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# Toby & Erin Tyler

Fordell

Type of operation Sheep and Beef

Years of dicalcic use 20

Size of farm (effective) 320ha

Stocking rate (average last 6 years) Breeding ewes 3000, Lambs finished: 4100 (137%), Ewe hoggets: 400, Rams (Terminal Sire): 40, Fattening heifers: 30, Rising 2 & 3 year Steers: 55, Weaner & Rising 2 year Steers: 30

Soil type(s) Fordell/Westmere Loam

Traditional product used Hatuma Dicalcic @ 350kg/ha (Special blends applied for last three years)

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**Toby first came to his property in the Fordell district when he was still in primary school, back then it was owned by Sam Henderson, a hard-working, well-respected farmer. Sam took Toby's natural enthusiasm for the love of the land under his wing and over the years taught him everything he could about good animal and soil husbandry.**



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By the time Toby was sixteen he was working full-time on the farm. He later moved into management, then finally as an official partner in the business. Twenty years ago the property saw its first application of Hatuma dicalcic. ‘It was Sam’s decision to use it,’ recalls Toby. ‘He was a true stockman and everything was done by the eye. He’d seen the effect lime had on the animals’ welfare and conditioning, so dicalcic was a natural progression.’

The farm is currently running 2,700 breeding ewes which produced 3,600 lambs. They also winter 250 ewe hoggets, fatten 35-40 heifers, and another 70 steers between 1 to 3 year olds. Toby calls his operation intensive, but doesn’t entertain the principle that definition has to automatically mean high input. ‘People ask how I judge performance. First is the stock condition, the second is how much money I’m making. Because of rising costs it’s natural for a farmer to demand more out of their acreage by upping the stocking rate and putting more pressure on what’s there. A few years ago we went up to 3,300 breeding ewes on exactly the same property, but we’ve come unstuck a couple of times where we’ve pushed it too far, so we’ve had to find a happy medium.’

We’re terminal sire, so everything we breed, we have to fatten and finish. The years we’ve gone for big lambing percentages, the quality wasn’t there. Last year we’ve dropped ewe numbers back by 10-12%. We’ve had a lot more singles, but we’re killing more kilograms than previous years, some at 18.5kg. We managed to quit 1,100 of them by late November.’ Toby says hitting the early market and getting more than \$30 premium over the standard \$70 is a huge advantage. Last year was the first year he found himself in that position, although he admits the previous season’s drought meant stock numbers were far fewer. ‘Having lambs go away in November and the heifers going to the works, means we can play the market a bit more and continue producing more weight on the lambs until the price is right. Traditionally our income period was lumped between November to March, now we’ve spread it out a bit more. Now we only have six to eight weeks a year when there’s no source of income.’

While Toby says he doesn’t believe there’s one single fertiliser that solves everything, Hatuma’s dicalcic blends have become a staple top-dressing product on their property. Dicalcic has produced the results in the pasture and stock so it serves the purpose of what we need. We’ve had good

clover growth and pasture all through the year. You’ve got to use something reasonably long term. We’ve tested every three years and the P levels and pH are at a point we’re now happy with. I’ve always maintained you’re better to chuck on something rather than nothing in the years when fertilisers are expensive, but the dicalcic continues to remain affordable. Last year we fine-tuned the dicalcic and lime blend to fit the cost.

The stock’s health is good. This property is called Meadowpark, but some call it Jurassic Park because of the size of the sheep. We source big healthy strong ewes and good quality rams. The shearers hate me; many of the ewes are 75-85kg so they find them hard to manage. We produce six to seven kilograms of A wool per ewe per year. We don’t have any issues with young stock, they’ve got good bone structure and they’re healthy and robust. We demand a lot from our pasture and the dicalcic suits, we’re getting the performance we expect even though this pasture hasn’t been turned over since 1956. We have used a little bit of urea on a few paddocks to give them a boost. At 50kg/ha the grass responded well. We grazed the paddocks and left the stock in there for two weeks. They started off grazing the pasture OK, but they seemed to be getting fussier and fussier. I opened the gate into the dicalcic paddock, they disappeared into it, and never went back, they weren’t interested. It was obvious the urea gave the pasture a boost, but the palatability wasn’t there. We had to force them back onto the pasture. We did the same thing over 50ha on different blocks around the farm, and had the same result in every paddock. Even though the gate was open in each case, the stock disappeared into the dicalcic paddocks every time. The stock didn’t want to go back. Funnily enough the urea pasture didn’t seem to recover under the same stocking regime as the dicalcic ones, but I didn’t apply any more. We used normal stocking rotation, but the stock told the story.’

