



New Zealand dairy companies processed 21.1 billion litres of milk containing 1.90 billion kilograms of milksolids (kg MS). Inset: Dairy NZ Chief Executive Dr Tim Mackle.

Feeling

Richard Loader

Reflecting on his journey as a dairy farmer, Dairy Holdings' sharemilker Gareth Lewis reckons a lot of the lure for him came from being valued by his boss.

"That's what draws you back – if you have a good boss and a good relationship with that person you're always going to want to work for that person and prove yourself."

There's a lot in that. When you feel respected and valued, you just don't want to let your boss down and a wise boss knows that. So they don't just forge positive relationships; they mold them to stand the test of time.

That has certainly been the case for Gareth. Growing up in rural Dunsandel all he wanted to do was be a dairy farmer.

Gareth's father told him he needed to get a trade behind him, letting him leave school at 16 to go farming on that proviso.

Upon leaving school Gareth followed his heart and went to work for Kieran Stone on his Dunsandel farm for a couple of years before wrenching himself away and doing an agricultural engineering apprenticeship for five years.

Every second weekend and annual leave Gareth would be back on Kieran's farm until the draw of the farm became too much and Gareth put his engineers overalls aside and stepped right back into the Redbands and a low order sharemilkers job on Kieran's farm.

That was around 2008, about the same time Gareth met Hayley who came from a sheep farming background and would become his wife.

Gareth had been low order sharemilking for a couple of years when Kieran offered him the opportunity of also sharemilking on his farm next door.

"I threw Haley in the deep-end and she looked after one farm, while I looked after the other, both with staff. We did that for about five years before taking the job with Dairy Holdings in 2013.

In addition to owning the farms we were low order sharemilking on, Kieran was Dairy Holdings' supervisor. I'd said to Kieran that we needed a bigger farm and he showed us Dairy Holdings' Somerton."

And that is why Gareth talks about being valued and the draw that has on you. For 18 years Kieran has not only been Gareth's boss but also his respected mentor.

Located in the little farming district of Seafield on the Ashburton Coast, Somerton encompasses 346 effective hectares of dead flat farmland that has the beach as its neighbour.

While you would be forgiven for thinking of sandy and stony soil being so close to the beach, the farm actually has very good soils that grow good pasture, especially now that it is fully irrigated.

When Gareth and Haley first came to Somerton

Record milksolids production in tough year

The annual New Zealand Dairy Statistics publication just released shows another record year for New Zealand's dairy sector, with total milksolids production at a record high.

The DairyNZ and Livestock Improvement Corporation (LIC) statistics show that in the 2019-20 season, New Zealand dairy companies processed 21.1 billion litres of milk containing 1.90 billion kilograms of milksolids (kg MS). This is a 0.6 percent increase in milksolids from the previous season.

Average milk production per cow also increased from 381 kg MS last season to 385 kg MS this season, while the latest count showed that New Zealand has 4.921 million milking cows – a decrease of 0.5 per cent from the previous season. This is again down significantly from peak cow numbers in 2014/15, which were at over 5 million.

DairyNZ chief executive Dr Tim Mackle says record milksolids production per cow was achieved despite cow numbers continuing to remain relatively stable, as farmers place more focus on cow productivity and environmental efficiency.

"The commitment by our farmers to improve the quality of their herds to drive better productivity and sustainability outcomes is good news," says Dr Mackle.

"While some of our key sectors have been hit hard by Covid-19, our dairy sector has proven extremely resilient through this period of uncertainty and is well-positioned to continue playing a key role in contributing to New Zealand's economy.

"The dairy sector directly employs 50,000 people and earns New Zealand roughly \$20 billion in



LIC Chief Executive Wayne McNee.

exports per year. The success of our dairy farmers is extremely important to every Kiwi and has real benefits for New Zealand."

This year's dairy cow census also showed New Zealand dairy farmers are continuing to draw on a range of tools to ensure their cows are year-on-year more efficient at converting grass into milk.

The number of cows herd tested was the highest on record this year, with a total of 3.689 million cows herd tested – equating to 75 per cent of all cows.

LIC chief executive Wayne McNee says the focus on cow quality is evident in the increasing uptake of herd improvement services.

"Herd testing enables farmers to collect information about individual cows in their herds, and to monitor cow performance and wellbeing so they

can make informed, effective herd management decisions on farm."

Artificial breeding (AB) is another tool used by Kiwi dairy farmers to increase cow productivity. 3.46 million cows were mated to AB in 2019-20, a slight decrease from the previous season.

"This year New Zealand is celebrating 70 years of artificial breeding for the national dairy herd, which has been game-changing for the value we deliver on farm," says Mr McNee.

"Interest in the highest genetic merit animals continues to grow year-on-year, with farmers investing in the latest artificial breeding technologies and indexes that focus on productivity, as well as animal welfare and the environment.

"It's what makes our cows gold medallists when it comes to efficiency and why, despite cow numbers reducing, our cows are more productive than ever.

"New innovations and agritech solutions will continue to play an important role in ensuring that our farmers can breed more productive and profitable cows, while achieving better environmental outcomes and improving herd resilience.

"As we invest more into research into genomics, it is pleasing to see more and more farmers utilising Genomic Sires to create on-farm value. Genomic evaluation allows scientists to evaluate a bull's genetic merit with more accuracy at a younger age.

"LIC expects to complete 1.4 million genomic inseminations throughout the country this year, a growth of over 1 million inseminations in just three seasons."



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valued part of the lure of farming



Gareth and Hayley Lewis have taken advantage of the opportunity to rear Dairy Holdings' surplus heifer calves.

“All our young stock and heifers are grazed in-house – for a sharemilker that’s huge.”

they cashed in on their cows, starting their careers with Dairy Holdings as contract milkers.

Since then they have taken advantage of the opportunity to rear Dairy Holdings' surplus heifer calves, as well as buying dry cows which they put to the bull.

Peak milking 1380 cows, Gareth and Haley are in their first season as full herd-owning sharemilkers, and already have their sights on their next goal.

“Dairy Holdings provides a very good platform for setting yourself up farming in the big wide world, as far as compliance, banking, business skills and dealing with people go,” says Gareth.

“It’s a very good training ground. It’s almost as though they want to set you up so that when you do go out and buy your own farm you’re trained and equipped to do that. And, for high achievers, there’s the ability to build their own herd at their own pace.”

Gareth says the herd owning agreement also provides the benefit of supplied bulls – a significant – saving – and in-house grazing.

“All our young stock and heifers are grazed in-house – for a sharemilker that’s huge. In-house, it’s a good price, it’s all sorted for us and there are no on-going costs. And all our cows are wintered off.”

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