



US and NZ couple forge top sharemilking team

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Winning Canterbury sharemilkers Michael and Susie Woodward have progressed in dairy farming alongside Synlait.

They come from different ends of the world and have combined to form a top sharemilking operation, writes Heather Chalmers.

Having the support of corporate dairy farmers Synlait - now Purata Farming- has its advantages, but the winning Canterbury Share Farmers of the Year Michael and Susie Woodward say they have steered their own path.

The couple have spent virtually their entire dairy farming careers at two Purata farms – Robindale at Te Pirita and their present farm Tapatoru near Dunsandel, only a few kilometres from the Synlait factory.

Synlait even played a part in bringing the two together. Originally from a Pukekohe family angora goat farm, Michael (Woody) Woodward's first dairy job was with Synlait Farms. "I enjoyed the large scale of the business as it provided good growth opportunities, so I stayed and grew through the ranks."

From a United States intensive family dairy farm in New York State, milking three times daily, Susie Woodward decided to travel after completing a dairy science degree at Iowa State University. The couple met when she arrived in New Zealand in 2005 to work at Robindale for calf rearing, where Michael was then second-in-charge. They married in 2009 and have three children.

The Woodwards moved from farm manager and contract milking roles to become 50-50 sharemilkers at Tapatoru from the start of the 2014-15 season. At Tapatoru they milk 1000 cows on 297 hectares, with total production this season targeted at 450,000 kilograms of milksolids, up 25,000kg on the previous year.

In 2012, the opportunity arose to buy the main house at Tapatoru, which was being subdivided from the farm. "So we bought the house and 2.5ha block at the end of the road. This was a great opportunity for equity growth and also to settle the family and have a place to call our own.

"We grew up with Synlait so have been privileged to get to know a lot of senior people and people that we have used to help drive our business along," said Michael. "Synlait and now Purata are at the forefront of new technology so we are among the first to see this coming through."

The couple have complementary skills, with Michael concentrating on the day-to-day running of the farm, pasture and staff and Susie on cow breeding, administration, payroll and recruitment.

At a field day on the property, the dairy downturn was regarded as just a bump on the road as the couple continue to

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work towards their goal of becoming majority owners in a family farm by 2020.

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A financial sensitivity analysis by the couple shows that at a payout of \$4.50/kg they can still make a return at budgeted production, but below that they are in the red.

Along with more than half of Synlait Milk's suppliers, the Woodwards receive premium payments, above its current forecast base milk price of \$4.20/kg, for differentiating their milk as part of its Lead with Pride and other special milk programmes. As sharemilkers, this premium is split 50-50 with the farm owners.

While Tapatoru receives a premium of 25c a kilogram of milksolids for being a "Grass Fed" Synlait Milk supplier, it also means the Woodwards are restricted in the type of supplementary feed they can bring on to the

farm. "Grass fed is a system that we love to run," said Michael. "We don't have a grain feeding system in the shed and have never really fed palm kernel expeller anyway. We do give up milk production at the top end, but because of the premium it still stacks up financially.

"The reason we do a lot of feed recording is that with the Grass Fed system we can't order a unit load of palm kernel if we get short. We always need to retain enough surplus silage on farm to ensure we don't have to go onto the open market when prices are high." To be a Grass Fed milk supplier, farmers cannot use any grain or imported feed, ruling out palm kernel and molasses. The Woodwards have stocks of grass baleage, maize silage and straw on-farm as these are allowed.

"We tend to farm on the conservative side and are currently running a 23-day pasture round so we don't get into feed holes. Silage is only used to fill gaps, not push production.

"This year we did drop peak cow numbers by 30, as with the low payout we were quick to cull poorer milking cows. Like everybody else we are pretty tight with numbers."

As a certified Lead with Pride supplier, standard operating procedures have been developed covering everything from stockmanship, husbandry practices, animal health, effluent management, staff recruitment, irrigation, and milking machine and vat hygiene. The programme offers a range of premiums depending on whether suppliers qualified for the gold, gold plus or gold elite standard. "While the premium is not great at 6c a kg/MS for the whole farm, the value is the engagement of the team as the SOP manuals are used for staff training. We don't want robot workers here."

While buying young stock and leasing these to farm owners was a common way to grow equity, the Woodwards took a slightly different approach. Purchasing their first lot of calves in 2009, their intention was to hold on to these. However, when the animals were rising-two-year heifers, market prices were so good they instead opted to sell. To replace these, they then bought a lower-priced herd and proved these could still generate good production on the farm they managed. Herd numbers traded increased from about 230 to 500 as they continued to buy and sell stock each year to make good equity gains.

This meant though, that they only owned 100 rising-two-year heifers as well as calves when they took up their sharemilking role.

Like many sharemilkers starting out, their herd is a mix of everything from purebred jersey to purebred friesian, said Susie. "Our breeding target is a half to three-quarter friesian; black cows with black feet. We want our cows to produce 100 per cent of their liveweight in kilograms of milksolids.

"On our farm in the US, we knew every cow and every calf. To ensure we have the best cows on the farm, record keeping is important. Cows are our main asset and I want to know every cow in order to make the best decisions about which ones to keep and which ones to cull."

Having progressed their career within a corporate structure has helped the Woodwards put procedures in place for issues like staff recruitment and health and safety, but they say it was still up to them to make it work.

"We have always worked with large teams and have developed a consistent process to follow with recruitment," said Susie. "It starts with getting the right people on the farm. You can always teach people skills, but it is much harder to change people's attitudes." A "reasonably thick document" has been developed by the couple that covers clear expectations on staff performance and hopefully eliminates any surprises.

"Quite often people say you are part of a corporate so are well resourced, how can I do it on my own. But a lot of the documents I use are from the DairyNZ website and accessible to everybody. You've just got to get out and look for it or ask other people what they use," she said.

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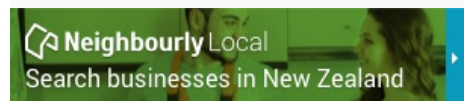
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