

Considering converting to dairying?

We were mapping a sheep and beef property last week and the conversation came up about the suitability of the farm for dairying. A fair question considering the present dairy payouts and the disillusioned climate for lamb and beef.

Just because your property has easy contour, it doesn't necessarily mean it is suitable for dairying. So what should you be considering when making this decision? The first is the livestock requirements from the land and secondly the physical attributes of the land.

1. Livestock requirements

The average fresian cow weighs 500+ kg, some 8 times more than a romney ewe. Consequently the weight loading from a cow is considerably higher than a ewe. When the soil is wet or saturated the effects are exponential.

Intensification from drystock to dairy, also means greater inputs such regrassing into better producing pasture species, increased use of fertilizers, more demand on water resources, greater staff requirements. Regional Councils have a mandate for water quality, and will be requiring certain standards in your district. Assess the requirements for the operation, and discuss with the regional council the conditions that are required to be met.

Consider the climate and the district currently farmed, does the climate and soils in the area produce a pasture growth pattern that is going to provide the feed required at different times of the year? Is irrigation something that you should be considering also? And will the land resources cope with irrigation, wintering cows or cropping for supplementary feed?

2. Land Resource Information: Good land resource information is essential for any land use, not just intensive dairying. This information, at the paddock scale, will allow you to make informed decisions without actually physically learning by your mistakes. This information should contain details of soils, geology, slope, vegetation and erosion severity for the property. Different combinations of these details will behave uniquely under climatic and management conditions. This information will provide an indication of how the land will respond under the new proposed management regime

The most important resource information for dairying is the soil type and its characteristics, as this is the powerhouse of the farm production. These characteristics should include soil texture, soil colour, soil consistency, and depth of topsoil. For example, soils that are weakly developed and with a friable to very friable consistency will be prone to pugging and treading damage by cows when wet. Internal drainage will also dictate how long these soils are unsuitable for grazing with cows after rain. Sheep on the other hand due to their low weight loading capacity have less of an impact on soil structure under wet conditions. Pasture production can be reduced by up to 40% for 6-12 months after a single pugging event, a big impact in the back pocket! Soil drainage will also affect soil temperatures throughout the season, identifying the areas that will respond earlier in spring to Nitrogen than others can provide production opportunities.

A simple soil map can provide endless opportunities to maximize production out of the land resources both for dairying and drystock farming.

Consider the strengths & limitations: For each different soil type or land management unit identified on the Land Resource map, consider the strengths and limitations and how it can be farmed profitably over the lifetime of the property. Often the strengths of one unit will complement some of the limitations of another unit. This consideration has the potential to not only save you money by avoiding poor management decisions, but can make you thousands by managing the areas to the best of their strengths. Examples of this may include identifying a poorly draining wet soil which limits cropping versatility of the properties flats, or stony flats which may not grow much grass in the summer but can be strategically important in wet periods or as a feed pad.

Considering these key points will ensure that the property will achieve your farming and personal objectives. It provides information that is critical for making future management decisions on your property. For existing landowners, undertaking this process will make you more sustainable and profitable.

A final consideration: If you are considering a dairy conversion, or even just a change of land use, then following these simple philosophies may save you a lot of heartache in the future

Want you want to know more, ring either Sarah (021 526458) or Lachie (021526478) at LandVision or visit our website on www.landvision.net.nz.



www.LandVision.net.nz