

# ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Graeme Blair, left, with Hardeep Singh and Todd Simmons – intensive young stock rearing.

## Anne Lee

anne.lee@nzx.com  
@Cantabannelee

It's just become seriously busy on Dairy Holdings' young stock rearing units as staff start taking delivery of this season's crop of about 9500 calves, swelling the total number of replacements on its four specialist units to close to 17,500 animals.

It's an exercise in logistics of epic proportions but with several years of experience now under their belt the company and its replacement unit managers have developed systems that help smoothly orchestrate the movement and monitoring of multiple mobs of young heifers.

The 520ha Alford Park and 133ha Pinelea are two such young stock units and sit amid dairy and mixed cropping farms near the foothills in Mid-Canterbury.

Alford Park is run by manager Todd Simmons while Pinelea is run by Hardeep (Harry) Singh.

Alford Park has begun taking delivery of the 2250 calves it expects until late December, adding to the 1600 rising two-

year-olds (R2s) it's already carrying.

Pinelea has about 610 calves coming, which will double its stock numbers with 620 R2s already there.

Alford Park's young stock come from 12 of Dairy Holdings' Canterbury dairy farms while Pinelea takes on animals from three of the company's West Coast operations.

Operations manager Graeme Blair says the number of farms and animals can vary depending on changes in management structure on farms.

"We can get changes in the number of farms we have that are sharemilked from time to time so the number of stock the company owns does vary," he says.

The aim is to have deliveries of weaned calves staggered but invariably there are still peak periods when animals from more than one destination turn up on the same day.

Before arrival they'll all be fitted with permanent electronic identification (EID) ear tags and their details transferred over to the heifer rearing units on LIC's Minda animal recording data base.

Todd says calves spend the first 24 hours on the rearing units acclimatising, refilling their bellies and settling in before they're handled.

"We leave them for a day then bring them into the yards, weigh them and check they're at their target weaning weight according to their breed."

That means assigning them to one of three breed groups – Jersey, Friesian-cross or Friesian.

They're run over Gallagher scales with a Technipharm auto drafting system able to read the EID tag and send animals in the right direction.

Graeme says there's been a concerted effort over the past few years to lift the level of communication between the young stock blocks and dairy farms and greater emphasis placed on having the dairy farm operators understand the importance of achieving the target weaning weights.

"We've incentivised them too and if calves don't measure up the guys at the rearing units are fully within their rights not to accept them and send them back," Graeme says.

It doesn't happen often but it can. If it does, the dairy farm operator doesn't receive their bonus and the cost of transporting calves back is borne by their farm.

Typically the rearing units have taken calves up to December 18 and stopped deliveries from then until about January 10 when they restart for tail-enders.

This season there will be no calves accepted after Christmas.

On their first run through the yards, as well as being weighed, the calves are given a health check, a vaccination for pink eye and a 10-in-1 vaccination to protect them from the clostridial infections. The 10-in-1 is followed up with a booster in February along with their first leptospirosis vaccination. They get another leptospirosis shot in March so they're set up to receive that vaccination in autumn each year as older cattle.

They also get a drench to bring them

## FARM FACTS

**Owners:** Dairy Holdings

	Alford Park	Pinelea
Manager	Todd Simmons	Hardeep Singh
Area	520ha	133ha
Calves	2250	610
Rising two-year-olds	1600	620
Weight gain over 18 months	0.6kg/day	0.6kg/day

into line with the structured drenching programme timing.

Calves come in to be drenched every four weeks, using a combination dual pour-on containing abamectin and levamisole to combat both ostertagia and cooperia.

Graeme says it's more expensive but they get better results.

That's alternated with an oral drench to help reduce the chances of developing drench resistance but faecal egg counts are carried out periodically to check for it.

Once they become R2s the drenching regime switches to a standard pour-on and takes place every six weeks.

At the initial weighing calves are assigned to mobs of 200-250 according to breed groups and weights, which means calves from several farms will end up being mixed in together.

Just as the dairy farm managers are incentivised to get calves to weaning weights, the young stock unit managers are also incentivised on weight gain although it's closely targeted at animals at the bottom end.

Calves are weighed and drenched every four weeks and the scales are set so anything under a pre-determined weight for that mob is drafted out.

It means any animals not doing well are quickly picked up and dealt with and can be moved to a new mob for preferential feeding.

The transaction between the dairy farms and the young stock rearing unit is based on weight gain rather than a flat grazing fee per-head per-week.

The rearing unit staff are incentivised to ensure weight gains are achieved and manage the day-to-day grazing operation well.

## Techno-grazing

Accurate pasture allocation and attention to grazing management is essential to ensure young stock are getting

Hardeep Singh – the techno system makes the level of precision possible.

### Target weaning weights by breed

Jersey	75kg
Friesian-cross	85kg
Friesian	95kg

all the highest-quality pasture they need daily to meet growth rate targets.

Todd says they're doing calculations all the time to make sure the growing animals are getting enough.

