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# Phil, Geoff & Roger Alexander

Puketapu

Geoff & Cheryl

Type of operation Sheep and Beef

Years of dicalcic use 7

Size of farm (effective) 410ha

Average rainfall 750ml

2008 product used Hatuma No.9S @ 300kg/ha

Puketapu

Phil & Louise

Type of operation Sheep and Beef

Years of dicalcic use 5

Size of farm (effective) 420ha

Average rainfall 750ml

2007 product used Hatuma No.8S @ 350kg/ha  
(no product applied in 2008)

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**The Alexander name is synonymous with the picturesque settlement of Puketapu, beyond the hills of Taradale. The first of the Alexanders settled their farm here back in the 1920s, and the second generation, Roger, took over when he was twenty. These days his sons, Phil and Geoff have returned to the 840ha property, consequently splitting it in half, and with their families are now managing either side as separate entities. That's not to say they don't work in with each other, quite the opposite. You'll often find them lending one another a hand to assist with the day-to-day running, such as picking lambs, shearing, and docking. It's a reflection of their shared farming philosophies and management style.**





It was Roger who made the initial decision to start using Hatuma's dicalcic on the property. He'd farmed through the 1980s with very little fertiliser, then through the tough times of the 1990s, he applied Hi Grow 767. Seven years ago they began looking for a product that would sweeten the soil and, with a bit of luck, improve the grazing. After making a visit to Hatuma Lime Company they decided to initially try a small amount of dicalcic across the farm at 200kg/ha. From there, Geoff and Phil have continued to use the dicalcic blends at 300kg/ha on their respective properties, although Phil admits he stopped for two years to apply capital rates of superphosphate. But after seeing how Geoff's place continued to have a different appearance and was being grazed better, he's since reverted back to the dicalcic blends.

'When I took over I started re-grassing northerly hills,' says Geoff 'I had giant discs bouncing over the ratstail after it'd been sprayed with high rates of Roundup and it was so hard to break it down. We'd put it into rape for summer then re-grass it for the autumn. It was a very time-consuming and expensive process.

Within a year of using dicalcic we started seeing a change. There were all these new plants germinating through the ratstail. We thought they must've been thistles, but two or three weeks later, we discovered they were clover plants. Where were they coming from? We couldn't work it out. These days the ratstail has disappeared without re-grassing, without spraying, it's died and gone, you can't find it. Now our northerly faces are mainly clover and ryegrass. We've had droughts since, and the ones I spent time and money re-grassing have never responded again, they're some of my worse paddocks now. The ones I've put just dicalcic on are the best by far. They're steep paddocks too, you can't get a tractor on them.'

With the quality came the improved utilisation. 'We could get away with having no cows on the farm now,' says Phil. 'In the 2007 drought we had all the northerly country that had gone to seed and the four and six tooth took it down to nothing, I couldn't believe it. They grazed the whole lot very evenly. It must've been more palatable than normal because in my experience the ewes would eat the southerly faces only and leave the northerly ones alone. Now all the clover goes to the top of the northerly faces, and it's competing with all

the grasses.' The brothers say the dicalcic has made pasture management on the property much easier. They like the thought of not having to take up the previous advice of spending money on extra fencing to force the stock to graze a series of smaller paddocks, and then being committed to the extra cost of re-grassing, and frequent rates of fertiliser.

The entire property is easy care now, a pleasant result for Phil and Geoff. They're assured if they put stock in the paddock, the stock will be happy and content, not stressed with poor-quality feed. 'Quality has always been a priority for us,' says Geoff. 'The fact they graze the whole paddock, that's fantastic. With a very good pasture utilisation I've increased the stocking rate from 1,000 ewes up to 1,400 this year on the same area. I had 170 cows, but dropped them down to 140 during the drought. I haven't replaced them because they're not needed to clean up the paddocks anymore. That can be done by the young stock now - yearlings, two-year-olds, even ewes can go into rank grass and clean it all up, northerly faces included. When it rains it just comes away with high-quality grasses again.'

