

Geoff & Marion Smith

Croftlea Farms Kumeroa
640 HA (600 effective)
No.8S (0:3.6:0:8) @ 250kg/ha

East of Woodville the land can get pretty steep. You certainly get that impression when you walk out the front door of Geoff and Marion Smith's house and stare up at their 640 hectares rising high into the skyline. This amazing geography also makes it prone to the elements, especially when two thirds of the farm is exposed to the two prevailing winds, west and south. So to be economic they take careful consideration when deciding what topdressing they are going to use.

"When I was growing up my father always used lime on our farm in the Waikato, so lime became well ingrained in the back of my mind," says Geoff. "Later on after leaving university, I became familiar with dicalcic while working on a sheep, beef and deer farm out at Mangaorapa in Central Hawke's Bay. The deer farm always had dicalcic applied on it and they always did well. When we arrived here, we had soil tests done and they showed most of the farm had a pH 5.2 – 5.3, so it obviously needed lime. But the cost of putting anything on here is the major issue as the plane has to climb a thousand feet off the airstrip before it can even start to drop its load. The weather conditions are also a limiting factor as well because we don't get many still days. So to be economic, we wanted something that was going to do it all in the one hit. I started using the dicalcic and lime blends eight years ago, and have been using them since. We noticed a few less dags over the ensuing years. But what I've really noticed over the last twelve months especially, after losing a lot of fences including two of our

boundary fences during February 2004, is the whole farm is still evenly grazed. Both the north and south faces have sheep spread out over the whole paddock. The stock used to hang around on the top third of them only, just grazing their campsites. That's a huge improvement. We hoof and tooth this place because it's too steep to cut hay, so it's important the pasture stays palatable and at a high quality. We've noticed an improvement in the clover grown, there's now plenty of it, especially in the southerly faces. It used to look rough and we had to always push the cattle onto it. I dropped a hundred cows after May last year because we lost a lot of subdivision, and I'm actually debating whether to replace them or put on more ewes – with the dicalcic there's a more even growth through the year, so we don't get that sudden spurt of feed like we used to, which means we don't have the pressure of trying to absorb it all in one go. What is grown is being eaten. Production is steadily improving all the time. Even if the grass does get long and in seed, it still stays palatable.



Right:
Most of the farm
sits 1200 - 2000ft
above sea level ▶



Continued over ▶

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Geoff Smith



► The stock simply chew it off and move on. Lambing percentages are increasing every year, despite 2004 being a difficult year. Even though there was not a lot of grass and the weather was against us, the stock obviously got their nutriment from the pasture.

Because of the steep contour of the farm, we aim for a 30kg lamb for the store market at weaning. Any lambs over 36kgs at weaning go to the works. By the end of March all male lambs are sold. That’s the other thing I’ve noticed over the last couple of years, is that we don’t get many tail-end lambs. The lambs at shearing average over a kilo of wool at the end of January.

The lambs are drenched at docking, weaning and then every six weeks after until May with another drench in spring as hoggets. Ewes get a pre-tup and a pre-lamb drench. Those are the only drenches we give the sheep. The cattle get a weaning drench and a spring drench. The cows are not administered copper or any other minerals either. We basically lock up a paddock for the cows in August, they’re put in during September at two to the hectare and they are not moved again until Christmas time when they are run with the bulls. With the ewes, we spread them out at the end of August into their lambing paddocks, and they aren’t shifted until docking time after Labour Weekend. During calving and lambing we minimise shepherding, because often the only flat area in the paddocks are the tracks, which means it gets very busy – especially in the twinning paddocks.

We don’t use nitrogen, being a lot higher and colder, I would suspect the effect of nitrogen wouldn’t always be there; there would only be a tiny window of opportunity to use it effectively. 70-80% of the farm is over 1200ft, up to 2000ft, above sea level, and being in such a high rainfall area too, it’d just get washed away. We also usually get three or four falls of snow on a quarter of the farm a year.

So I question whether you’d economically get a benefit out of it to warrant it.

Since using dicalcic the stock are livelier. They keep moving; when we first arrived fourteen years ago, it used to take us a good two days to drive the stock from the back paddock to the woolshed, now we’re doing it in four or five hours. It’s no doubt a bit of breeding, but there’s certainly a lot of life in the them now. I haven’t done a soil test since using dicalcic. You see it everyday, the stock look great, they’re doing well, and there’s a bloom in their eye. There isn’t an area on the farm to worry about. I don’t seem to have any animal health problems; our losses are minimal, maybe one to two percent.

There is a saving to be made by using the dicalcic and lime blends. When we decided we’d need to apply lime, we had to re-think things. For the first couple of years we used the No.14S blend at 600kg/ha (40% dicalcic phosphate sulphur/60% Cropfine lime), and then moved on to using No.8S at 250kg/ha (80% dicalcic phosphate sulphur/20% Cropfine), which we’ve been using ever since. What I really liked about dicalcic is that it’s a balanced product. If you’re going to put on super then lime, it will damage the microbe activity in the soil, because you’re applying an acidic product, then an alkaline product. At least a thin layer of neutral dicalcic and lime doesn’t have that effect. I know, through digging postholes for the last six months, that it’s easy digging, and there’re usually earthworms amongst it. It’s a really nice nutty, aerated soil, with a nice texture to it, whereas it used to be very clay-like with a hard blue layer below. It doesn’t get like that now, even with all that rain we had. The micro-activity in the soil is obviously working. When you sit back and look at the lambs and wool coming off the farm, the main nutrients being taken are the ones I’m simply replacing when I use the Hatuma blends.”