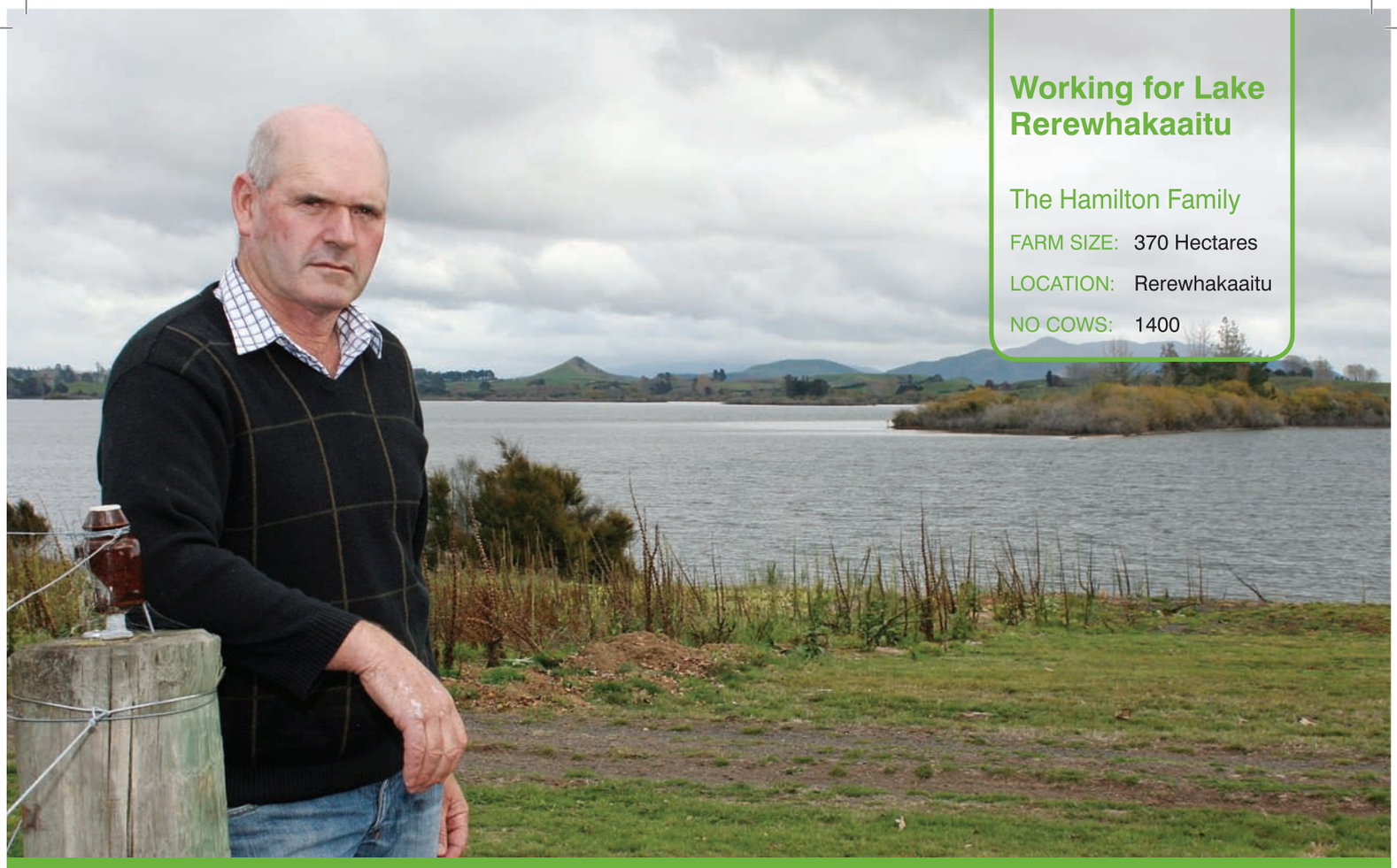

Working for Lake Rerewhakaaitu

The Hamilton Family

FARM SIZE: 370 Hectares

LOCATION: Rerewhakaaitu

NO COWS: 1400

For the love of a lake - and a life

For Trevor and Harriet Hamilton settling at Lake Rerewhakaaitu was both a business and lifestyle decision.

The Hamiltons have only lived at Rerewhakaaitu for 18 months - their home is barely a stone's throw from the Lake's shoreline - a daily reminder that they are among the main guardians of the Lake's health.

Before taking up permanent residence, the couple had absentee farmed a block of land in the catchment for 12 years, so they have long been mindful of the need for careful farm practices to minimise water contamination.