Phil believes his property has caught up with Geoff's and he's now enjoying experiencing all the same benefits. 'There was a westerly face Dad thought I should work up. It had big clumps of ratstail with nothing growing between, but the dicalcic has made it so palatable and it doesn't clump anymore. I didn't think I'd see anything like it; I thought we'd never get rid of it.'

People used to tell the brothers that it was the dry summer conditions Puketapu is prone to that caused the ratstail to be prolific. It kills the good grasses, they'd tell them, get used to it. They laugh at those comments now and say it's simply not true. Their motorbikes would bounce from clump to clump through the thick areas. These days the hills are smooth and when the conditions are moist, a lovely dark green. They believe it's dicalcic's non-acidic qualities that have changed the composition; put an acid product on and you're bound to attract acid-loving plants such as ratstail. Instead of spending money on any re-grassing in the future, they're convinced applying more dicalcic will achieve a far better result at a fraction of the price.

Geoff believes the clover actually smothers out the ratstail.

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From left: Phil,  
Roger & Geoff  
Alexander



**Above ▲**  
**Geoff and Hatuma**  
**Field Representative,**  
**Bill Nicholson,**  
**discuss the results.**

► It has been a huge learning curve, he says. He didn't know clover leaves could grow so large. A few years ago their property was a case study for a monitoring programme designed to demonstrate how some farms struggle to grow clover on northerly faces. The only solution the experts could come up with was to apply urea to stimulate growth. Without it, they warned, the faces would remain unproductive. But five years later, while clover now grows thick and rampant across the two properties' northerly faces, the site where the monitoring took place has still not recovered from the urea application. They even made the observation the ratstail became more prolific than ever on the northerly faces after urea had been applied.

'We don't put N on anymore, just dicalcic and that's it,' says Phil, a former finalist in the National Young Farmer of the Year. 'Without any over-sowing the clover has come back by itself. We don't always know what the micro-activity is doing but it must be good when you see paddocks respond like that. Even the cowpats are diminishing. We're very relaxed now because we're not chopping and changing from one thing to the next. We didn't apply any top-dressing in 2008 due to the previous year's drought, but you wouldn't know we missed it, it's still working for us. Both 2006 and 2007 were both tough years, so when we did get the autumn, it was unbelievable. The cattle were fantastic, the ewes brilliant, the farm's never looked better, it was great to see it all bounce back like that.'

With the improvements in the pasture, the flow on effect to the stock has been just as satisfactory for the Alexanders. They used to lamb in June to get them away by the first week of November, but that meant they'd be stuck with a period where the ewes and lambs would be competing for the same grass. Now they're lambing in July, yet still getting them away at the same time and at better weights. On Geoff's

property, out of 1,900 lambs, 1,450 were sent straight from their mothers at 19kg average on 30 October. Phil got 1,250 lambs away. They're more than happy with that, Geoff says, 'that's the proof of the dicalcic programme. After one of the worst droughts in Hawke's Bay history in 2007 I sent singles away at 18kg and the twins at 17.6kg. 1,200 lambs off their mothers, 1,800 lambs altogether. That was only because the clover came away in June, by August and September they were eating quality grass. We used to struggle to scan 130% but in the last few years, even with the drought we're scanning 150%, so the scanning rate is climbing. We're docking around 130%. We used to lose bulls and heifers and cows to bloat in September and October in paddocks where I'd used other fertilisers. Since applying the dicalcic I haven't lost one in five years. I can now put them in clover up to my shins and they'll grow like rockets with not a sign of bloat.'

Not surprisingly, the stock health bills have come down. Geoff uses capsules pre-lambing and a combination drench. He's stopped giving the yearlings a copper shot and it doesn't seem to have made a difference, they're still growing well. 'I think the sheep side of our business has really taken off with dicalcic. It has improved the pasture out of sight. That's important to me, because I'm a fat-lamb farmer and I buy in all the ewes. I mouth everything at weaning, and any ewe with a low mouth is killed in November, so they have to be in good condition and killable straight away as that's when they achieve top dollar.'

