

Cashing in on the Hereford White Face Advantage

Rob Foster, left and son Willy milk 420 cows at Rerewhakaaitu and have found the use of registered Herefords has improved the bottom line of their business.

By
Natalie
Campbell

The use of registered Hereford bulls by the Foster family on their dairy farm at Rerewhakaaitu in the Bay of Plenty has seen an improvement in financial returns.

Rob Foster says the use of Hereford bulls over the heifers and to follow up artificial breeding (AB) means there are less calves going on the bobby truck and the calves are more valuable.

Rob, his wife Christine and their son Willy are milking 420 cows on 132ha (effective) south east of Rotorua and have been using Herefords in their herd for a number of years.

Herd production last season was 1360kgMS/ha, slightly down on normal but a result of the drought and poorer quality supplements being available. They generally target production of 1430kgMS/ha.

Rob says Herefords are a breed he's familiar with, his father having farmed a pure bred herd, but he said it was the event of low birth weight Hereford bulls that they really began to take the breed seriously.

It was thanks to meeting Reporoa Hereford breeder Kevin McDonald that Herefords then cemented their place in the Foster business.

Rob said they had met Kevin off farm and Kevin's daughter-in-law Nicola had done some veterinary work for them. It was this that led them to discussing their bull needs with Kevin that has helped them successfully select sires now having a positive influence on their bottom line.

The Fosters are purchasing bulls from the Craigmores stud of the Henderson family at Ohaupo, Hamilton and the Arundel stud of the Howards near Katikati.

"They've been really good bulls," says Rob.

The Fosters buy about eight yearling bulls annually and carry over some of the bulls from the previous year's purchase to use as two year olds.

The yearling bulls are run with 100 rising two year old Friesian heifers and the older bulls and some of the yearling bulls are then used to follow up after AB.

"It works really well," he says.

"We've had no fertility issues and it's closed the tail end of calving up."

"They do the job alright," he said.

Rob says while he has a budget for bull purchases he prefers reasonably sized bulls paired with the relevant EBVs for easy calving, low birth weight, high growth rates. Quiet temperament is another key trait they look for.

"We want good sized calves so our buyers and rearers return," he said.

Rob says Kevin helps them interpret the EBVs and studies the pedigrees on their behalf and guides them towards the bulls that are suitable for their business goals.

They had previously been experiencing some issues and Rob says with Kevin's help those issues have been solved.

"He sorted them out really quickly for us. He asked us what we need and he's very particular about the bulls we can reach our goals with."

Temperament is important to them because it helps with ease of management.

Even though Hereford bulls are naturally quiet the Fosters spend time with them before they join the herd, moving them around the property so they become familiar with walking along the races. This also helps harden up the feet which can prevent lameness and breakdowns. Quiet bulls also mean they can be cut out of the herd easily and kept out of the milking shed.

COLOSTRUM KEY TO CALF HEALTH

Artificial breeding (AB) starts for the main herd on October 10 and runs until November 15. The Fosters aim for 65-70% conception rate.

The yearling Hereford bulls join the heifers at the same time AB starts and run with them until Christmas (a period of 11 weeks). Rob says typically 99% of the heifers calve within eight weeks, an indication the Herefords get the job done quickly.

Calving begins July 20 with the first few weeks being very busy.

“Half the herd calves by about August 10,” he says.

The calves are removed from the cow once they've had a feed of colostrum.

“We are particular about that especially with the heifer and Hereford cross calves,” says Rob.

He says ensuring this first feed of colostrum helps reduce ill thrift and they have identified it as the key to calf survival.

The Hereford cross calves are reared for four days and then sold as feeder calves. The AB heifer calves are reared through to 110kg before weaning with the best ones selected as herd replacements.

Rob says the Hereford calves feed well and they have no issues with them. Ideally he'd like to rear them to 10 days old, which would allow them to get more for them. But at this stage they don't have the facilities to do so.

He says that since increasing the frame size of the herd he has noted the heifers milk production has improved with most of them reaching the herd average in milk solid production in their first year of milking.

The Hereford cross calves are sold in the Reporoa calf shed on the property of Kevin and Jane McDonald and last year they sold 120 calves averaging \$110/head across heifer and bull calves.

He says the use of Hereford bulls has improved their bottom line because less calves go on the bobby truck and the cross bred calves are more valuable.

