

Case Study

Legg dairy farm, Selwyn Te Waihora

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CATEGORY: NEWS | Funding | Water Quality | Biodiversity | Zones | Environment | Farming | Water

ZONE: SELWYN WAIHORA

In the late 1990s local farmers embarked on the restoration of Harts Creek and Birdling's Brook which flow into Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere. With support from the local community, Environment Canterbury, Selwyn District Council, the Department of Conservation and many others, 13 landholders have now undertaken restoration projects on their farms.

The Legg farm is a good example of adept land management in a sensitive area, where sustainable production has been achieved with a small herd suited to this location, a wide range of pasture species and pro-active farm environmental management.

The farm is within the recently established Cultural Values Management Area, which recognises the sensitivity of this catchment and its importance to Ngāi Tahu. This farm will be required to operate at Good Management Practice by 2022.

Andrew and Christine Legg have an ayrshire dairy herd. They are working to build soil health, cease irrigation, as well as achieving all relevant Good Management Practices.

The Leggs have started working with sustainable soil consultancy Soil Matters as a step towards the goal of a farm without irrigation.

They are running what was Andrew's grandfather's farm. Andrew says his grandfather chose it because he and his sons had been driving their cows to water from his previous farms.

"About 60 years ago they put drains down each side of our farm and we lost all our water," Andrew says. "But that's why we farm ayrshires. My grandfather didn't want great big heavy cows, and he didn't want jerseys because he didn't think they would produce enough milk. So he started breeding ayrshires, which are somewhere in between." Andrew's grandfather sent his sons to Scotland to bring back ayrshire bulls, as well as using ayrshire bulls from around New Zealand, and ended up with a top herd.

When Andrew's parents married, his mother was a herd tester and would help the Legg family select bulls to increase production.

For a time, Lakeside Ayrshires had one of New Zealand's highest producing ayrshire herds. One of their cows was the North Island champion, then the South Island champion the following year.

Andrew doesn't have the on-farm labour force his parents enjoyed, so hasn't found much time to show cows.

But his son, John, who will soon take over Lakeside Ayrshires, had a cow in this year's Ellesmere A & P Show.

In recent years, the Leggs have been busy switching their attention from production (they had one of the highest producing herds in New Zealand) to sustainability (they are working to lessen the environmental impact of their dairying operation).

"We've done some things that have taken a toll on the herd as far as production goes," says Andrew.

"So we're working on our fertility and tightening up our calving pattern, and we feel we'll come right if John can get our soil health happening. His target is to eventually not irrigate at all."

The Leggs have never come close to using their water allocation, and Andrew says the farm is going to lose some of its water allocation.

"But our soil really shouldn't need to have irrigation. We didn't have any when I was a boy, even after the drains were installed and we lost all our water."

John's interest in soil health has him learning everything he can, and he has become inspired to overhaul the farm's fertiliser regime.

Soil Matters has been brought on board to help the family in the use of biological nutrients to boost crop yields and animal performance.