Taranaki. So animals have to be in very good condition to withstand the demands of that environment.

Milk fever is not an issue, and neither is mastitis. Ian won’t use penicillin, although he protests he’s not a textbook ‘greenie’, more of a pragmatist: ‘I don’t want all their restrictions’ he says, referring to the terms and conditions applying to Bio-certification. ‘There might be a price premium: but as Fonterra only pick up in the Waikato, it’s irrelevant to me. I’m comfortable with what I’m doing, and with what I can manage.’

Replacement rate is a creditable 18 percent but he points out that with an even more fertile herd, fewer animals are lost and so the replacement rate would go down.

His herd general condition? — ‘average to good, given that it’s tough country — when the wind blows here, sweeping over the hills, it can be harsh.’

His genetic improvement programme is a response to an empty rate of around 6 or 7 percent. ‘But on the flat I used to run at 2 or 3 percent. So now he’s launched into a major breeding programme to change the picture. His work is in its second generation of going for better fertility: he searches the stats to identify semen supplied by CRV from bulls that meet certain criteria : ‘ I believe I’m seeing some improvement, but it’s a bit too soon to hang my hook on it’ he says. ‘Like everybody else I saw my reproductive performance falling — milk production per cow was getting better but I felt I had sacrificed fertility for production, so I took steps to change direction on the fertility front.’

Within the genetic information available from CRV for example, he says, breeding value tables give a clear direction, pointing to one bull with a 2.5 BV rating against a 1.7BV average. Choosing semen from bulls with a higher rating, rather than the collective average, as, he says, most farmers do, should produce more fertile daughters, who he can track through the next calving season, crossing them again with high BV semen for the generations to come. He’s suspicious of the so-called ‘sexed-up’ semen: ‘You might get more daughters at the cost of more empty slots’ he says.

His annual milk production figure is 52 000MS which works out at MS980/ha and 347S/cow (figures rounded). Having a drought each of the past two years hasn’t helped and in his area of Taranaki last year it was worse than that of 2012. Feed held on pretty well, he says, but adding that it was so dry last year there was nothing he could compare it to: ‘Finally, the grass was still there and came away afterwards, when it rained. The drought two years ago was very intense, but last season it went on forever, but with a magnificent January. We had to make that feed last until April.’

It’s an all-grass farm, with some PKE supplement ‘when feed’s a bit short. But, he says, he doesn’t want to be relying on that too much: ‘I don’t like to see the animals suffer, so don’t want restrictions as to what I can do (to retain organic certification).’

He only got 70 size 10 bales last year, but normally would get 20 more.

Ian puts great focus on the rumen and the BioAg RumiMate product— what he calls ‘the power-house of production: ‘Anything I can do to make that (rumen) a better place means I’m not only helping milk production, but I’m helping her. She’ll partition (whatever we feed her) in whatever way she wants, whatever is best for her.’

As to the grass itself, some five years into the BioAg programme Ian has a good feeling about some things pertaining to grass growth. He is pleased with his ‘much better’ nitrogen profile and uses no urea. Phosphates are more difficult in his environment and don’t release quite as readily as the nitrogen cycle, he says. So he feels he has to be patient in this context

Clover and worms are more prolific and the cows have shown no tendency to bloat, he says.

‘I’m pretty happy with the way things are going: I’m a patient man — you’ve got to be in Taranaki.