

Long wait for the golden weather

A young couple hope years of struggling against cruel weather and increased costs are behind them



Jon Morgan
FARMING EDITOR

BRENT and Rachael Fouhy are a young couple who have yet to experience a good year farming sheep and beef. But they are poised, ready to reap the benefits, if kind weather and rising prices ever coincide. They have leased a barely economic hilly farm near Pahiatua for the past six years and despite the tough times brought by cruel weather and increased costs say they won't give up.

They feel they have built the foundation of a sheep flock that can cope with the hills and weather, and they have the figures to prove it. In the past five years, scanning numbers have lifted to 170 per cent, ewe and lamb deaths have dropped markedly and the lambing percentage has risen from 110 to about 140 per cent.

They have adopted a disciplined approach, working hard at improving the fitness of their ewe flock with an eye on preparing them for the year to come, rather than being focused solely on selling lambs for the current season.

It is one of the lessons they have learnt from a sheep and cattle programme called StockCare, run by Te Awamutu-based consultancy AgriNetworks.

Based on keeping animals in the best of health, the system depends on regular measuring of growth rates and on a method for telling if sheep are in sound condition.

Called condition scoring, it involves placing a palm on a ewe's spine, feeling the ridges, then using the fingers to feel the fat covering the top of the ribs. At the same time, the couple have worked on improving the genetics of their flock, infusing coopworth bloodlines on the maternal side and using a hardy dorper-based terminal sire.

But despite the satisfaction of knowing their stock are more robust – and contributing more to their income – the couple can see it will be a long time before they will be able to afford to buy their own farm.

They lament the diminishing number of "starter" farms available. "One-person farms of this size come up rarely," Mrs Fouhy says. "And when they do, the young people find themselves up against the established older farmer wanting to expand, if they're hilly, or if they're relatively flat, it's the dairy farmer



Hard yards: "The town view may be that we are all given our farms, but, like everyone else, we are waiting to win Lotto," say Brent and Rachael Fouhy.

Photo: JON MORGAN

who wants them." The competition is just as tough for leases, Mr Fouhy says. He put in a bid for another lease farm before landing their present contract, but a dairy farmer "blew me out of the water".

Their current lease is from a Fouhy family trust but he says they are paying market rates.

"The town view may be that we are all given our farms, but, like everyone else, we are waiting to win Lotto."



Their farm size and rugged terrain put it in the starter category, but not its price. When they took up the lease six years ago, farm values were soaring, driven up by the dairy boom.

"To buy it we would have had to pay \$2 million, or to at least have half that in the bank. That's not just a Lotto win. That's winning the Powerball as well." As it was, they had to borrow heavily to buy the stock for the farm.

They stress they are not afraid of hard work and accept they are still in the early stages of building up assets. But they cannot help but look across the river that

borders their farm to the dairy flats beyond and see young farmers there in a system that allows a stepped progression to farm ownership.

"Unfortunately, there is no established system in the sheep and beef sector that allows you to build your equity, compared with sharemilking in the dairy system," Mrs Fouhy says.

Mr Fouhy, 32, grew up on the farm he leases and was a cadet at the Smedley training farm in Central Hawke's Bay for two years, graduating with the prize for top stockman. He then went to Massey University and completed an agriculture diploma.

At Massey, he met Rachael, the daughter of Southland sheep and beef farmers, who was studying to be a veterinarian. She now works for Taranaki Veterinary Services in Pahiatua.

After six years' shepherding, four of them for Alfredton farmer Andy Falloon, he looked for a farm to lease. He was 27.

"It's not a bad age to take on more responsibility," he says. "I'd had enough experience working with different operators in different parts of the country. I was keen to put all that together with the theory I had learnt in the classroom."

He arrived at the 370 hectares (320ha effective) farm in 2005 and found it still recovering from severe storms the year before when slips had wiped out tracks, ruined fences and filled up dams. Cleanup work was still needed and now, under Horizons Regional

Council's sustainable land use initiative, tree plantings are under way in erosion-sensitive gullies to protect the farm in future.

THE couple's first task was to buy stock. It was mid-winter, prices were at their peak and sheep and cattle were in short supply.

"We ended up paying more than \$100 for very ordinary sheep, but we couldn't afford the best." The result was a lambing percentage at docking of just 110 per cent. At the same time, prices dived, with lambs fetching only \$50.

It was not a good start. "We decided we needed to build up a team of knowledgeable people around us," Mr Fouhy says.

They signed up with the StockCare scheme, then known as Sheep For Profit, founded by veterinarians Chris Mulvaney and Don MacColl.

"It's about measuring weight gains and condition scores, seven times a year," Mrs Fouhy says. "You get a handle on what is happening to the sheep and why it is happening."

Through condition-scoring they discovered they had a lot of underweight ewes. The first year they over-corrected the feeding regime and had too many cases of bearings (prolapsed vagina). The next year, they went too far the other way and had too many light sheep.

"We've got it about right now," Mr Fouhy says. "We've got used to the farm, worked out which are

the better lambing paddocks, and the improved genetics are showing up too."

