

Farm giants woken

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AN extra \$34 million of gross farm income over 10 years and huge improvements in human capital are two of the key success factors hailed at the Tairāwhiti Land Development Trust's final meeting.

The trust, which managed and implemented the \$2 million Major Regional Initiative funding from New Zealand Trade and Enterprise announced in 2004, shared its successes yesterday.

The aim of the MRI was to transform the regional economy by improving the use and productivity of underdeveloped Māori land.

The six projects involved 18 farms, 60,000 hectares and 320,000 stock units.

TDLT chairman Kingi Smiler said there had been a significant contribution to the district's economy and the payback would continue to grow.

Trustees, stakeholders and some of those involved in the projects all applauded the long-term benefits for all involved — mostly the human aspect with huge learning by committees, boards, management and farm staff.

Mayor Meng Foon said it had been a positive journey and regardless of the outcomes, the networking, support from experts and from cluster neighbours as well as strengthened governance all were positives.

The Te Taumata Monitor Farm project set out to increase annual production by 5 percent a year. It achieved a 3.25 percent increase or \$750,000 of gross farm income. Before the drought in the final year, the project had an annual increase of 5.9 percent.

Mentor farmer James Brownlie said the greatest advance has been with the committees in the understanding and application of the principles of true governance.

There were benefits for managers, staff, overseers and mentor farmers.

The project had "woken some sleeping giants".

"We now look forward with anticipation and confidence to these properties and owners being a powerful influence on East Coast pastoral farming."

Under new funding from the Sustainable Farming Fund, the project was continuing.

The Tapuaeroa project looked to increase productivity by 15 percent and achieved 11 percent, with drought again influencing the outcome of the project.

One of the farmers involved was Jeremy Williams, who said a weakness was that there were no mentor farmers.

"But we have changed culture and come off a very low base."

Lifting farm performance in the Ruatoria district, where high performance was not prevalent, was one aspect that was hard to measure, he said.

The sheep for profit project had a goal to lift ewe income by \$12.37 a ewe. It achieved \$13.33 a ewe and equated to \$560,000 extra revenue a year from ewe income.

They still had a long way to go to get anywhere near the top 10 percent of farmers in the district though, he said.

Whangara Farms took part in this project and manager Richard Scholefield said a big part of the project for him was the staff development.

“They learned new livestock monitoring systems, weighing stock, they were more aware of what was going on the farm, were able to benchmark themselves and enjoyed taking part in discussion groups.”

The Aromatawai project showed only a small increase of \$62,000 in gross farm income from its starting point.

It did not achieve its goals, said trustee Dennis Munroe.

“Now they are well on their way and the key drivers are better governance, more vigilant monitoring and tighter control on stock numbers.”

Arai Matawai board member Peter Brown said the project had made the board realise they had to keep their eye on the ball and get out around the farm regularly.

“It has woken us up.”

The Hikuwai-Uawa project lifted the economic farm surplus per hectare from \$12 a hectare to \$103 a hectare, equating to an increase of \$686,000 of gross farm income per year.

AgFirst farm consultant Peter Andrew said the diverse project pulled together some significant businesses on the Coast and achieved most of its goals.

The sweetcorn project with Cedenco had a goal of establishing 400 hectares and at the end of year three, 752ha was planted. Mr Smiler said he hoped Cedenco would want to get sweetcorn from Ruatoria in the future.

Another funded project was an evaluation of the MRI by AgResearch.

Trust chief executive Chris Torrie has been investigating other forms of funding to extend the achievements already made. An application has been made to the Primary Growth Partnership for funding to unlock the potential of Maori capital and position Maori agribusiness to capture value chain opportunities to increase returns to Maori landowners.

The trust will hear if this business case has been accepted in June.

- More on the Land Development Trust farm projects in Focus on the Land next week