

# Holmes

## David & Valmai

PAKARAKA PARTNERSHIP, 480HA – MASTERTON

Eight kilometres out of Masterton sits Pakaraka Partnership – a farm transformed into an immaculate operation where production is high and the humble tree is treasured. Achieved through the vision and endeavour of David and Valmai Holmes, who have farmed here for 24 years, the property has now been recognised as a model of sustainable, effective farming, winning the 2003 Richmond Best Livestock Farm Award.

“We’d been using the dicalcic off and on over the last 25 years – but mainly applying heavy applications of superphosphate. Although the experts told us not to bother, we always applied extra lime to address the pH, as well,” recalls David. “But for the last four years we’ve

gone back to using Hatuma’s dicalcic consistently as a No.8 mix, through a split dressing in autumn and spring. We decided to change back to using the dicalcic permanently because of the better results we get.

Response from the fertiliser this year has been awesome. The clover content is incredible now, with a visible mat of it everywhere on the farm. During the dry seasons, the pasture hangs on longer before being affected. Then, once the rain arrives, it responds quickly and recovers. A pilot mentioned to me once that he could pick the farms that are using dicalcic because of their green appearance. The dicalcic allows for a consistent growth as well – there’s no large burst followed by a slump.



I’m amazed at how many rotations I can get off some paddocks. We don’t have the need for nitrogen here either – it’s a short fix and the long-term retributions counteract the results.

The friability of the soil is amazing now with a vast increase in the number of earthworms. When we dig a fence-post hole we don’t just get one or two, we’re talking many. This also shows in the cowpats breaking down easily.

Stock health improvement is huge, with no problems – even the dagging is nothing like it used to be. We don’t drench as much any more either, although we do use extenders. At the end of the day, the extra costs have dropped, which leaves a much better bottom line.

We fatten everything here, with 5000 lambs fattened annually. Last year 3000 of our lambs averaged 17.2kg by the New Year. We lamb later July (130% lambing), aiming to shift them off early. This is a major benefit to using the dicalcic – the stock do so well off it, we’re able to get them away on time. Years back we would’ve only been getting 13-14kg lambs. Even the employees were surprised to discover just how good stock can do on this sort of country. The lambs have a real bloom to them now.

25-30 years ago we had big paddocks. Once the water scheme came through, we started splitting the paddocks into a series of smaller ones. Now, twenty odd years later, and with 11 stock units per hectare, we’re cutting them in half again to maximise the feed quality. We see the dicalcic playing an important role in achieving this.”

When a wet season in 1977 left Pakaraka with a mass of eroded slips, David began a cause to eliminate any such repeat. What started as a necessity though, has transformed into a passion that David reflects over with great pride – and so he should: Over the last 14 years he has not only planted thousands of poplars throughout the steep gullies of Pakaraka, but 50ha of pine, eucalyptus and macrocarpa have been established, with a QE2 Trust covenant placed on 4.9ha of native bush, plus an extra 2.6ha in the Forest 500 Project. Not to mention the white pine scattered regally over the landscape. “We have to be proactive with agro-forestry.

The beauty of planting trees is a combination of ground stability, shade and shelter, and aesthetic value. When the first settlers here cut away the heavy native bush, they left everything vulnerable. Now, it’s magnificent to see stock on a hot day with shelter.

I believe the most important aspects of farming are: water, quality of grass, trees and shelter. You have to be careful not to be hooked into everything out there. Stick to the basics and do it well,” David concludes.

