
Blue & Helen McMillan

Lake Tutira

Type of operation Sheep and Beef / Farm Park

Years of dicalcic use 12 years

Size of farm (effective) 320ha

Stock 1,200 ewes, 110 cows, 1,550 lambs

Soil type(s) Steep hills: Kidnappers Silt Loam/Medium hills: Tutira Sandy Loam/Flats: Twyford Silt Loam

2008 production 17kg (av) lambs

Average rainfall 60 inches

2008 product used 50:50 Hatuma Dicalcic & Generate @ 350kg/ha

Adjacent to the main highway between Napier and Wairoa, Lake Tutira is a refreshing change to the scenery of steep hill country with its picturesque shore set against a backdrop of regenerating bush, farmland, and rocky outcrops. Blue and Helen McMillan have been farming their property here since arriving back from England. In that time they have helped oversee the transformation of this iconic slice of Hawke's Bay into a model example of sustainable land use. Their home, overlooking the southern end, is a reflection of their attitude to the environment; quails roam the garden, giant wood pigeons hang in branches, while two ring necked doves will sit beside you if they think there's a chance of a feed.



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Blue McMillan



Before farming the property full time, Blue was employed by Tutira Station as part shepherd, part outdoor education instructor, working with school groups and teaching them outdoor pursuits like canoeing, abseiling, and the merits of conservation projects. Eventually the Hawke’s Bay Regional Council (HBRC) bought 450ha of lakefront land off the station with the objective of improving Lake Tutira’s water quality. Blue and Helen began leasing off the Council and farming approximately 240ha that ran adjacent to their own 80ha left of the original McMillan family farm, and allowed the steep slopes to revert back to kanuka.

With concerns over the degraded water quality through years of intensive pastoral farming within the Tutira catchment, one of the first things Blue and the Council did was meet to discuss using a sustainable topdressing product, something that wasn’t going to compound the nutrient damage already in place. ‘My background in conservation was a definite reason to begin working with Hatuma’s dicalcic,’ Blue says. ‘Farming to what the environment will allow is our biggest issue and we find the non water-soluble nature of the dicalcic fulfils our requirements, as well as fitting our regime regarding sustainability and production. I’m not that worried about increasing stock numbers, I’m more interested in getting a sustainable level of stock to suit the land. Currently we’re running 1,200 ewes to the ram and about 110 cows. Last year we sent approximately 1,550 lambs straight to the works at an average of just over 17kg.

The first thing I noticed after using dicalcic was the improvement in stock health. I haven’t needed to dip for flystrike in the last five years. I still drench a bit, but I feel I don’t have to poke the chemicals down the stock like I used to, certainly not as routinely as many other farmers, so the stock health costs have come down significantly. The silty areas left from the landslides during Cyclone Bola turned to browntop, but with the dicalcic the clover came back by itself without re-sowing. Now the cover is better quality, resulting in easier pasture management. The paddocks are now far more evenly grazed.’

The McMillans are in the unique role of managing a farming environment within a country park atmosphere. The cattle ratio on the property has been kept low to encourage the regrowth

of kanuka, and an emphasis has been put on stocking the better country only. It is hoped the rest of the property will revert back to native bush over the next 100 years. In the meantime, along with getting production out of the existing farmland, they also have the job of managing the aesthetics of the park for the Council to make the many available tramping experiences remain some of the best around. ‘It involves organising fencing, new planting lines, weed control, tree removal, tree cages, and looking after the rubbish around the place by supplying bins for the holiday season,’ says Blue. And it’s obvious, even after a short time in the setting, that Blue is doing a fantastic job of supporting the lake’s appeal. Tramping around the body of water isn’t the only drawcard; on any given day you can observe row boats quietly trawling for trout, the Guthrie Outdoor Education Centre students standing beside the lined-up kayaks on the shore, the motor campers parked up, or anglers staying at the special hut hidden around the back of the northern side. To celebrate the last ten years developments, during December hundreds of families enjoyed a special open day run by the HBRC to highlight the wide range of activities available around the lake. The McMillan’s work makes sure it’s always an enjoyable one.

