

Craig, Toni & Tabetha McCaskie

Rangiwahia

289 HA

1800 ewes, 550 hoggets, 155 cattle

Dicalcic Phosphate 10%S (0:4:0:10) @ 375kg/ha

Fertiliser can be a confusing topic. What one farmer requires from theirs, is often at odds with another. While many farmers never find true satisfaction, others decide enough is enough, and take a step back to reassess priorities. That is the easiest part, they then have to overcome pressures to stay within the norm, only to wade their way through the many differing products, some that have only been on the market for a handful of years. It's hard, and it takes a special type of farmer. For over forty years Hatuma has dealt with thousands of these self-reliant farmers who have all had the one thing in common – they value the condition of their stock as the number one priority.

Six years ago Craig and Toni McCaskie were in the position of reassessing their farming operation to look for improvement. As far as fertiliser was concerned, they were determined to work it out for themselves. But that approach left them with six different convincing answers and worse off than when they started. "That's when I decided I'd talk to a reliable source who was independent, who had been in the industry a long time, and who had relevant information on overall farm performance at his finger tips," says Craig.

"I asked him what the best farms were using in ways of fertiliser. Straight away he told me dicalcic - if I used that I wouldn't go wrong. He'd already done the research after being amazed at the results for himself on his own block. It came with a warning though. He told me to look out for fert reps arguing there's not enough 'P' in it, pressure to put it on twice as heavy, or people saying it's the same as a mix of lime and super. He told me to take no notice of them, keep my head down and keep using it, and I wouldn't regret it. So I got myself prepared for the flak, and he was right, but I ignored it, and I've continued using it ever since with great results.

We sort of knew what to expect in terms of results though, after already using a small amount a few years prior. A neighbour had ordered more Hatuma dicalcic than he needed so we decided to take it off him and spread it on a paddock out the back we'd recently taken out of scrub. A few months later that paddock was full of white clover. I couldn't believe it because it was usually a really poor area. Now it looked like it had snowed - there was clover everywhere, even in the gullies. However, back then we didn't really think that it had anything to do with the dicalcic, it was just a freak occurrence, and we continued on with our regular fertiliser programme. In hindsight, that was our first experience of dicalcic's potential."

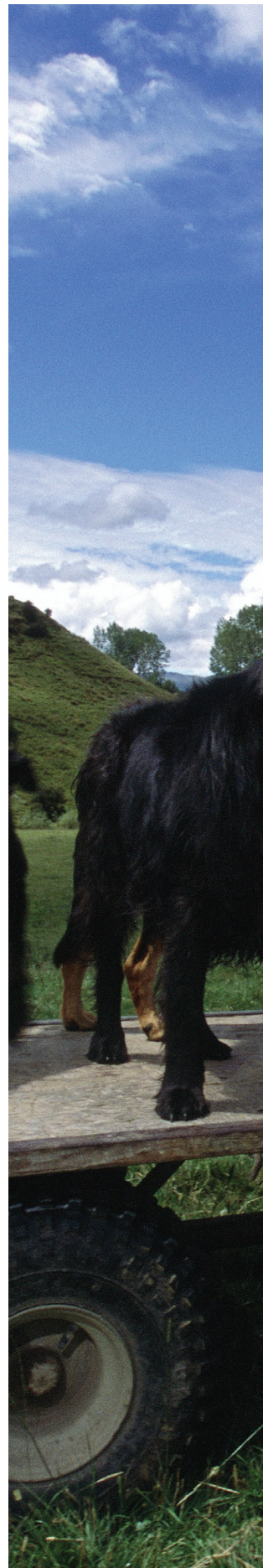
By the first twelve months, Craig and Toni were starting to notice the stock grazing the paddocks more readily. One area had got away on them, causing concern since they had recently dropped cow numbers. But the sheep and

the remaining heifers cleaned it up easily. "The fact I never had to force them to do it, it was really quite amazing. The pasture had obviously become palatable, something which has continued to improve. In fact I'd say that's a huge advantage when using dicalcic. Cows are important for cleaning up the paddocks, but since the sheep now want to eat what's in them, I don't have to rely as much on cattle doing the job. I used to find pressuring the stock into eating was hard on them - to eat out a rough corner they'd have to stay in there for a long time. However, having palatable tucker is so much better for them. I've always believed the farm starts with having edible grass. You can grow as much of it as you like, but if the stock won't eat it, then it's no good to you. You're wasting your time. I'd rather have half the length that they can do on. And this is what's happening here. I had some heifers on short grass, yet they kept getting fat on me, and I'd have to keep drafting them. A neighbour who had their heifers on a lot more grass across the fence, mentioned it didn't look like I had enough tucker, and he was scratching his head - he couldn't believe that they were fattening. But I knew it was the palatability making the difference.

