Working for Lake Rerewhakaaitu

The Koopal Family

FARM SIZE: 204 Hectares

LOCATION: Rerewhakaaitu

NO COWS: 420

Family has strong connection to lake

Anne and Stewart Koopal have a proud dairying heritage. Three generations of the Koopal family have farmed at Lake Rerewhakaaitu.

Stewart's parents Tjisse and Nancy Koopal emigrated from Holland in 1953 and in 1967 bought a 46-hectare ballot dairy farm right by the Lake. Stewart took over the farm after his father's death in 1973.

Since then the Koopals have steadily increased their dairy holding by purchasing neighbouring farms. They now farm 204 hectares and milk 420 cows alongside their son who is a 25 percent sharemilker.

The farm encompasses the Mangakino and Awaroa streams, so the Koopals sense of guardianship over the Lake and waterways is strong and it has been a family legacy to do so.

The couple's sustainable farming methods, sound nutrient budget, team work and family culture have earned them a Bay of Plenty Regional Council environmental award.

This sustainable culture began with Stewart's dad. Even in the 1960s when many farmers grazed cows right up to the Lake edge and allowed effluent to discharge into the waterways, Stewart's dad was one of the first farmers to build a sump and pump effluent into a tank to spread onto his land.

"We have always had a strong motivation to care for the Lake," Anne says. "We love the Lake. We have brought up our family here and have used the Lake for water skiing, kayaking, swimming and cycling around – and it is so beautiful to look at - we want to keep it as pristine as possible."

But it hasn't always been so. They recall in the late 1960s that Lake Rerewhakaaitu was dirty, smelly and weedy due to farming effluent discharging into it.

The turnaround came in the 1970s with the demand from the Regional Council for farmers to build effluent ponds and also the requirement by the Department of Conservation for farmers to fence off a riparian strip around the entire Lake.

The Koopals lost 5.5 hectares of their land to the riparian strip and would like to see it used productively by growing hay to cut and carry.

This, they say, would be a far better use of the strip than the gorse, broom and blackberry that has been allowed to smother the Lake edge.

"We would be keen to do trials on the strip. Growing grass is one of the best ways to take nutrients away from the Lake," Stewart says.

They would also like wetlands to be developed at the stream mouths to act as a filter for phosphates and nitrates that enter the Lake from the outflows - especially after heavy rain.

"What has struck me is how little everyone knew in the past - including the scientists."

In the past six years the Koopals have decreased their on-farm nutrient levels, particularly the urea rate which they have reduced from 300 units to 180 units a year.

They have also reduced their stocking rate and upgraded their effluent management.

"You soon find out how much your land can take," Stewart says. "The block we purchased in 2005 was 60-hectares with 280 cows. That was four cows to the hectare, so by buying this land we have been able to reduce our stocking rate and by doing that we have helped the Lake."

Keen participants of the Lake Rerewhakaaitu Project, the Koopals say it has given them a better understanding of the level of nutrients the land needs and has highlighted the mistakes of the past.

"In the past we have been putting on far too much (fertiliser)," Stewart says. "But that was what the farm consultants and fertiliser companies told us to do 'put phosphate on and the grass will grow,' they said. Now we have cut back on this considerably - and the grass is still growing."

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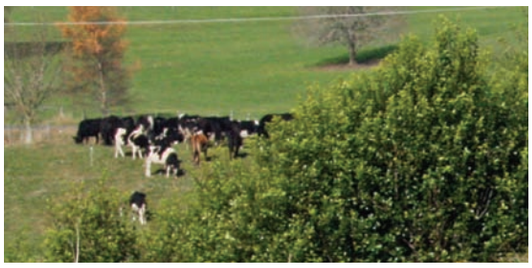
The Koopals are quick to praise the Regional Council in its willingness to work with the Rerewhakaaitu farmers, listen to them and not 'wave a big stick'.

They say the project serves as a great example of how dairy farmers can



continue to farm sustainably without compromising their independence and productivity or relinquishing control over their own destiny.

"And now that we have grandchildren we want the Lake to be kept healthy for them to enjoy."

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