They worked on improving the quality of their flock by crossing them with romneys one year and then coopworths the next in an effort to get sustained hybrid vigour. They concentrated on growing out their hoggets to have them weighing close to 60kg in time for mating as two-tooths.

The two-tooths are mated to a terminal sire, recently changed to GroPlus, a dorper-based composite, after earlier breeds produced lambs that were too big, causing lambing troubles at birth.

The GroPlus progeny are born quickly, have a finer bone structure, particularly in the shoulders, and start feeding immediately.

The next year, the ewes go to coopworth rams, from Simon Carthew at Alfredton, known for producing sheep with good mothering ability.

Culling is mainly on age with some, including "wet dries" – pregnant ewes that fail to rear a lamb – and light-conditioned ewes being given a second chance in a 300-ewe B flock. The A flock has 450 two-tooths and 850 mixed age ewes.

A herd of 70 predominantly angus cows is used mainly to groom the pastures. Calves are taken to 18 months with heifers being killed and the steers sold store. Early problems in growth and reproduction were remedied after liver biopsies revealed a copper deficiency.

Dairy grazing provides another income stream. They have 23 cows

this year and will increase that to 50. They arrive as calves and leave as rising two-year-olds.

They say the StockCare system has proved its worth in extreme weather. In the early stages of the 2008 drought, condition scoring showed some sheep were struggling to stay at healthy weights. Mr Fouhy acted quickly to sell lambs and ewes and to find grazing elsewhere for the cows.

"Don MacColl had drummed it into me, to cull on condition score. Even though I would get only \$1 a kg for the lambs, they had to go."

The proof of that good decision came in the next year when his ewes went to the ram in good condition, scanned at 170 per cent and lambing at 142 per cent.

Last September, the storms that played havoc with lambing in the deep south and the central North Island dumped 400 millimetres of rain on the farm. The worst came just as the B flock was lambing, but they were in good condition and on such good pasture that they lambed at 130 per cent. The couple feel their overall lambing performance, at 140 per cent, has reached a level that suits their farm. Any higher and they would have too many high-maintenance triplets. The plan now is to concentrate on lifting growth rates.

The couple are looking forward to the novel experience of a good year. "Maybe it will be this year," Mr Fouhy says. "Prices are higher across the board than they have been for a long time and with good rain at the end of January it's shaping up pretty well."

Farmers ahead on cattle tag scheme

NEARLY a quarter of New Zealand's cattle already have electronic tags 10 months before it becomes mandatory.

NAIT (National Animal Identification and Tracing) chief executive Russell Burnard said farmers had been preparing for the scheme, which will become mandatory in November, for two years.

"Two million [radio frequency identification tags] have been sold in the last two years and there are nine million cattle [in New Zealand]," he said.

Mr Burnard, who was a Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries regulatory and information manager before he joined NAIT late last year, said farmers were trying to avoid the "big bang" of one big spendup on the day the scheme designed to link people, property and animals became compulsory.

NAIT was designed to provide information on the location and movement history of stock and could be used to quickly trace infected animals and properties in the event of the outbreak of a disease such as foot and mouth.

"It's a good adoption regime," Mr Burnard said. "Industry have put their hands in their pockets and said they are going to form this company."

NAIT was established by farmer levy-funded industry-good organisations DairyNZ, Beef + Lamb New Zealand and Deer Industry NZ, to get the mandatory scheme off the ground.

Just before Christmas, Agriculture Minister David Carter introduced a bill to Parliament that would bring the legislation into force. It is now at the select committee stage.

Mr Burnard said NAIT was in discussions with its Australian equivalent National Livestock Identification System about providing the infrastructure for the scheme.

Federated Farmers said NAIT, designed to provide a system that recorded the whereabouts of specific animals, added unnecessary costs to farmers. The organisation also feared the data could be used to tax farmers.

"You are never going to get 100 per cent support for this stuff," Mr Burnard said. "We are a democracy, that's OK. People can have their views on things."

"It is a challenge. It is improving the biosecurity capacity of our nation."

NAIT will have a stand at the National Agricultural Fielddays at Mystery Creek in June, where it will roll out an education programme for farmers, and also plans to hold on-farm field days to demonstrate the technology.

"We will get farmers up to speed." Deer will be introduced into the scheme next year.

The Bottom
LINE
SPECIAL OFFER



SHIFT_the way you move



X-Trail

- 2.5L petrol or 2.0L diesel engine
- Intelligent 4WD system
- Dual front, front side and curtain airbags
- 2,000kg braked tow rating (petrol)

Includes a FREE
Rinnai BARBECUE
valued at \$2,999 with every new X-Trail



FIRST
100
CUSTOMERS
ONLY

www.nissan.co.nz

The free Rinnai Maxx S5S BBQ is limited to the first 100 new X-Trail registered between 1st February - 31st March 2011. Excludes lease and some fleet business. Terms & Conditions apply - see your nearest Nissan Dealer for more details.

0800 4 NISSAN

GT NISSAN - 35-41 Kent Terrace, Wellington ph: 0800 668 668; CITY NISSAN LOWER HUTT - 340 High St, Lower Hutt ph: 566 8668