

Organic Dairy and Pastoral Group Field Day – Maurice & Neroli Hellewell's farm, Waimate, 5 May 2009

Report by Mary Ralston

The ODPG (Organic Dairy and Pastoral Group) held a very successful field day at Maurice and Neroli Hellewell's farm, near Waimate on 5 May. About 55 people attended.

The Hellewell's farm is 65 ha of heavy fertile soils where they fatten cattle and lambs and have a small breeding flock. In the 1980s Maurice "tried and failed" with organics, then carried on with conventional farming. He worked off-farm for many years, then he and Neroli decided to try organics again, as they were both interested in the idea. They wanted to produce healthy, high quality, nutrient-dense food, and be involved in the marketing, rather than merely selling commodities. With only 64 ha, it had to be high value, and with organic premiums available they thought that they could have an economic unit.

The big difference between organics in the 80s and now is that back then, "you almost didn't admit you were organic farmers," said Maurice. Now there is great support and appreciation of organics, with a lot more information, mentors and field days.

Conversion to organics was done slowly, and the farm was fully certified with Biogro in 2006. The Hellewells are interested in biodynamics and are moving towards that certification. WWOOFers have been a great asset to the farm and an education for the Hellewells, for instance many young Europeans are vegetarians because they think it is wasteful and inefficient to raise stock on grains, and are amazed to see that in New Zealand cattle and sheep are grass-fed. Maurice is pleased to show them that he produces high quality stock that are raised on grass, which have meat with high levels of Omega-3 and other nutrients.

The 150 ewes are a cross between Wiltshires and poll dorset texel cross. 150% lambing is achieved with all ewes and hoggets. They are never drenched, crutched or vaccinated, and have no problems with flystrike, footrot or internal parasites. Bought-in sheep do get flystrike at times. Lambs are sold to Canterbury Meat Packers and achieve a premium, although that finishes in May.

Cattle were the backbone of the farm during the conversion. The land is "too good" for breeding stock, so calves are bought in and fattened. They are held in a quarantine paddock for 24-48 hours, weighed and tagged so that weight gain can be ascertained, and so that the return from fattening can be compared with the return available

from grazing dairy heifers. They were buying in steers of 450kg and fattening to 600kg, which gave a return of 70c-\$1/day. Now they buy in younger stock (250kg) and fatten to 500, with a net return of \$1-\$1.50/day, better than can be achieved from grazing other farmers' stock.

A "home-made" techno-system is used so that pasture can be break-fenced. The cattle we saw would probably be sold on the conventional market. One section of the pasture was a "health strip" – an area of red clover and grasses. In the 1980s Maurice tried to rest one-seventh of the farm, but then decided a better practice would be to rest one-seventh of the paddocks at a time. The major part of the pasture was 8 years old, consisting of ryegrass, plantain, red and white clover and high sugar grass. A bale of straw was available for the cattle, to raise the level of dry matter in their diet.

Maurice likes to monitor Brix levels with a refractometer. A Brix level of 10 is aimed for. A cloudy line shows that sugars are being transported down to the roots, and for this there needs to be adequate boron in the soil.

The Hellewells have begun cropping as a way to increase farm profitability and as a route to pasture renewal. Linseed and barley were grown last season, although the wet February made things difficult. Maurice is finding that there is a great market for organic crops, and a good return although a high level of risk. Cultivating pasture in spring for summer crops is too tight a time frame but summer cultivation in a dry period, then planting a winter feed crop such as triticale allows for another cultivation and drilling to be carried out in spring. Stale seed beds are used to control weeds and the crops are tyne weeded. Green manure crops and undersowing are used to boost nitrogen levels in between crops.

\*\*\*\*\*

Bruce McGill talked about his organic farm near Owaka in Southland. He described it as "large-scale management of an organic specialist production system, producing high quality food for niche markets". He went into organics for health reasons, with the aim of producing better quality food with lower costs. The organic system gave a better profit margin. He has 660 ha, running 2500 ewes, 700 hoggets and 150 cows, and emphasised that organic farmers should concentrate on profit rather than maximising production.