Maintaining quality is imperative so pasture management is similar to that on a dairy farm.

A pasture walk is done every week and platemeter data put into Minda Land and Feed to create a feed wedge and monitor impending surpluses or deficits.

"We run it just like a dairy farm except there's no cow shed," Todd says.

And instead of milk production, pasture intakes are there to simply drive weight gain and growth.

Pre-graze cover targets are ideally 2700kg drymatter (DM) for calves with R2s able to go into 2900kg DM covers.

If an area is slightly over 2700kg DM the R2s will come in to clean up so that calves aren't pushed at all.

Any paddocks over 3000kg DM are taken out for silage, Hardeep says.

Most of the farm is sown in a diploid ryegrass-white clover mix and quality will suffer if covers get too high.

"If we have the calves in a 7ha paddock and we're half way through it and they've been in there five days with five breaks and it's just taking off in terms of growth rate, we'll just move the calves

elsewhere and put the R2s in there," Todd says.

There can be 20 mobs a day to shift on Alford Park and each mob shift involves three fences being moved – the front fence, back fence and the fence for the next break.

"If we had to use normal reels and standards we'd be there all day just doing that," Todd says.

Instead it takes about two hours a day because Dairy Holdings uses an adaptation of the techno systems developed in Feilding and used when the company ran beef-rearing operations in Tasmania.

Reels are mounted on the front of quad bikes with fittings that wind up the tape or let it out automatically so the farmer doesn't have to get off their bike. Other fittings allow standards to be pulled out and racked on the front of the bike.

Most paddocks are set up with three to four troughs to make small breaks possible and Hardeep uses portable troughs too.

One of the benefits of the intensive grazing management approach is each mob is seen close up every day so any animal health issues are quickly spotted.

The two farms have up to five staff between them with a base team of four on the ground each day.

A weigh calendar is drawn up and they aim to weigh and drench all the mobs within each year group in a week.

"On a good day we can do four mobs in a day," Todd says.

All the weigh data is put up online on a company portal that allows the managers of each dairy farm to view how their young stock are doing at any time.

They're still encouraged to visit so they can see them for themselves although their animals will be scattered amongst mobs.

Graeme says the managers of each young stock rearing unit can also compare the performance of each unit so there's some healthy rivalry when it comes to weight gains.

"We've learnt a lot and altered our systems over the years.

"We've got a better feel for how these farms should be stocked and we've done a lot with feed budgeting and target covers," Graeme says.



Hardeep Singh, left, and Todd Simmons – animals are seen every day with calves weighed every four weeks and R2s every six weeks.

## Mating

All R2s are mated to bulls rather than artificially inseminated.

Graeme says they looked at the costs and benefits of synchronising the heifers for AI but the cost and logistics of it outweighed the benefits given the scale they're dealing with.

The company sources high breeding worth Jersey bulls from farms in the North Island.

They're all fertility-checked and BVD-tested.

Bulls are run with the heifers at a ratio of one bull to 20 heifers for 10 weeks, starting about October 13, so they will calve about a week before the main herds.

Hardeep begins heifer mating a week later than Todd because the West Coast herds calve a week later than their Canterbury counterparts.

The empty rate is about 3%.

Over the next six months the intensive monitoring and feeding system carries on with daily allocations increasing as the animals get older and in-calf heifers require greater intakes to support the growing foetal calf.

The allocations are in line with DairyNZ recommendations for age groups but the intensive monitoring and splitting of animals into weight groups mean these



Hardeep Singh, left, and Todd Simmons – the aim is for young stock to be going into high-quality pasture every day to maximise growth rates.

allocations can be increased for certain mobs and more precisely determined to meet their needs.

Graeme says the weight gain will average 0.6kg/day over the whole time they're on the rearing unit but at times it might be up to 1kg/day.

Just as the arrival of calves can be a hectic time so too are the weeks leading up to their departure.

About 10 days before they're booked on trucks to leave, they are drafted back into mobs according to where they've come from.

Todd says over the 18 months the animals are with them they will be weighed about 16 times. At any time over that period any that fall behind the target

growth rate line will be identified and plans put in place to rectify the drop-off.

Graeme says the results show the intensive monitoring approach does work and over the past few years animals have steadily been getting heavier.

"I think the focus right back from the dairy farm and everything that has to happen to get calves to target weaning weights right through to really watching every young animal intensively while they're here does pay off. We're seeing that." □



To see the techno fencing system in action go to: [youngcountry.farmersweekly.co.nz/?p=5408](http://youngcountry.farmersweekly.co.nz/?p=5408)

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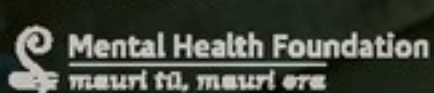
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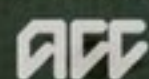


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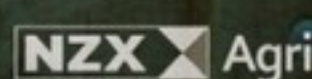
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