

The Drugs aren't working?

Like most of you who caught the news story about drench resistance ten days ago, it sent shivers down the spine. Now, its not news to some members of the rural community, but it does ask some hard questions.

Is 'sick sheep' the perception what we want the urban population of New Zealand to see? What about our overseas consumers? Are kiwi farmers truly clean and green?

For all those who gave a yes to the last question, can you prove it? That's a bit harder , and we are not sure how many farming operations could do it.

Planning, monitoring and recording are becoming an integral part of the farm business. Many farmers have been taking measurements for years. Last week, we heard about a farmer who had 30 years of rainfall data stored on planks of wood in the back shed (although he was missing a couple of years due to a cold winter).

At a time when the focus is on maximizing production, it is critically important to monitor what is happening and record your resulting actions. This will ensure that management decisions are being made at identified trigger points, and not because Granddad George did it back in 1956. Documenting actions and the results, will give you the opportunity to review way your farm business operates. Farm policy 30 years ago should not be happening today.

Going back to the drenches; How many of you have checked the resistance status on your farm? How can you manage a problem, if you are not sure that there is one in the first place?

Monitoring; faecal egg counting is the decision making tool that you should be using before and after drenching. There are plenty of experts out there who will only be too happy to offer you a kit and teach you how to use it.

Reporting; Record the who, what, when and why each time, and keep a folder for all your animal health activities. This could not only provide some answers in the future, but it will also prove to the consumer (and vet) that you are using these products in a responsible manner.

Other options? There is some really interesting work being carried out with poplar and willow fodder at present. It can be a great worm free fodder for stock at different points in the grazing system. There also appears to be some benefits with the tannins for flushing ewes.

What else should farmers be monitoring? Most take soil tests, and decide what fertilizer to apply at certain trigger levels. Are you considering other aspects of soil health and management, and your ability to influence pasture growth rate and composition? It's about working smarter not harder.

Animal welfare: There should be shelter provided for stock in each paddock, and if not there should be a documented tree planting plan for the property. In your animal health folder, outline some of your key stock management strategies. Such as putting the newly shorn ewes in the 'basin paddock' when a southerly storm is forecast. This is common practice, but hard to prove.

Water: Many hill country properties are working very hard at achieving fully reticulated water systems. Set and document a goal, break it down into small chunks and then deal with it on a yearly basis. The 5 years goes quickly.

Weed control: Many landowners are using sprays on a regular basis. Simply recording in your diary, what, when and why, and a compiling and yearly summary will provide a good record of the weed population on your property over time. Hopefully this will demonstrate a downward trend.

Erosion and soil health: This a challenge faced by most, and many farmers have plans on how to deal with these issues. Regional Councils are getting increasingly hot under the collar about sediment in waterways. The question is, would you and your family drink the water leaving your property? Develop a plan to prove that the issues on the farm as being dealt with.

Soil health should be monitored through fertility and structure. Aim to run your soil fertility sampling transects through the same soil types, at the same points on the property on a biannual basis. Undertake a Visual Soil Assessment annually, to ensure that you are getting the maximum production out of your soil.

On the whole, farmers are a responsible bunch, caring for their land to pass on to the next generation. It is important to provide some history for the next caretaker, and help prove that your decisions today were well thought through.

Finally, for all those out there buying property. Ask for this information, make it part of the market requirement. Don't invest all that money for half the picture.