

In the peak period, Clearview Dairies on New Zealand's South Island milks 1,500 cows in two milking parlours. Business manager Hans Fikken has been in charge here since 2004 and the Dutch immigrant knows all the key figures off the top of his head, and cherishes his staff.



Dagmar and Hans Fikken: "No one likes being tied to the milking parlour for more than two and a half hours"

His calculator is within hand's reach and Hans Fikken reaches for it regularly. He likes using figures to support what he says. Feeding efficiency, how much dry matter per hectare and non-return percentage: these are key indicators the newcomer to New Zealand has off pat.

It was 11 years ago when Hans Fikken and his wife Dagmar – they met while 'backpacking' in Australia – came to New Zealand. They settled down where they are now, at Rakaia on the South Island, in 2004. They set up Clearview Dairies with New Zealander Stuart Brander and Hans and Dagmar now hold 20% of the business. Clearview Dairies, where Hans is business manager, has 365 hectares in use and milks 1,500 cows at peak times. Hans Fikken shows a drawing of the business. The plots are laid out strikingly straight. All are seven hectares in size: 100m wide and around 700m long. "That's make it easier to irrigate," says Hans. "We have a water permit for 25 years. Without water, you can't milk cows here. We usually irrigate from the end of October until March and it costs 1,000 NZ dollars a day."

The drawing shows other things that are even more remarkably. Clearview Dairies has two milking parlours: a 44 and a 54-stand rotary. Hans explains why. "When we come to sell this business, it's easier to sell 165 hectares with one milking parlour than 400 hectares with one milking parlour. And the cows don't have so far to walk, 650m at most."

He hasn't even stated his most important

reason, though. "We wanted to have a good working environment for our staff. No one likes being tied to the milking parlour for more than two and a half hours."

The Fikken family looks after its staff well. As well as salaries, the staff – three Filipinos and two Sri Lankans – get free accommodation too. The strategy seems to be working – although finding and keeping staff is difficult in New Zealand, the Fikkens don't have many problems. Hans handles the cows himself, with AI and pregnancy detection being done by the staff. Inseminating is done while milking, as is usual in New Zealand. "Milking is milking, and AI is AI. I'm not going to mess up his structure. At first, you want to do everything yourself, but the more responsibility you give them, the better it goes."

Clearview Dairies inseminates twice a

day, unlike most other New Zealand businesses. "With inseminating once a day, you're often too late. After four weeks, we're now getting a non-return percentage of 76%. When time is tight, milking, inseminating and looking at cows comes first."

The cows make their own way to the milking parlour. "With an assembling gate, you get rid of lame cows quicker. For the same reason we don't use dogs to herd the cows in off the land: we're afraid that could cause lameness too. By treating the cows 'calmly' and maintaining the paths well, we keep the percentage of lame cows down to around 1%."

Feeding efficiency

The herd is a mix of Holsteins, Jerseys and crosses between them. On large and black-and-white cows, Hans uses a Jersey sire, and a Holstein sire on small cows



The percentage of lame cows is around 1%

and cross-breeds. He puts the importance of breeding into perspective. "What we need are cows that can turn dry matter into milk. The cross-bred cows are strong and hard and yield well. Our cows yield 450kg of fat and protein, but in genetic terms, they ought to be capable of yielding between 500 and 600kg."

Rakaia aims to produce 670,000kg of fat and protein a year. At an average content of 4.68% fat and 3.73% protein, that means around eight million kilograms of milk. "To us, yield per hectare is more

important than yield per cow. We're getting a yield of 1,860kg of fat and protein per hectare."

Hans picks up his calculator and works his feeding efficiency out. "We add 1,200kg of dry matter per cow to supplements like potatoes, grain and silage. That's five tonnes a hectare. Add the 13.2 tonnes of dry matter from grass, and you get a total of 18.2 tonnes of dry matter per hectare. That means we need 10kg of dry matter for every kilogram of fat and protein we produce."

Grassland management is pivotal in running the business. Hans has trained his staff to carry out 'grassland checks'. "Every 10 days, staff go through each plot and estimates how much dry matter there is per hectare. Then we put that information into the computer so we can calculate how much grass there is for each plot. We can easily see whether we have too little or too much grass. If it's the former, we mow, if it's the second, we add. We also drive across the land every two days to check whether the grass is growing in line with our expectations."

Grass calculations

Hans tries to keep to a 20-day rotation. "We cut out if there is 1,500kg dry matter. Another 50kg dry matter then grows every day, and we cut in again at 2,500kg." Hans shows a spreadsheet on his computer. "Look, average dry matter per hectare is now 2,092kg. On average, the cows are currently consuming 52.2kg of dry matter per hectare, while 48.2kg of dry matter is growing per hectare."

Hans has certainly adjusted his sights since he came to New Zealand.

"I came here with the ultimate aim of owning a business with between 200 and 300 cows. My aim is now far higher than that."

Even stronger, Clearview Dairies is taking over two businesses on June 1, 2008. One has 380 hectares and 1,400 cows, the other 270 hectares and 1,100 cows. Hans is looking forward to this. "I love organising, and I think it'll be nice to be milking more cows straight away."

Inge van Drie

Emigrant Hans Fikken redefines his ambitions in New Zealand

More manager than milker

