

Working for Lake Rerewhakaaitu

The Sutton Family

FARM SIZE: 95 Hectares

LOCATION: Rerewhakaaitu

NO COWS: 260



Farmers unite to drive project

Chris and Rosemary Sutton have a long history in dairying, starting as sharemilkers in the Waikato. They sold their herd in Putaruru and brought their first 64-hectare farm in Rerewhakaaitu in 1993, amalgamating it with another farm in 1999.

They now farm 95 effective hectares and milk 260 cows on just over one cow per hectare. They winter on the farm but also winter off their young cows.

Relationship with the Lake

Chris says affinity to the Lake is shared by all farmers in Rerewhakaaitu and awareness of the Lake and looking after it is a priority for everyone.

The Sutton's farm is two kilometres from the Lake and is located in the southern catchment where all the water flows into the Lake. The sub-soils of ash pumice and clay means the water permeates the ash and pumice, hits the clay and heads straight to the Lake.

When asked if there is any one silver bullet that sets Lake Rerewhakaaitu apart from other lakes in the region, Chris says there is no single factor but rather a combination of practices that are reaping rewards.

"Most farmers would say there isn't any one thing we can hold up and say this is the cause," Chris explains. "But 85 percent of the farmers in the catchment are doing the right things."

"If we graze properly and treat effluent with best practice then we are farming right. I believe that any farming at higher intensity in this catchment will eventually show up in the streams and Lake water – it's just a matter of wait and see," Chris says.

Project Rerewhakaaitu is a powerful unifying force within the dairying community of the Lake catchment and has inspired a collective drive to work towards a common goal, say the Suttons.

Chris was the initial instigator of Project Rerewhakaaitu in 2003 and looks back with pride on what farmers have achieved in the past seven years as a result of working together.

Chris believes that the key to the project's success has been the will of the farmers to take the lead and drive the project, as opposed to their farm practices being regulated by a local authority.

Asked what he was doing now that he wasn't doing 10 years ago, Chris rattles out a long list – and he says that 95 percent of the farmers within the catchment who have come on board with the project will tell similar stories.

- I use my nutrient budget to minimise the nutrient footprint as best I can, given the climatic variables in a season.
- I have extended the area on which we irrigate our shed effluent from the consented minimum of nine-hectares to spreading over up to 30 hectares. Remember this effluent



"It's a win-win situation where farmers are taking ownership of both the challenge, and the solution," Chris says.

is only 10 percent of the nutrients recorded in the OVERSEER® budget.

- I am now considering run-off from our races and what might enter any valleys during heavy rain events.
- We have fenced off all the main gully that runs through our farm as it is considered sensitive and carried large water flow in heavy rain events. By fencing the valleys we can avoid grazing in wet periods therefore avoiding erosion.

"Bay of Plenty Regional Council has also changed its attitude to dairy farmers and is treating them with greater respect and recognising their on-farm expertise and experiential knowledge base," Chris says.

"Both parties - the Regional Council and the farmers - now know and understand far more about each other's aspirations and needs through having worked closely and openly together without fear of penalty or the possible imposition of nutrient constraints," Chris says.

Project Rerewhakaaitu has been a platform to begin dialogue between the farming community, scientists and Bay of Plenty Regional Council.

"We have all changed slowly," Chris says. "We are all doing things differently now with being pressured.

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Where to from here...

This year, Project Rerewhakaaitu has obtained funding from the Sustainable

Farming Fund and Bay of Plenty Regional Council to assist farmers in putting together their individual farm management plans and then the development of a combined catchment plan.

"Each farmer will work out an environmental plan on their farm, show what mitigations they are putting in place on their farm and what impact they are having on the environment," explains Chris.

"Before we do a whole-of-catchment plan for the Lake, we need to get our own farms in order to ensure they are not adversely affecting the Lake."