

# Tough country now showing a return

It's hard to imagine farming in a rainfall that can reach nearly six metres a year, but that's what Len Rapley faces on Lone Star's Quartz Range property in Golden Bay.

The property covers about 700ha, but around the 420 effective hectares are deep rinvies with slow-growing bush scrubbling for sustenance on a landscape that has barely 20cm of pakhi as a topsoil on a hard rock base. To the rear is the Kahurangi National Park with its craggy peaks.

After more than a century, the remains of goldfields just beyond the farm's border are still rocky rubble with little regeneration of bush. It's hard country for growing and rain can quickly leach fertiliser from the pakhi.

The area was first farmed about 30 years ago after a fire burned off the scrubby cover. The then Lands and Survey Department flew on seed and farmed it for a time.

It's a long, thin property made up of two blocks with an access from the bottom and via the national park. A 16km track that Rapley will get around most days winds from the bottom through a chunk of the park and back through the middle.

Nowadays, it's a productive unit that Rapley says has been achieved largely through a combination of fertiliser, fencing and knowing the product.

He winters 2500 Perendale breeding ewes, 800 ewe lambs and 200 R1 calves on Quartz Range as part of the Lonestar Farms group that owns 11 farms around the South Island.

When Rapley first took up the job as manager 10 years ago, the property had a pH between 5.2 and 5.4 while the Olsen P sat between five and eight. A thatch of native grasses at the base of the pasture acted like a sponge and stopped grass roots reaching into the soil for nutrients.

Since then, the thatch has been grazed off and fertiliser has been poured on. An initial dressing of lime at 5t/ha was applied that has since dropped back to maintenance, but total fertiliser still adds up to \$10 a stock unit each year.

Now the pH has risen to between 5.7 and 6, while the Olsen P is between 13 and 15. To get the latter any higher would take an enormous amount of fertiliser to counteract leaching, Rapley says.

"You have to be careful when you fly on fertiliser because if you get a good dump of rain, it will all end up down in the mussel farms."

Rushes over much of the property have been a constant battle for Rapley, who initially attacked them with a rotary slasher before wiping the regrowth with roto wipe. Three months later, seed in the ground was producing a fresh crop of rushes and he is still wiping rushes, though they cover a fraction of the pasture compared with his early days on the farm. He estimates rushes covered about 20% of the pasture 10 years ago.

Breeding cows, combined with fertiliser, did a good job of getting rid of the thatch of pasture that covered the farm for the first five years under Rapley's management, but once that was gone the weight of the cows caused serious pugging in the pakhi soil. It forced a change in policy and the cows were quit in preference to buying in weaners.

So in autumn, 100 mixed-breed heifers calves including Angus and Salers are brought in from Lone Star's Patarau farm on the West Coast of Golden Bay, with the balance of Angus steer calves from Lone Star's Panuki farm on Durville Island.

On arrival, the calves are given a combination drench and copper injections,

which are repeated in September. This year they are also being given Deposol to combat selenium deficiencies.

Through winter, the calves are rotationally grazed and fed balerage as a supplement. The aim is to get as many heifers as possible up to 440kg before the following winter when they are 18 months old. Normally about half achieve the target weight and are trucked south to Alliance's Sockburn plant while the remainder are either sold within the Lonestar group or through sales and agents. Steers need to reach 410kg before heading to the Five Star Feedlot at Ashburton and by winter the farm is stocking only the lighter weaners. To achieve the targets in time, the heifers and steers are run separately and moved every four days on to new pasture throughout the year and during winter will munch through 150 bales of balerage that have been bought in from another Lone Star farm.

Through summer and autumn, Rapley weighs a random sample of cattle once a month and records weight gains up to one kilogram a week. He divides them into different weight brackets so they can be fed accordingly to reach their target.

Between grazing management and overwintering, the native grasses on Quartz Range have been pretty well replaced with ryegrass and clover, and with the thatch gone the grasses are taking up more nutrients so productivity has improved dramatically.

The Perendales are proving a hardy breed in the wet climate and are free of hoof problems, though the sheer volume of water that descends on the farm makes lambing challenging. In the past seven years, rainfall has varied from 3.2m to 5.7m a year and it's not unusual to get a dumping of 16cm in one night.

No amount of breeding will improve lamb's survivability in those conditions, Rapley says, so it comes down to chance at lambing. There can be heavy losses, yet most years still reach about 135% lambs tailed and has been up to 145%. Scanning normally reveals between 170% and 180% and the difference between scanning and tailing is usually the rain, he says.

Ideally, he would lamb earlier in the season before the spring rain set in, but there's little feed available then so he is forced to delay the start of lambing until September 20.

Fertility is quite high and 80% of the ewes get in lamb in the first cycle with the ram, which means lambing is quite condensed. To go to the ram, Rapley has a target of 65kg for the mixed-aged ewes and 60kg for two-tooths. He has put hoggets to the ram in the past but found they struggled to catch up and were being culled as two-tooths, so now prefers to let them continue growing.

Perendale rams go over about 1700 of the ewes including two-tooths, while Suffex rams go over the lighter, remaining ewes. It's a breed that has been tried within the Lone Star system with good yield results.

Until scanning, the 900 mixed-aged ewes in lamb to Perendale rams are run as one mob and moved every three days. When set stocked for lambing, ewes that got in lamb after two cycles are stocked on higher, more exposed paddocks that will have warmed up by the time their lambing dates come around.

Just before lambing, all ewes are set stocked at a rate of 10 sheep a hectare and spread over about 30 paddocks. They will stay in those paddocks until tailing in mid-October, then be mobbed up and rotationally grazed.

Since Lone Star took over the property, the formerly large paddocks have been extensively subdivided and now Rapley



Quartz Range manager Len Rapley, right, and casual employee Chris Smart.

considers 10ha a big paddock.

Two-tooths are mixed with older ewes through lambing and Rapley says he thinks it has a settling effect on the younger ewes.

He checks for cast ewes at lambing, but tries to get through quickly without disrupting flighty Perendales too much.

At weaning, wet dries are drafted off to sell and though Rapley concedes good ewes that lost lambs in atrocious weather will be lost from the mob, it is also a way of getting rid of any problem ewes.

From weaning until the end of June, the ewes are mobbed together and put on a four-day shift around the farm.

During the year the ewes receive a pre-tup drench, ewe guard in September and a campylobacter and toxoplasmosis injection to stop abortion.

While the ewes are rotationally grazed, the ewe hoggets are being break-fed on saved pasture through August and September, when there is little grass growth on the farm. By the time the lambs are weaned in

mid-January, there is ample grass on the farm that will continue through autumn and Rapley says they grow quickly toward the 17kg carcassweight target, with a sizeable percentage finished during March and April. From weaning the lambs are split into four mobs including the replacement ewe lambs and a heavy, medium and light mob for finishing. The heavier-lamb mob is weighed every three weeks and as numbers are drafted off, lambs from the second cut are moved into it.

Every four days the lambs are moved to new pasture to keep their weight gain on track and from weaning they are on a 28-day drenching programme with worm egg count monitored.

Between February and March the lambs are drafted every three weeks and sent off to Alliance's Nelson plant. About two-thirds of the lambs will be finished on Quartz Range and the remainder that have not reached target weights by May are sold to other Lone Star farms that have the ability to finish them through winter.



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