Their decision to live in the Lake Rerewhakaaitu community happened at the same time as their purchase of more land for dairying.

This expansion makes the Hamiltons the largest dairy farmers in the lake area, dairying 370 hectares on two farms at a stocking rate of 3.8 cows per hectare totalling 1,400 cows. The average herd size in the Lake Rerewhakaaitu catchment is about 300 cows at two to three cows per hectare.

Wintering off

The Hamiltons rest their land during winter by wintering off their cows on 132 hectares outside the lake catchment about eight kilometres away.

Wintering off is a farm practice that greatly reduces effluent contamination of groundwater through leaching, particularly during months of low growth and higher rainfall.

Effluent treatment

This year Trevor has invested $1.2 million in a new 60-bay rotary milking shed and has installed a 30-day holding pond for effluent. The pond is completely sealed with liner, a pump and stirrer.

He is also testing the soil types where effluent is being spread to ensure that the rate of spreading and the nutrient value of the effluent are not exceeding the maximum nitrate levels.

"When it comes to distributing effluent around the farm we felt the need to raise the bar and educate our staff on how sensitive the land is around here," Trevor says.

"We know our rates of irrigation. We are putting on nine kilograms of nitrogen and 12 kilograms of phosphate per pass with the irrigator. This gives staff the data on the best areas to run the irrigator," Trevor explains.

Raising the bar

In comparison to other Lake Rerewhakaaitu dairy farmers whose operations are smaller family-owned units, most of which go back at least one generation, the Hamiltons are a larger, corporate dairy farming family company operating under TH Enterprises Limited.

The Rerewhakaaitu farm is one of seven farms the Hamiltons own across

"We have the responsibility to mitigate as much as possible what we do with dairying."

the North and South islands. Their total asset value is around $80 million and they have an annual turnover of two million kilograms of milk solids.

To quash perceptions that bigger is not necessarily better or cleaner, Trevor feels pressure to set an example and 'raise the bar' in farm management practices, effluent control and mitigation of his farming impact on the lake.

"As a result of activities by some large farmers elsewhere in New Zealand, we believe we have to set the bar higher as they (Bay of Plenty Regional Council) will look to us before they target a singular farm," he says.

Project Rerewhakaaitu a great model

Trevor is a relative newcomer on the committee of the Lake Rerewhakaaitu Project and feels a responsibility to contribute.

"This is a great model where the Rerewhakaaitu farmers have said to Environment Bay of Plenty: "we want to work with you as much as possible to get the right outcomes for the Lake rather than have you come to us with regulatory powers."

Another view

Trevor acknowledges the strength of commitment to the project from other farmers but he begs to differ on some mitigation procedures.

"I think the project has focused too much on micro issues," Trevor said. "While much work has been done scientifically on surface water, we have overlooked the macro issues. There are some big things we could do to mitigate a heck of a lot of problems with the Lake."

Trevor suggests these macro issues include use of a nitrate inhibitor for cow urine; getting rid of the broom and gorse growing wild within the Department of Conservation's riparian lake edge (both are legumes and contribute 45 kilograms of nitrogen into the lake annually) and lastly, damming floodwaters from the Mangakino and Awaroa streams and letting the sediment settle to prevent direct inflow into the Lake of phosphate-rich run-off.

Having used EcoN on his South Island farms, Trevor says it is good to have in the 'toolbox' and he would like it built into the project's OVERSEER® model.

Farmers take the lead

Trevor is putting every ounce of energy into ensuring the Lake stays healthy and that his business is not put at risk.

He says the effort must come from the farmers, not from a regional authority regulating what farmers do on their land.

"Dairying is not going away. I am not going away. We have the responsibility to mitigate as much as possible what we do with dairying," he said.

"The last thing I want is to lower my stocking rate or lower my farm inputs as that will affect profitability and productivity. The reason I am buying into the project is because I live by the Lake and I want to dairy farm here for as long as I can."

While this corporate-style farmer has productivity and profitability as priorities, he is quick to point out not a day goes by that he fails to admire the aesthetic value of Lake Rerewhakaaitu lapping at his garden edge.

The beauty and quality of the Lake, says Trevor, is the very reason that he and all those who farm against its shores seek to maintain its quality through the best possible farm management practices.

"We have the buy-in from the farmers because they look at the Lake on a daily basis – it is of huge aesthetic value to them. There is virtually 100 percent (effluent) compliance among the farmers here," Trevor said.

Bay of Plenty Regional Council
Sustainable Farming Fund
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
Te Manatū Ahuwhenua, Ngāherehere
agresearch
DairyNZ