'We have to get smarter on how we do things,' says Phil. 'A lamb is a lamb, but if the cost structure is better in South America then we're going to be facing pressure here. The challenge then is to make the cost structure of our production system as low as possible and have a great product at the end of it. Sell it as a more pure product. I'm not a big believer in



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Geoff and Cheryl Alexander

‘The future farmer is going to have to think more about sustainability, both economically and environmentally. I think we are future-proofing the farm here. This farm feels good, it looks good, it’s very productive, the feed is far better than what we’ve ever experienced, and it’s a low cost system.’

Phil and Louise Alexander



intensifying production with a whole lot of tiny paddocks all over the place, then having to manage the stock so they graze in rotation when they can do that by themselves. It boils down to the basics - water, fencing, animal health, fertiliser. The harder you try to farm every last stock unit flat out, then the bigger the chance you’ll get caught out big-time. It doesn’t matter where you are in the country; a serious winter on your hands or a drought will tip it up, so you need flexibility in there. I think there’s going to be a backing-off of those intensive systems from the last ten years as farmers discover and become comfortable using other fertiliser regimes. The future farmer is going to have to think more about sustainability, both economically and environmentally. I think we are future-proofing the farm here. This farm feels good, it looks good, it’s very productive, the feed is far better than what we’ve ever experienced, and it’s a low-cost system.

It’s been a great experience over the last four years seeing it happen, because people can get carried away with the nitty gritty elements of the soil, applying capital dressing of things to counteract issues. But we don’t bother with that anymore, we’re on the right track. Farming is a lot more pleasant. In the end, dicalcic is going to be the choice of the future because there’s enough information out there to say that it works. When all the other products become unsustainable through costs and the environment it’s a no-brainer, dicalcic is it. It’s a neutral product to put on the farm.’

‘I think we’re close to achieving very high grazing efficiency here thanks to the dicalcic improving the utilisation of the feed,’ says Geoff. ‘It’s meant I’ve been able to put more stock on. The fertiliser bill is the same, yet I’m physically applying more. Some people in the industry might still say it doesn’t work, but science is finally catching up to support what we’re experiencing. I’m a results person and they’re there. Phenomenal results. Sustainability is a big issue for farming. As far as I can see it, putting on dicalcic is going a long way towards having a sustainable future because you can use this product forever. Other fertilisers have a lot of side effects, they might grow grass, but this causes a lot of other issues in how they treat the soil. If you’re looking after the soil life, it’s going to look after you. The pro-organic people have been saying that for years. Using dicalcic is very close to organic. We’re feeding the soil and the soil is feeding the plants, it’s what’s been happening forever. Droughts in Hawke’s Bay are going to be the biggest management issues as the experts predict it will average 10-15% drier on the East Coast in the future. We’re very prone to droughts in Puketapu. I think the improvement in soil quality is going to help buffer our exposure to them.

The benefits to using dicalcic on the farm, such as improvements in the soil structure and earthworm activity, should be recognised more. If farmers start looking outside of the square and use it they’ll carry on doing so. It’s rewarding, your stock look good, and your farm looks fantastic.’ ■

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Geoff Alexander



‘Since we started using Hatuma’s dicalcic phosphate on the hills we’ve noticed a marked increase in clover on the northerly faces and the ratstail, which was prolific, virtually disappear in just four years of topdressing. Earthworm activity has returned and pastures hold on better in dry spells. The most noticeable improvement has been in grazing patterns. Stock now graze the whole paddock evenly and lambs do much better, particularly the twins. Rough cow tucker has been replaced by high quality feed. Dicalcic really is a breakthrough in the fertiliser industry, and best of all it’s affordable.’

Roger Alexander