

“I just want a simple system that’s profitable and basically runs like clock-work so that someone else can come in and run that system and I know it’s going to work.”



Taharoa Trust, Mahia Peninsula

The Farm

- 396 ha in total of which 350 ha is effective. Much of the balance is wetland or riparian areas. An additional 277 ha is leased from a neighbour with approximately 220 ha effective. The O’Brien’s also own a 260 ha farm at Norsewood which is currently leased.
- Altitude ranges from sea level to around 100m.
- Sheep and beef operation with about 6500 stock units.

Farming to summer dry conditions

“I just farm to summer dry conditions and if we get a wet summer it’s a bonus.”

Pat and his wife Sue have been farming Taharoa Trust farm for the last decade, taking it over from Sue’s parents. Pat’s views on how best to manage the farm changed within a couple of years of farming it. He realised a need for some basic development work and a change in farming policies. The primary focus has been putting things in place to farm better to summer dry conditions. This approach has begun to yield results with increasing profitability

in the last couple of years. Pat is increasingly focusing on making the best use of different land classes to farm it to its potential. To achieve this he has been fencing off wetland and bush areas. At the same time the better land is being farmed more intensively. Pat isn’t one to sit back. There is a plan going forward for at least the next ten years with succession in mind and a goal to make the farm as productive and sustainable as possible. He carries in mind their block at Norsewood with well planned shelter in all paddocks and clean running water off the Ruahine Ranges.



Climate

“The seasons are definitely different. You don’t seem to get two years the same, that’s what I’ve noticed lately.”

Pat is noting changes in climate which are mostly reflected in greater unpredictability. The springs can be earlier or later, the winters can be longer or shorter. They seem to be getting more extremes. They’re also not getting the hot and dry Christmas periods that they experienced thirty years ago. Weather patterns have changed in the last ten years with wetter summers. They’ve been fortunate to have escaped serious droughts.

Average rainfall at the farm is about 1150mm, which is normally spread pretty evenly throughout the year. The summer dry is the main climate risk. They’ve missed the worst effects of extreme rainfall events, including Cyclone Bola, which have hit more inland. The worst event in recent years was in the last week of January 2010. They had 265mm of rainfall with a flood through the farm that was above fences that had been realigned after Bola. They’re quite exposed to wind from all directions, but the prevailing wind is from the north-west.

Stock policy

“I think its all about making decisions early. About 90 percent of farming is common sense.”

They were breeding a capital line of ewes when Pat first came here. Now they’ve gone

to terminal sire to reduce stock numbers through the summer. They have 2650 breeding ewes, which are all terminal sire. They buy 230 R1 bulls and finish them out to two and half years and they have 110 breeding cows (predominantly Angus-Hereford) from which they fatten the heifers and steers. The rest is lamb trading, with numbers depending on the season. Usually 60 to 70 percent of lambs are killed before Christmas. The cows and the trading component have been in place for about three years.

Pasture and feed management

“I make decisions based on what I see. I believe I can make more money by being out there doing it than I can by sitting in an office.”

The pasture is ryegrass and clover, which grows here all year round. A bit of plantain and chicory have been planted. Pat manages to keep on top of the pasture through until December and then it gets away with stock numbers down. He tries not to graze the hill country too hard. Being aware of the lighter soils he always keeps a bit of cover.

An area of about 50 ha is used for a summer brassica crop followed by annual ryegrasses. The varieties selected seem to be doing well here. Occasionally one of the paddocks is put back into permanent pasture and another is put into the cropping system.

Pat ensures some hay is kept in reserve. However, he is trying to get away from hay for cost reasons, focusing more on grass and crops.

Soils

The soils are predominantly ash with Mahia series soils formed in Waimihia lapilli and ash over older ash beds and loess. On steep slopes the ash thins and steepland soils are formed in the underlying parent rock material.

Historically dicalcic was used for the first four years, then a change to superphosphate and lime, 800 tonnes last year. To fit with a more sustainable farming model Hatuma products will be used in the future.

“I make decisions based on what I see...”





