Inaugural Field Day for Growers

Farmers are often masters of under-statement, and Mike Morahan is no exception when he describes his 161 hectare Wanganui hill country farm as “a glorified lifestyle block.”

Nothing is as effective as ...

one-to-one communication, as was proven at the inaugural field day for growers and others associated with the New Zealand Grazing Company and Silver Fern Farms' beef rearing programme.

Twenty people, including nursery bull growers from as far afield as Ruatoria, discussed issues of common concern on the property of Mike Morahan, which is located at Makirikiri Valley, near Wanganui.

Animal health, animal nutrition, metabolisable energy values, profit margins, feed costs and problems associated with tail-end calves were among the issues discussed.

Nursery bull growers, industry representatives and others came from as far afield as Ruatoria (a seven hour drive) to the field day on the Wanganui farm of Mike Morahan.
“Calf rearing has been the main thrust of my business,”

Mike told 20 nursery bull growers, calf rearers, industry representatives and others at a recent field-day organised by the New Zealand Grazing Company and Silver Fern Farms Ltd.

As just part of his overall operation, Mr Morahan is rearing 240 nursery bull calves for N.Z.Grazing/ Silver Fern. At their first weighing on his Makirikiri Valley property, the bulls were averaging 1.12 kg per animal, per day, over the preceding five week period.

Paradoxically, while the NZGC was delighted with Mr Morahan’s 1.12 kg average per animal, per day for the first five weeks, he was disappointed!

“I was targeting 1.5kg per day but I was let down by my pasture because we just ran out of good feed,” he said.

“The heaviest weight gain was 1.65 kg per day over a 36 day period. If I could have had the whole lot at 1.5 kg we could have made some reasonable money, but I haven’t made a lot of money in that 35 day period. There are three reasons for that:-

I am doing it for the long term and that is one of the reasons.

The calves which are on here were getting one kg of pellets per day plus one kg of crushed maize, plus straw. They are still on crushed maize now, but we have cut their pellets back to .5 kg per day.

We are still getting the weight gains on that. I feed them this for three reasons, the first being that they need it. The second reason is that they are going to be killed – I want to start killing them this time next year and have them all gone by May. It probably won’t happen with all of them.”

Wendy Morgan, a nutritionist who works with Viterra New Zealand Ltd, makes a point at the field day.
Unlike most nursery bull growers, stock on Mr Morahan’s Makirikiri Valley farm are taken through from four-day-old calves to slaughter weight. This, he said, strongly influenced his decision making.

“I know that putting weight on a little animal is a lot harder than putting weight on a big animal but I am prepared to wear the cost at this stage to get them up to a decent weight later.”

“The other reason is in your contract. If your weights drop below a given line, the payment alters quite drastically. It is extremely important to keep the average weight of your calves above that line.”

“Unfortunately, while we may be a gloried lifestyle block, we also have a station-sized debt, so we try to be as efficient as we possibly can,” quipped Mr Morahan, in explaining his overall farming operation.”

“We have had a few changes in farming policies over the years. It used to be sheep and cows - selling off the best calves and then farming the rest through. We tried finishing bulls.”

“Then I got involved with Landcorp, for whom I reared Kiwi-cross heifers. We did that for three years and then this evolved into taking them on through so it became a heifer-grazing unit. We changed the infrastructure a bit with water to make it all work. After a management decision from Wellington, the heifer thing ran out. There are 200 left here now, last year’s progeny, and they will go back in May.”

“In June/July we were looking at calf rearing. Then the Silver Fern Farms deal turned up. The New Zealand Grazing Company were going to pay me each day to rear stock,” he said.

“I have been rearing calves for too long – this is my 21st year – every year there is something new to pick up. For the first 10 years of doing it, I learned very little. In 1995, I signed a contract for 250 calves at $230 net at 100 kg.”

“I went out and bought calves at $25. I could buy milk back in those days at 12.5 cents per litre, so a 200 litre drum cost me $25. I put two bags of pellets into the calves. They were reared for about $75, so at $25 purchase price, the cost was $100. We were selling at $230 per weaner, for a profit of $130 per animal which was good money.”

“Then the Poukawa number four system told everybody in the world that rearers needed to make only $50 per head. Ever since it has been a real struggle to get that $100 profit per calf.”

“If we are going to grow animals under this nursery bull contract, we do really need performance bulls to make money. You can put the same amount of feed into two different animals and one will convert it into growth far better than the other one. To be picking up calves mid to late November, you are getting the real tail end out of a calf shed like mine. They are lower-performing animals and from my limited experience, they will continue to be lower-performing animals”– Mike Morahan

Mike Morahan’s 230 bull calves averaged 171 kg at their most recent weighing on the 21st December 2010. The heaviest calf was 227 kg and the lightest was 132 kg and they have gained at the rate of 1.013 kg per day for the past 59 days.
The New Zealand Grazing Company and Silver Fern Farms are striving to set in place animal health protocols which will become “the gold standard” for the calf rearing industry throughout New Zealand, veterinarian, Dr Bas Shouten, one of this country’s leading experts on calf rearing told those attending....

“If the calf rearer is going to rear a good calf, we want that calf to be growing at .7, .8, .9kg per day before you (the nursery bull growers) see it. We want that animal well weaned off milk before you get it, so we need to set some protocols for these calves when they leave the farm.

“They must have been weaned off milk for at least four to five days. They must be getting at least one kilogram of meal per day and they must be vaccinated.”

In order to assist those rearing calves over the late summer/autumn months when pasture quality falls off, research is focusing on producing a high quality feed at a cost which is acceptable to growers, said Dr Shouten.

“Viterra New Zealand Ltd is trying to develop a specialised juvenile ration which is different to anything which has been on the market so we have some really neat goodies in there which we think will help this animal during this difficult phase,” he said.

“This is really the make and break of calf rearing. We are looking for a specialised ration which no-one has ever been able to develop. We have got something in there which is going to stimulate the immune system.

“What we want to do is maintain good fermentation in the calf’s gut. My question is do we want a high quality feed at $600 per tonne or do we want something at $450 per tonne?

“To my way of thinking, we have got to get that rumen firing. If you really want to fire it along put two kilograms of the stuff in there. If you want to maintain an animal until the conditions come right, put half a kilogram in there. Don’t compromise on the quality, compromise on the volume.”

“The whole idea of a good rumen is that it is a fermentation vat with lovely bacteria all working together in unison. If you have a ginger beer plant or a home brew mix are you going to feed it every second or third day? No. If you want a ginger beer plant which can produce well then you feed it on a regular basis.” - Dr Bas Shouten