

Family creates new coast legend

West Coast dairying is a different type of graft. In some cases rough land, boggy or rocky soil and scrub, isolation and up to five metres of rain annually means conversions, and the day to day farming to recoup the investment and getting ahead is not for the faint hearted.

BY TIM BREWSTER



After two dairy conversions on properties in Whataroa and Fox Glacier, the husband and wife team of Dale and Stacey Straight and Dale's brother Kerry seem to have found the right blend of a commitment to hard work, intelligent farming decisions and a considered approach to risk.

Seeing the potential in land and following through with the improvements has been a major part of that success.

"We were brought up on a rough farm in Karamea that our parents were constantly working hard at developing so land development is second nature to us. For me developing land is the main motivation, farming is second," Kerry said.

Stacey and Dale are now in their ninth season on the Whataroa farm which has now grown to 430 effective hectares and milking 1,100 cows. With Kerry in his fifth season milking 1,000 cows on a farm he helped convert just south of Fox Glacier. The three became the only partners in the two properties last winter, buying out the other half of the Fox property.

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"With the farm in Fox, we've managed to make it all happen. We've only just started paying ourselves more than our staff. It seems once we get financially comfortable we stretch ourselves again," Dale said. "Now we've just got to knuckle down and get into it."

Stacey and Dale had already been knuckling down for years on the land since leaving their home town of Karamea and heading to Canterbury in the mid 1990's. After a season in a farm management role in Methven the two got offered a 50-50 sharemilking position on that farm and Dale, then 25 and Stacey managed to "squirrel away enough for a herd of 430 cows" over three years. Next was a move to Fairlie to another 50-50 job, "the land just had a shed in the middle and not a fence on it," Dale recalls. Five years on, Dale and his older brother Kerry were roaming the West coast looking for a potential dairy property.



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The two brothers had taken separate paths after leaving the family farm and school. With Dale going straight onto the land, Kerry headed over the pass to complete a Bachelor in Agricultural Science at Lincoln, and started a 15 year career as a farm consultant specialising in dairy production in the tropics, and eventually working for Lincoln International, the international consultancy firm owned by the university.

Along with projects in Sri Lanka and other parts of South East Asia and the Pacific, Kerry also completed a Master of Applied Science (International Rural Development) in 1998. In 2002 he decided to return to his native West Coast and farming and joined forces with Dale and Stacey. Along with some family assistance they started their search for their first conversion project.

While Dale was head down calving cows one spring he asked Kerry to go over to Whataroa to check out a beef farm that might be a conversion possibility. Initial impression of the property was that it had been a wasted trip. However, after a full weekend of wandering about through scrub, willows, swamp, rushes, some pasture and a few bits of bush he decided that it was worth further

ABOVE: Cows at the Whataroa farm

BELOW: Kerry Straight on the Fox Glacier farm

OPPOSITE: Kerry, Dale and Stacey Straight

consideration and eventually the decision was made and deal done.

After getting title just before Christmas the two brothers started an intensive six month conversion with Kerry fulltime and Dale doing week on week off, travelling from Fairlie.

"There was a lot of bush and scrub. The biggest challenge was land development with two 20 tonne diggers for nine months. It wasn't like a Canterbury conversion where you just spray and drill," Dale said. Paddocks were cleared and contoured to enable runoff in heavy rain, and a network of drains lowered the water table. A tonne of super and five tonnes of lime were applied per hectare, followed by another half-tonne of super prior to their first milking season.

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They managed to get 150 hectares ready and grassed that summer and a 60 bale rotary shed up and running. By the middle of the year Dale and Stacey moved over, bringing their cows with them for their first milking season with 650 cows on 275 hectares.

The West Coast dairy experience was quite different from the tidy checkerboard plains of Canterbury with contractors and services just a quick phone call away.

"You have to do everything yourself. Contractors are very limited. You get a fine day and call them to find out your already fifth in line. We spread all our fertilisers and do all our cultivation," Dale said. Any bulk supplies brought over from Canterbury cost \$55 a tonne in cartage which also adds to the cost. "You've got to be a jack of all trades and fix stuff if you have to. The engineers not always here."



The amount of rainfall means weather dictates much of their day to day work, affecting stock and recently meaning they had to fly urea onto most of the farm because it was too boggy to drive on. In October alone the area had 22 rain days resulting in almost 700mm just for the month, almost a year's worth for much of Canterbury. Contouring the land to enable runoff was a crucial aspect of the conversion and accounted for a lot of unforeseen digger hours. Spraying effluent onto paddocks can be a "nightmare" with heavy rain.

He said the biggest changes for dairying from his point of view was the need for more stringent environmental controls. "Effluent is our biggest footprint. It takes a lot of managing."

"It's a very good community here, absolutely tremendous and on the coast generally."

The rainfall also means the Straights fertilise more often in smaller amounts for it to be effective. "The cows struggle with rain," Dale said. They use a smaller crossbred Friesian and milk once a day with an annual yield average of 320kg of milk solids a head compared to 430kg in Canterbury.