“It's all money in the bank.”

He says they do pay a little bit more for Hereford bulls than they would a dairy sire but they use them for two years before working them. The margin of difference between bull purchase and sale price ranges between \$700-\$200 depending on the beef schedule at time of slaughter.

ADJUSTING SYSTEMS IMPROVES BOTTOM LINE

Rob and Christine purchased their Rerewhakaaitu farm in 1998 growing equity throughout their career working as managers, contract milkers and then share milkers.

Rob recalls they looked at a large number of farms before finding their property and this one happened to be the right size at the right price.

“We paid about \$13,000/ha and in the Waikato, prices were higher at \$18,000/ha.”

“It meant we could milk 300 cows instead of 200 and was more economic,” he says.

He recalls looking at the house and shed which at face value didn't appeal, but after walking around the farm they fell in love with it.

Christine and Rob originally bought just under 100ha (including 8ha of pine trees). They added to this by purchasing 40ha across the road.

The farm system used to include winter milking and a 500 cow herd but when son Willy returned from Massey University with an Ag Science degree he analysed the farm finances and broke the winter milking component away from the spring calving and found winter milking was not performing profitability for the farm.

They made the decision to reduce cow numbers and they now calve 420 cows. The change in system has had a positive influence on the bottom line.



The Hereford cross calves are sold at four days old.



“The bottom line is feed in, feed out and the bigger animals will outperform smaller animals in production.”



Registered Hereford bulls from the Craigmore and Arundel studs are used over the Foster's Friesian herd.

“We’ve been able to develop and invest in the business from farm income,” says Rob.

They used to have a full Jersey stud herd, but made the move to Friesian genetics in a bid to increase frame size, which they believed would enhance production.

He feels that bigger cows are better converters of feed to milk solids.

“The bottom line is feed in, feed out and the bigger animals will outperform smaller animals in production.”

With the herd currently producing about 430kgMS/head Rob says he and the family expect this to increase. Part of that increase will be once the transition away from winter milking is complete. This is their second season without winter milking.

He also said the drought this year knocked production and they had to settle for less quality supplements.

The family grow Lucerne but this is the only crop and supplement they make on farm. The rest being bought in maize silage and palm kernel.

Rob says their soil type means they are restricted and this is one of the challenges they face in the business.

Beneath a shallow layer of top soil lies scoria and pumice and below that at a depth of about two meters the more alluvial soils can be found.

During summer soil temperatures can reach 25 degrees celsius restricting the planting of crops.

Average rainfall is between 1200-1500mm and they installed three hard hose irrigator guns on 6ha in 2007 to boost productivity. The guns apply 3.2mm/day and Rob says during this year’s drought they made a huge difference.

Another challenge for the business is keeping supplement prices down so that bought in feed is economic. He said it was difficult this year when the drought began to bite in the district in November. However it wasn’t until February they were declared a drought so supplements had to be purchased for a longer period than normal.

The farm is not far from the shores of Lake Rerewhakaaitu and while they are not Nitrogen capped the wider catchment area has its own management plan they adhere to.

A farmer co-op has been formed in the district and they have acted voluntarily as a group to reduce inputs that can run into surrounding waterways. Rob says their property is not in the Lake catchment area but they opted to reduce Nitrogen use anyway.

The Fosters have dropped their Nitrogen inputs to 90units/ha down from 350units/ha with the results being the same level of pasture production and a financial gain from not having to invest in so much Nitrogen.

They have also moved away from the use of Superphosphate and now spread chicken fertiliser instead.

It’s slow release and they have used it for 14 of the 15 years they have been on the property. It’s had a positive effect in developing the organic matter of the top soil and its depth as well – helping to make the business more drought proof.

FUTURE GOALS

Looking ahead Rob says he and Christine would like to implement a succession plan.

“We’d like the family to run the farm and myself and Christine to be supporting them,” he says.

Son Willy is managing the farm and daughter Trudy, who recently got married, is a nurse. She is interested in the business but Rob says they will have to wait to see if she and her husband Josh opt to come home.

Rob and Christine both actively work on the farm and they are currently looking to employ someone to allow Christine out of the milking shed.

“She’s happy to milk and is really good on the farm but we’ve been farming for 31 years – it’s time for the younger guys to be put in charge and make the most of our knowledge,” says Rob. **H**