In the 1980s he believed superphosphate would solve production issues and then phased in a low-input system, and became organically certified in 2000. RPR and lime is applied on his hill country by plane. Bruce is emphatic that farmers should become familiar with basic soil science and make sure they understand their soil test results rather than leaving interpretation to a fertiliser rep. He

recommends the Albrecht system (used by many soil testing services, such as Hills Labs), and the book “Science and Agriculture”, by Arden Andersen.

\*\*\*\*\*

Grant Howie of Silver Fern Farms (SFF) gave a run-down on the current export market conditions for organic lamb. The main market is UK and Europe which is suffering badly from the global recession. This has meant supermarkets are discounting organic lamb to the price of conventional product, and both price and volume have taken a hit. Previously there was a 16% annual growth in sales which has now stopped. However many consumers still want high quality and Grant is confident for the long-term future of organic lamb. Many consumers have a lot of money to spend on quality food and are prepared to pay for it; and even when buying organic are not prepared to forego quality (tenderness, taste, flavour, consistency of quality). This is hard to achieve but if farmers can do this, there will be a market. Customers are also demanding convenience: many only want to spend 15-20 minutes preparing a meal so the wholesaler needs to supply many different cuts of meat, e.g., boneless alternatives to the traditional leg of lamb.

SFF have a “plate to pasture strategy” – helping farmers to produce the right product at the right time of year, and want to set up partnerships to “grow the market”. The Backbone organic programme is a 12-month forward contract with a guaranteed price and processing space for lambs from December – May. Specifications (weights and grades) are required so SFF can negotiate with retailers. SFF is making a big commitment to organic lamb and is hoping this contract could double sales in the coming season. All killing is done at the Finnegan plant at Balclutha.

SFF is struggling to grow the organic beef market. Premiums are at about 20% but markets are hard to get. There is very little organic venison as most export markets perceive New Zealand venison to be “almost organic”.

\*\*\*\*\*

Aaron Mickle discussed the role of Meat and Wool NZ. This organisation is a statutory body funded by levies on sheep, beef and goat meat, and wool. \$42 million a year is generated. Funds are spent on “industry good” research to benefit these rural industries, and compilation of statistics. Projects that are funded need to be ones that will offer an adequate return on investment but not necessarily be ones that a commercial company would investigate, for instance, monitor farm programmes such as the recent one run in the fine wool sector.

Meat and Wool NZ also run the Economic Service and Data Base which is available to farmers and industry. It shows long-term trends so is useful for forecasting before making investment decisions. The Economic Farm Survey has been going for over 50 years and surveys 550-600 farms annually. This survey has shown that the contribution of agriculture to the economy has grown 98% in the last 15 years, while the rest of the economy has grown 15%.

Market development is another area that Meat and Wool NZ is involved in. A successful recent campaign has been the promotion of red meat using the Evers-Swindell twins in advertising. Skills and education for the rural sector is also promoted by Meat and Wool NZ.

Twelve field staff are employed doing extension work and are “there to be contacted” says Aaron. Information and services available from Meat and Wool NZ include the inclusion of dates in an e-diary, speakers for functions such as this field day, statistics, R & D reports, a website, guidebooks, etc.

Any reasonable requests for funding for research or projects that would benefit the sheep, beef, goat and wool sectors will be considered. There are two types of funding pools that could be used: the Farmer Initiated Technology Transfer (FITT) fund, and the Research Fund. FITT funds demonstration projects up to \$10,000 + gst, for example on-farm trials and books. Application forms are available from Aaron.

Research funding is contestable funding targetted towards projects with professional input, e.g., the research on easy-care sheep run by Dr Scobie at AgResearch. Other funding is also required, such as from the Sustainable Farming Fund.

Aaron can be contacted on 03 433.1392 or by email on [aaronmikle@meatandwoolnz.com](mailto:aaronmikle@meatandwoolnz.com). The website is [www.meatandwoolnz.com](http://www.meatandwoolnz.com) and the free-phone number is 0800.696.328.