They don't have any major erosion problems on the farm. However there are some areas where Pat wants to look at some pole plantings, both for soil protection and summer shade.

Water

There's running water at the back of the farm which is the only permanently running stream on the Mahia Peninsula. They've put reticulated water in to the front of the farm from a spring fed dam, which is fenced off. Pat is aiming for a water trough in every paddock but it's going to take another ten years probably. He wants to fence off the stream at the back of the farm eventually.

Wetland areas and trees

"I want to utilise the land better to farm it to its potential. We can look after the land better with wetland and bush areas fenced off."

They've been retiring out wetland areas, covering a total of 27 ha, over the last five years with support from Hawke's Bay Regional Council. Initial thoughts of draining the wetlands were soon discounted as uneconomic and environmentally irresponsible. Retiring and fencing these areas allowed more intensive farming practices to be put in place. Increased biodiversity is happening with more bird life already apparent and significant regeneration of native plants.

Planting of shelterbelts is part of the plan for the next ten years. To date they've been cutting out old macrocarpa trees but didn't want to invest in new shelter until they had completed subdivision work. With retirement of the wetlands and subdivision of the better land they have a better idea of where to plant shelter now. The focus will be on species that grow well locally, which are predominantly natives such as pohutukawa, flax and karo.

Weeds

They have a major weed problem with gorse, blackberry and thistles of all kinds. It has taken six to seven years to get on top of the weeds and this is ongoing with 220 ha sprayed with a helicopter last year.

Infrastructure

"I don't like putting big highways in. I put in tracks with small culverts for motorbike access."

Tracks are kept simple for motorbike access and are touched up on an annual basis. The culverts are on small waterways so if they do wash out it is not a big deal to replace them. They have been constantly fencing since being on the farm, re-doing the boundaries and fencing into smaller paddocks, as well as fencing the wetland areas.

Future thinking

"There's a lot of work. I doubt if I'll finish it in my lifetime."

"The long-term plan has definitely changed since coming here, because at first I was looking at draining all of the swamps and

"... I doubt if I'll finish it in my lifetime."

getting grass down to the water verges. But after being here for a couple of years and having a look around I thought 'no this isn't going to work ... the expense is going to be too great and we're going to do away with all of our wildlife'."



Pat's approach is to be proactive and to not be afraid to make mistakes and change your thinking along the way. This is reflected in the changes that they have implemented over the last ten years. He is already thinking ahead for the next ten years with planning for shelter, shade, more water and more subdivision.



The on-going focus is on matching land use to land class. This approach is paying off as they are getting more profitable each year. They're now in a position to take back their 260 ha block at Norsewood, at the end of the current lease.

Along with on-going development they're also exploring other ideas. One thing they're keen on, but haven't pursued yet, is to do farmstays with walks taking in the wetland areas, the bush, and the beach.

Another issue on the horizon is succession, which is something they're going through at the moment.

Resources/support

"I think you can always make mistakes and learn lessons. You're never too old to learn."

Pat seeks advice and support continually to improve his farming operation. It's about building up a rapport and finding someone you can trust. Ultimately you weigh up all the information and make sound decisions.



Future thoughts for Hawke's Bay

"Some people you can't influence, they're beyond it. You've got to have the want and the will and the desire. You've got to be passionate about what you do and you've got to get out and do it."

Pat thinks there is a need to go back to some more traditional farming on the east coast, back to the breeding stock. He's seen a lot of coastal property right throughout the east coast that they've tried to turn into finishing farms and a lot of it is not working.

Pat suggests that in future the wetland and bush areas could be more valuable than what the farming land is. He believes that farmers who produce a good product that the market wants should be rewarded for it.



Written by:
Gavin Kenny

Produced by:
Earthwise Consulting Limited
709a Duke Street
Hastings 4120

Tel: 06 870 8466
www.earthlimited.org

Funded by:
Sustainable Farming Fund
PO Box 2526
Wellington

Phone 0800 008 333
www.maf.govt.nz/sff/

Hawkes Bay Regional Council
Private Bag 6006
Napier 4142

Tel: 06 835 9200
www.hbrc.govt.nz