Toby is a firm believer that if you can’t utilise every bit of pasture, then farming becomes pointless, in his situation he doesn’t have the scope. It’s a philosophy he takes to the point of not tolerating untidiness in the feed cover. ‘The dicalcic and lime blends make pasture management easier. I don’t strip-graze or force-feed typically, unless the pasture gets away. The stock are free to chew what they want and the outcome is that they graze the paddocks evenly, from one fence-line to the other. It’s all being utilised, lambs at an average of 18.5kg

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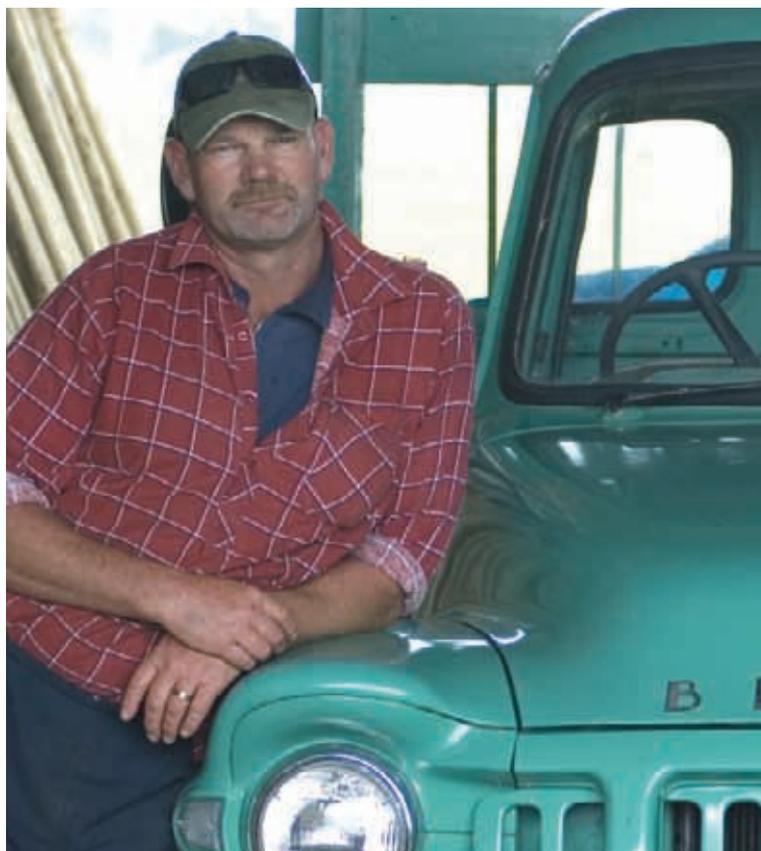
► is proof of that. It's not how much grass you've got, but how it's grazed. Palatability is paramount. It makes farming a lot less stressful. One of the biggest financial and production based decisions you make is fert application, so it comes down to value and what level you're producing lambs at. If I'm not making profit out of my lambs and cattle, there's something wrong which creates more stress, more burden.'

During the devastating drought of 2007, Toby felt the activity in the soil on the property was the key to holding on longer and maintaining a level of production. They stuck with works lambs right through the period, managing to get rid of 70-80 a week at an average of 16.5kg in the middle of the driest period in March. This showed him the quality in the pasture was still there. While he admits the farm is situated on a thin narrow rain belt, he noticed a lot of the new pastures in the district fell over badly in the drought, yet his old grass hung in there with an amazing recovery period. 'I don't care how it looks at those times, as long as it recovers. A sniff of rain and you could see the paddocks freshen up and the quality coming back.

I think farmers have pushed production to the brink now. Ask the older guys about modern farming and they'll put it down to human greed. But when nature bites back, it bites bloody hard so we have to be careful as to how far we push these boundaries. We have to start going down a quality path. Last year is a prime example. We produced more single lambs than twins, but we've never had lambs killed at that sort of weight by mid November before. We shifted more weight from fewer stock. Other countries, like Chile, have pasture just as good as New Zealand but their inflation, economics, population and pollution puts them at a disadvantage. But we've got a good name for clean and green, and our technology is second to none, so we have to be careful we don't lose what we've gained. Most farmers are switched-on people, they've become savvy for what the consumer wants. I think farming has got the genetics, we've got switched-on people in the industry, but we don't need to push production anymore. We're after quality, not quantity, and I think that's what we're doing on this property with our lamb, beef and wool. It's about efficiency, both cost and input-wise. Farmers need to sit down and think about the amount of grass being produced with urea and DAP because the quality isn't there. The dicalcic and lime blends produce quality. While we're almost at optimum efficiency, there's always room for some refinement. The day I stop learning, I need to get out. I learn something new every day.'

Sam was 92 when he died. According to Toby, he was

farming almost to the day. He'd been through two world wars and plenty of droughts, and always said he enjoyed farming in the '50s and '60s rather than the pressures of the '80s and '90s. 'Everybody has a different philosophy to sustainability, but he got the farm in a good position. We could continue doing what we're doing now. The place is future-proofed in that sense. Small steps are more realistic, but I realise there is always room for improvement and that's an on-going farm policy. How much do you want to produce? We're going down the right road. You get to a certain point where you're happy with it. It's common sense, not rocket science. That's sustainability - doing things within the parameters of sanity because I've seen some pretty insane things out there. Pretty simple really. It's palatability, evenness of grazing, the quality of stock, and the welfare of the stock. And it has to fit within my budget, that's the main thing.' ■



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