

**YOUNG  
country**

**FARM MANAGER**

Words by Jackie Harrigan

Glenn Weitenberg has overseen a transformation of Landcorp's Ruapehu farm.

# Boosting business wins award

**T**hree years ago then-23-year-old Glenn Weitenberg took over the farm manager's role at Landcorp Ruapehu in the Moutoa cluster of farms south of Foxton, and in 2016 the farm won the supreme award in the Dairy Business of the Year competition.

The 871-cow farm was "a low performing unit", Landcorp's dairy farm's manager Mark Julian said, but huge improvements have been made by Glenn with the cows now producing 99% of their bodyweight in milksolids each season. In the 2014/15 season operating profit topped \$4000 a hectare when the top 10% of dairy farmers (in the Manawatu Wairarapa region on the Red Sky benchmarking system) were returning less than half that.

Glenn has always been a dairy farmer, leaving school at 16 to work on his parents' farm then moving to a small 200-cow herd followed by managing a 850-cow high-input farm for three seasons before joining Landcorp at Ruapehu farm.

While he says he fell into it in the early days, Glenn is now planning a long-term

career in the industry, and he and wife Tammi hope to eventually use their equity in a couple of rental properties to buy an equity partnership or property of their own.

While the Landcorp farm is a system four farm, using summer crops of 16ha turnips and or rape and 25ha of home-grown maize for late in the lactation, the emphasis over the past three years has been on higher pasture quality and quantity through a re-grassing programme, applications of lime and fine-tuning pasture management.

The stocking rate of 3.44 cows/ha and use of system four allows the farm to make full use of the high spring pasture growth rates when the mild coastal climate can see daily pasture growth rates of 70-80kg DM/ha. Winter growth rates often truck along at 25-30kg DM/ha and the summer crops fill the feed deficit in the summer dry period with 14-16 t DM/ha with home-grown maize silage bolstering the autumn period.

Summer can grow up to 40kg DM/ha if the rains are regular, but Glenn says it often looks green but is lacking in substance at that time

of the year. "It can look like a green drought."

Palm kernel has been used at a rate of 2kg/cow/day but with Landcorp planning to move away from the product, Glenn and farm supervisor Tony Dowman are investigating other local alternatives, possibly an in-shed feeding system using locally grown grain or using more homegrown silage for the future.

For Glenn the focus is on how they can offer the cows the best possible grass at every grazing to fully maximise their performance. Pre-grazing topping pastures (from late August or early September through until the growth slows in December) and the use of the three-leaf grazing system have been important tools and he credits these with a marked lift in pasture production across the farm and an increase of 45,000kg milksolids (MS) production last season for the same input costs. This increase in production along with Guaranteed Milk Price income of \$6.14/kg MS contributed to the operating profit per hectare of \$4191 for the 2014/15 season.

"I want every paddock to look like the regrowth after we have taken silage off."

When he instituted the pre-grazing topping regime he did lots of measuring to back up the trial and found the cows were utilising more grass, harvesting 1.8-2 t DM/ha more than the previous year.

"The pre-topped grass also has higher ME (metabolisable energy) levels by 0.5-1 unit which would have contributed to the higher milksolids produced."

He acknowledges the extra work involved in mowing the grass, saying you need have the manpower to do it admitting that they often post-grazing top as well when the grass is growing at its fastest.

"The pre-mowing gives the highest and most even sward but we still need skills around allocating the pasture, to make sure the gazing tidies it up and the allocation is right."

"There is lots of extra work involved in only giving the herd 2/3 or 3/4 of the paddock for a grazing – but it's easier than having to go back and tidy up afterwards – although

## Farm Facts

- Ruapehu Farm, Whirokino, Foxton
- Total platform: 263ha, effective 253ha
- Peak milking cows: 871
- Stocking rate: 3.44 cows/ha
- Stocking rate: 1652 kg LW/ha
- Milk production: 1638 kgMS/ha, 476kg MS/cow, 418,000kg MS.
- Target for 2016/17: 420,000 kgMS
- Milk production as percentage of cow weight: 99%
- Pasture harvested: 14.4tDM/ha
- Pasture consumed/cow: 3.83 t/cow/yr
- Forage consumed: 1.09t/cow/year
- Concentrate consumed: 0.49 t/cow/year



Glenn Weitenberg on farm with assistant production managers Jordy Temomo and Stephen Boothby.



we will do that if the paddock is left looking patchy.”

The pastures included fescue swards when Glenn arrived, but he has replaced them with ryegrass One50, saying “fescue and I just don’t mix”.

Guided by Intelact farm consultant Helwi Tacoma, Glenn and the staff have learnt the three-leaf grazing method which sees them set the grazing round to the growth stage of the plant.