And the upside? "Cheap land, and cheap shares in the dairy company," Dale said.

He considers the profitability is as good as anywhere in the country with a significantly



lower capital outlay without a need for irrigation. Both farms are grass only so there is no imported feed adding to costs.

The Westland Dairy Company processing plant in Hokitika is 100km from Whataroa so transporting milk is not an issue and the company shares are only \$1.50, compared to Fonterra's recent \$7 price.

"It's a very good community here, absolutely tremendous, and on the coast generally. Smaller towns, Whataroa, Fox, Harihari, are all pretty special places. Easy to slip into."

"We bypassed the system because we were already coasters," Stacey said with a laugh. South Westland has other benefits too, "there's not many places you can shoot a deer from your

backyard." A herd of about 18 deer appeared soon after they arrived "it has thinned out a bit since then," Dale said.

Labour can be difficult in the area with farmers keen to get families to help bolster the school role and add to the community.

"More often than not the husbands are happy to come over, it's just convincing the wives," Stacey said. Generally if two candidates with equal qualities apply for a job in the area, the one with a family usually gets chosen she said.

The Whataroa farm has three fulltime staff and some part-time help doing the milking with an 11 day on 3 day off rotation. Dale does three days milking and he and Stacey have had a busy calving season since August with 350





ABOVE: Kerry, Dale and Stacey Straight at the Whataroa Farm

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Cows grazing at the Fox Glacier farm

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM: The spectacular scenery on the Fox Glacier farm

to feed. Dale also does the majority of tractor work, fertilising and managing feed. As the self-described 'gofer' Stacey does much of the calf rearing, and is hands-on when staff are off.

At some point the two brothers were driving through Fox Glacier and noticed some green pasture that disappeared into rushes and scrub. "We thought if it looked like that by the road, then why couldn't the rest of it too? With a bit of work," Kerry said. Little did they realise that a few years later it would be them doing that work.

"The farm is now into its fifth season milking 1010 cows on 395 effective hectares."

Five years ago, the Straights embarked on another project as 50% shareholders in a partnership converting this 412 hectare beef and sheep farm in Fox Glacier.

Over an 18-month period Kerry tackled the property. "The Fox farm is old glacial riverbed

and unlike anything we had tackled in the past," Kerry said. It was rough; there was a huge amount of guess work at the outset with the challenges of identifying the best methods for developing the various types of terrain and then the challenges of keeping machinery working in tough conditions. "There were huge gambles on what would work and what it would cost."

As well as the development of pastures from scrub, bush, swamp, rushes and stony riverbeds there was also the total re-fencing, stock lane and access road construction, installation of stock water supply, installing power supply lines and building houses, calf rearing sheds and a 60 bale rotary milking shed. The farm is now into its fifth season milking 1010 cows on 395 effective hectares.

The Straight's are modest about their efforts but their contribution to the dairy industry on the West Coast with their farming practices and conversions is anything but.

"As hard working, progressive farmers they are a great example of what can be achieved on the West Coast by adapting systems to make the most of it. They recognise potential," director of Westland Dairy products Kirsty Robertson said.

The project in Fox also caused interest in the industry, but since it was completed, it has been recognised a worthwhile project. "Kerry is a progressive farmer who prefers to do things right and do it once. Starting a dairy farm in the Fox was a big challenge. It has traditionally been a beef area and is the last dairy farm on the map going south. He had to convince the board that it was worthwhile to pick up milk so far south. He has not disappointed," Chris Pullen, Environmental Manager of Westland Milk Products said.

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Last winter the Straights bought out the original partners of the Fox farm and added another 120 hectares to the Whataroa property last year.

When asked what the plans for the future were, Dale's response replicates what many dairy farmers must think when they set out on their daily chores—"get rid of debt."

He said the costs aren't as high as setting up a dairy operation in Canterbury but they are still "pretty big numbers."

It doesn't keep them awake at night though. "If it did it wouldn't be worth doing it," Stacey said. "We're confident enough in our abilities and our budgeting to know we can handle it," Dale said. "We did well sharemilking, thanks in part to getting onto a couple of good farms owned by some great people".

Kerry is adamant Dale is definitely the better farmer of the two. "He's very practical, is a great stockman and plans very well. I may be able to turn out a spreadsheet quicker but that's all."

What both brothers share which could be a cornerstone of their success so far is a vision for the potential of land others might shy away from.

"We got given an opportunity in Methven. It would be nice to repay the favour."

"Dairying is very important to West Coast. Hokitika would be a ghost town without the dairy company," Dale said.

In the long term, Dale and Stacey aim to have sharemilkers on the farm who want to take the next step in their dairy career. "We got given an opportunity in Methven. It would be nice to repay the favour."

"It's a bloody good career. You work hard but you have opportunities to do well. There are not many jobs out there where you can be 30 with a million dollars in your back pocket."