Clover growth on the farm has improved immensely. I can't get over how much of it I've got on my hills. It's everywhere. The general pasture regrowth is as good as anyone else's too. I had some real-estate people have a look around the farm and they were blown away by the pasture and its colour. They just assumed I was putting a heap of fertiliser on to get that amount of clover. I've noticed a lot more earthworms too. Sometimes in the wet we can stamp on the ground and they come up around our feet. You don't see the cow dung sitting around for months on end anymore; thanks to the earthworms they're put back into the natural system very quickly, which is important.

We don't use any nitrogen. I'm not totally against it in small doses as a crutch, but in saying that, I would only use it knowing that the dicalcic has already prepared the soil to minimise any adverse effects. With that in mind, I believe the farm is set up well if the need ever arises.

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► So far though, I haven’t done - a couple of times during the odd hard season I gave it serious consideration, but never went through with it and the stock got through fine. Before I started with dicalcic I gave urea a go, putting it on a few twin paddocks to see what would happen. The grass grew alright, it just took off, but it got away on me, and then it was gone. I figured then it was better to put any extra money into capital fertiliser that was going to give me quality pasture all the time instead of something that drastically changed my pasture management. That’s the difference with dicalcic, it gives the farm a constant, even growth instead of forcing me to fight it all at once, then leave me with a slump. Initially we didn’t think much about dicalcic being non water-soluble, but it definitely means something to us now. As the ‘environmental movement’ starts to gain momentum we are pleased to know we’re already doing something that’s going to complement that. The dicalcic is a long term product, which has got to be good.

When I started using dicalcic, the main appeal to me was the improvement in animal health. If you have strong, healthy stock then you’re half way there. I’d use the more expensive products like superphosphate if I thought they were going to be better for it, but dicalcic does the job well. You can’t compromise stock health. It’s been improving ever since using dicalcic, which means the associated costs have dropped as well. I used to use capsules to get the production but for the last three years I haven’t felt I’ve needed to. The health in the young stock has especially improved. We reared a hundred calves this year and it was amazing how well they did. This year was a chronic year for dags, and I can remember before we started with dicalcic, I’d be dagging ninety-five percent of the ewes. Now they are so much easier to manage. The drop in dags has been quite phenomenal. Definitely nothing like it used to be. I

don’t feel I need to do soil tests because the condition of the stock is most important, and they’re doing well.

My lambing percentage has improved. We were once only docking 100%, so raising that became a primary focus. Amazingly enough, during the February storm a couple of years back I had the best docking ever, 133%. Normally out of 1800 ewes, I’ll draft about 700 to the works at an average of around 16kg. Before dicalcic we hardly got any lambs off mum to the works, which shows how far we’ve come. I’ve also had comments from others saying how few tail-enders I seem to have these days. When we were crutching we always had a big tail-end, but it’s definitely improved.

Some fert reps claim they can do it cheaper, but they aren’t comparing apples with apples. They’ve tried to tell me my ‘P’ levels are going to run out, but my production is getting better and better. Unless you understand dicalcic, you can be fooled into thinking super and lime are the same thing. I’m much more comfortable knowing the two products have had time to react with each other, to be made into something completely different before it’s applied. It now becomes a proper fertiliser, not just the ingredients. The dicalcic also has the advantage of having a neutral pH, which is vital. Sure, people try and tell me it’s more expensive, but it doesn’t work like that, it’s just a mindset. At the application rate we’re using, you wouldn’t get the same results from a lime and super mix. With dicalcic all the phosphate that I apply is getting used, it’s better than applying a product that has twice as much and not work.

The farm has definitely become a less stressful operation. The dicalcic is so simple and it takes care of many things. It’s helped open my eyes to what can be achieved, especially the follow-on from soil health to animal health. I wouldn’t use dicalcic if it didn’t work, but the evidence I’m seeing here tells me it does.”