“We are trying to wait for the third leaf to emerge but at this time in spring we will go for the second leaf because by the time the third one comes we are getting seed head and losing potential quality.”

Glenn says a new leaf grows every 8-10 days at different times of the year so the round varies from 24 to 30 days depending on grass growth rates. Good pasture is paramount for Glenn who says he is happy to challenge on the level of regrassing.

“I reckon that 10% is not high enough – I think every six years is better for the whole farm to be regrassed as we struggle with persistence. Last season we regrassed 40% of the farm, which is expensive but if you can manage it you can make good production from it.”

#### COW IMPROVEMENT

Glenn is moving away from the larger older Friesian cows in the herd and breeding towards a smaller more-efficient Kiwi cross herd with average body weight of 485kg that is kinder on the light sandy soils of the Moutoa basin.

The farm lies within the spillway area adjacent to the Manawatu River and



#### Three-leaf grazing technique

Leaf 1 = 20% potential DM growth

Leaf 2 = 30% potential DM growth

Leaf 3 = 50% DM growth

Total: 100%

If eaten at leaf 2, you might only get 50% of the potential.

If eaten off at leaf 4 you lose the 20% because leaf one is dying.

sometimes floods as part of the protection scheme of the wider area in a heavy flooding event. The rest of the time sees the area’s deep drains pumped out over the stopbanks.

The farm’s herd was considered quite poor but lots of emphasis has gone on to culling poor performers along with increasing the reproductive performance to enable heavier culling as well as, lifting the BW and PW. Shortening the mating from six weeks of AI to five weeks followed by five weeks of bulls has seen the six-week in-calf rate lift from high 50% to 67%, whereas other farms on the complex are 74-76%. This area is a real focus for Glenn and the three-week submission rate this season was 91%.

Over the past two seasons Glenn has been able to tidy up the herd by culling Angus cross cows, split or low-udder cows and recurring lameness animals. Now he is concentrating on eliminating empty carryovers, culling older cows and any whose performance is below average. Next step is focusing on BW/

PW of 52/62 to lift the average performance of the herd. Glenn and his staff rear 20% replacements, 181 heifer calves, on the Bell Booth Queen of calves system from day one with adlib meal and hay through to weaning at 10 weeks of age and then the calves leave the farm in December at 120kg liveweight to go out to grazing. He is excited to see the first of his heifers reared on the property join the milking herd this season, saying they came into the herd at good weights and are milking well in their sub-herd of two and three year olds. Mixed aged cows are separate again and a smaller herd of 160 mainly lighter, later-calving or non-cycling cows are in a third herd from October onwards.

Cost control is an issue Glenn is also working hard on, saying he gets lots of autonomy to run his own policies and budgets but works alongside farm supervisor Tony Dowman to review budgets three times a year. Spending money to make money is fine in his book, but overall Glenn is trying to increase milk production without lifting the costs.

“Basically we need to be smarter with the money we have and produce more milk with it – which has the effect of diluting the costs – lowering the cost per kilogram of milk solids produced.”

“There is lots of room to improve and claw back our farm working expenses of \$3.70.”

He acknowledges animal health is a lot higher than most farms, at around \$100/cow so he has a focus on bringing it down.

They use a lot of lime flour and mag-ox and have high P levels onfarm so need monthly B12 injections, as well as the cost of CIDRs for the younger cows and a PG programme in the final week of mating.

“They are all little things that add cost.”

Other strategies for saving costs this season include only essential repairs and maintenance, direct drilling turnips, not using CIDRs for anoestrus cows, shortening AI and rearing fewer heifers calves along with monitoring supplement wastage by measuring what arrives onfarm and weighing out daily allowances.

#### Business profitability

	Ruapehu 2014/15	Man/Wai av. *	Man/Wai Top 10%**
Return on capital (%)	7.1	1.3	3.8
Return on assets (%)	7.4	1.1	3.7
Operating profit margin (%)	38.5	5.4	22.6
Operating profit/ha (\$)	4191	340	1850
Gross operating revenue/ha (\$)	10875	6310	8173
Gross operating expenses/ha (\$)	6685	5970	6322
Milk price /kg MS (\$)	6.17	4.41	4.41
Cost of production/kg MS/(\$)**	3.61	4.34	3.46
Gross revenue/kg MS (\$)	6.64	5.15	5.14
Farm Working expenses/kg MS (\$)	3.79	4.09	3.39

\* Red Sky Manawatu Wairarapa average \*\*Red Sky Manawatu Wairarapa Top 10%

\*\*\*Cost of production is the operating expenses less non-milk revenue which shows the cost to produce the milksolids alone. A key indicator of resilience and the COP plus financing costs is in effect the \$/kg MS needed for the business to break even.

• Ruapehu Milk price was \$6.17/kg MS through Fonterra Guaranteed Milk Price scheme.