



## Dairy converts nail it with nil empties

» VIVIENNE HALDANE

CONVERTING FROM beef and sheep to dairy four years ago was a smart move for Hawkes Bay farmers, Karen and Donald Fraser.

They are enjoying the double bonus of high milksolids payouts coupled with an increase in milk production last year by 100,000 kg.

That was helped by a nil empty rate in their incoming heifers, 218 of them, reared in 2008 with the help of probiotic Queen of Calves.

"It doesn't get any better than that. The national average is 40%," says Donald.

They attribute their success to a variety of management factors with attention to detail throughout being crucial, they say.

Karen keeps a close eye on the calves from the start.

"The first 10 weeks of life is critical and will determine how good they are when they join the herd."

Calves are fed X-factor for 12 days then go on to Queen of Calves, a probiotic calf feeding supplement to enhance the nutritional value of milk. The Frasers say the calves start eating substantially early on, their coats shine and they look healthy on both products.

Fibre Fresh is used instead of meal. "Fibre Fresh is partly fermented so half the work is done for the calf. An added bonus is the birds don't like it. I also use straw to give them the scratch factor."

A crop of home grown barley is used to finish calves.

Frasers used Queen of Calves in their first year dairy farming, trialling it on 300 calves which went through to produce 340kgs/head on average in their first lactation.

"That's an average 50-60kg above average and, at \$8/kg, that return is worth having."

Meanwhile forecast lower payouts in their second year saw them drop Queen of Calves. They later saw this as false economy and reinstated it.

"We pride ourselves in hardly ever having a sick calf and I'd put that down to making sure they get the colostrum and use of probiotics."

Massey University recently reported research (*Rural News*, Aug 2) which found Queen of Calves increased daily growth rates by 10%, reduced weaning time by about 8 days and produced much bigger calves at 12 weeks of age.

Dairy farm survey statistics show Queen of Calves can produce an extra 49kg milksolids per heifer in the first lactation and \$367 extra revenue per

### RAWHITI DAIRY

- Eight employees, including two assistant managers.
- 750ha, 1500 cows, year round milking.
- 6m kgMS in 2010.
- Maize, barley and other feed crops grown.
- Grain fed in shed all year.
- Running Friesian, Kiwi Cross and Jersey: mid range cows more economical, easier on pasture.
- Dairy effluent seen as soil nutrient.
- Calving shed floor of deep pea-size metal: waste drains away; no smell.

calf. Donald says for the farm to run well, all "the little things" need to be done well too. It's a philosophy that's been reflected in milk quality.

"We were grade free last year. Out

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of 300 dairy farms from Wairoa to Woodville, there were only 20 grade free."

Having decided to convert to dairy, a lot of time and money were invested in the new venture. Sheds were built over the course of a year and they chose staff carefully. "The staff we attract are going places and take pride in their work," says Karen.

"They are nagging us to do more courses to better themselves. We instil in them the importance of detail. We want them to notice things: animal health comes first.

"But no farm is perfect," Donald says. "And when you get problems it's best to deal with something straight away, rather than let it get worse."

The Frasers say the low empty rates in their cows are mostly down to growing big, strong calves.

"Everything has to work well," says Donald, "You have to get all the little bits right. You get out what you put in. It's not just about buying some cows and all of a sudden you make a fortune. There's a lot more to it than that.

"Because we winter milk, it doesn't matter to us if cows get pregnant a bit later."

## Milk pricing bugbears

ONE OF the Fraser's bugbears is hearing frequent complaints by consumers over rising milk prices.

"The biggest worry is the damage that can be done to the dairy industry when they start capping this or that," says Karen.

"When I look at the water section in a supermarket and see millions of dollars of water being sold at so much a litre - it's gold compared to milk. They reckon there's a water shortage in the world, yet they start crucifying milk."