The vast amount of greenery around the area is in stark contrast to a time when the land was cleared to maximise farm opportunities. These days 95% of what you see has been planted since Cyclone Bola. School groups from Wairoa, Hastings, and Napier have helped establish a wide range of natives in retired areas every year. The Honda Motor Corporation has made substantial annual donations over the past four years, while DOC and the HBRC assist with funding, and Forest & Bird Society and Fish & Game help organise group plantings. But the job’s not done yet. Last year another 1000 totara, 200 kahikatea, and 500 kowhai were planted, with another 1000 totara to go in 2009. The previously established kahikatea and totara are already self-seeding and helping to increase numbers. In total there have been 120ha of pine trees and 40ha of natives established.

Up until the 1990s the only birds seen were in and around the lake itself. Reminiscent of Captain Cook’s observation of the tremendous noise of birdlife coming from the bush as he sailed into the Bay of Islands, Blue says the noise factor

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► coming from the regenerating bush areas around the lake is incredible. The bird population has exploded with tui, wood pigeons, and bellbirds now common residents. 'I couldn't have wished for better. It's been a huge change in beautification from when everything was just pasture. It has been a great community success.'

There's certainly a skill involved in farming to the requirements of public expectation while maintaining high stock performance. But Blue says that while production is important it's not his highest priority. 'We're not gearing up for it here, we're caretaking the property, managing the land in harmony. I can make a living out of it as it is. Dicalcic helps to keep the stress off the management. We only put on 50 tonne over the whole 243ha now, and every second year at that. Some years I might put it on by groundspread and increase it to 80 tonne. I don't use nitrogen because it comes back to the question of sustainability and farming to your needs.' With predictions by experts of increasing dry periods on the East Coast, Blue feels his property is going to fair better in such adverse conditions. Even though the farm gets the brunt of the predominant westerly winds, thanks to its topography, already he's experiencing how the farm holds on during the dry spells. 'The fact the grass can be short but both the cows and sheep can maintain their condition is testament to the dicalcic. When you're up on the hills looking over the other properties you can tell the ones using lime-based products.'

The whole industry is coming to terms with itself - where it's been, where we have to go, and the changes we'll have to make to get there. The clock may have to turn back a bit, but sometimes you don't get there unless you go that far. I think there's an awareness now that we're here to farm sustainably, so we're going to see a few changes ahead where the lakes, rivers, or waterways are concerned. Whether we'll still have the corporate 'grass factory' farmers, I don't know, but if we do they'll have to be held more accountable. That's happening across the globe. The key to New Zealand's production is going to be on quality. We can't continue the way we've been otherwise we're going to defeat the purpose in the market. We have to take steps to not farm as hard, but to farm smarter. So it'll have to become more efficient. From the results I've seen with the dicalcic I think it's a far more efficient way to apply super and lime.

We're learning all the time, and while I believe there's a lot we can improve on, I also feel we're getting there. I think the condition of the soil is improving overall and we are contributing toward a healthier environment at the same time, with less impact on the relationship between land and water. Having the lake on your doorstep is great, you never take it for granted, it's a joy to work here. Every day we appreciate we've probably got one of the better sceneries in which to work.' ■



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When Blue and Helen restored the old woolshed situated a stone's throw from the lake, they created a unique and very picturesque setting for social gatherings within the community. Once inside, you are transported to a rustic, laid-back country-style dwelling; the Totara used came from an old homestead up Mahia way, the giant rimu bar top came from a block of scrub he was cutting, and that's kanuka beneath it. The old saddlery and harnesses hanging from the ceiling were some of his great-grandfather's. Sometimes Blue, a former National Dog Trials runner-up, will use it to hold the local trials social evenings after a day of competing. The cottage next door is a lakehouse retreat for those wanting to escape their busy lives for as long as they need. It was built by Guthrie Smith at Tutira Station for his gardener around 1900. In 1997, Blue and Helen relocated and restored it to a sheltered knoll with amazing views spanning the lake. For the last eight years it's accommodated around twenty bookings a year.