



Red Devons like it tough

Andrew Stewart

Throughout a decade of turbulent weather, Leslie and Jill Kellick have seen enough to be convinced their Red Devons are the ideal cattle for the hard hill country northeast of Wanganui.

The rugged terrain surrounding the tiny settlement of Mangamahu suffered record floods in 2004 that swept away bridges, stock and farming spirits, and droughts in 2003 and 2008 that decimated livestock numbers.

The Kellick family have been in the area since Leslie's great-grandfather arrived to establish the family farm. The 750ha (effective) farm has a good mix of terrain, with about 130ha cultivatable, 200ha medium hill and the rest steeper, "overhanging" hills.

The Kellicks run about 600 head of cattle, with 200 cows going to the bull. Friesian bulls are traded as well, bought in at 100kg and kept to 320kg. About 3000 ewes round out the stock numbers, with the ewe flock comprising three breeds, a Cheviot Perendale cross, purebred Perendales, and a small number of Wiltshires. This year 64ha of maize will complement the sheep and cattle operation.

Although they used to run Angus cattle, and still retain a few in a small stud, Leslie became disenchanted with moves to American bloodlines within the breed.

They moved to use Saler sires, a French breed, over the Angus herd but found the progeny were

difficult to handle. To quiet the herd down they introduced South Devon genetics; although they were better they did not provide the solution they were looking for.

"I just didn't have the country to feed them properly. If you have easy country they are the ultimate cattle."

So they changed sires again to Red Devon, and Leslie now says that is where he wished he had gone in the first place.

"They had all the traits we were looking for: quietness, easy doing, early maturity, smaller frames and they suit this place perfectly."

Not only do the Red Devons efficiently convert the tough drymatter from hillsides into muscle and fat, Leslie has found them easy to handle and they display excellent maternal instincts. He has never had to help a Red Devon cow with calving and their conception rate usually leaves him with few dries. The Kellicks now obtain their bulls from Graeme Dyke, who runs Te Maewa Red Devon Stud near Paihiatua in the northern Wairarapa.

Leslie described their farm as having its own microclimate, taking a regular beating from Mother Nature. "It was during the drought of 2008 that we noticed the Red Devons were able to hang on far better than anything else." These regular stoushes with the elements led the family to look at ways of

improving their farming business, so they had a Farm Plan done by Horizons Regional Council. This suggested ways to improve erosion planting, stocking policies and retirement options. It was the economic analysis that caught Leslie's eye. They realised they could improve their financial performance from the herd by finishing more cattle, so they made the decision to retain progeny longer.

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Historically the farm has used a 60/40 sheep-to-cattle ratio, but the Red Devons and reduction in workload associated with cattle over sheep have convinced Leslie

to push to a 50/50 mix. This season has proved the ideal time to put their plan into action with an abundance of feed and prices for beef at record highs.

Previously they sold all progeny at 13 months on the store market, but they will now keep everything until between 20 and 24 months.

The Kellicks have found the Farm Plan to be highly beneficial to their business. "If you work that plan to what you think, it is really valuable," Leslie said.

They have prioritised what they are going to implement from the suggestions, and have begun with the change in cattle policy and a planting programme to control erosion.

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"They're so quiet you can pull them off a ridge with a heading dog."

Keep on top of debt

Having started farming when interest rates were 25%, the Kellicks now have an aversion to debt that sees them run a minimal-input system.

Traditional fertiliser has long been forgotten and farm working expenses are kept to an absolute minimum without affecting animal performance.

Leslie encourages other farmers to think carefully about debt, advising those starting out in farming to keep borrowing to a minimum.

"The big thing in farming is don't get yourself in too much debt. Don't let the debt get geared so it becomes a struggle. It limits you so much if you're selling off stock to pay off debt or to meet interest payments. Get your balance right and get your bank beside you – that's what has worked for us."