

CASE STUDY: MARK GUSCOTT

Irrigation infrastructure – taking the long term view

Ruth Lavelle talks with Mark Guscott about irrigation development in the Wairarapa.

"Reliable water through irrigation provides us with the certainty we need to make good investment decisions," says Mark Guscott who runs Glen Eden Farm, ten minutes from Martinborough in the Wairarapa.

"My dad put the first pivot on in the early 2000s and I upgraded it and put a second one on six years later. We now irrigate 155ha," explains Mark.

"Reliable water has allowed us to diversify our income to cash cropping and allows us to do more finishing. What we found is that suppliers were coming to us saying, 'can you grow this and can you grow that', and we could, because we knew we could irrigate for certainty of production.

"Simply put, our gross income doubled when we put irrigation in and we now have some form of income all year round."

Glen Eden is a sheep and beef finishing operation and with access to dependable water has diversified into cropping. The farm now produces wheat, barley, peas, maize and specialist seeds like onion and sweetcorn. The Guscotts also run a breeding operation on their hill country property. Irrigation water at Glen Eden is applied to the pasture and crops via two centre pivots.

Diverse production through irrigation has helped buffer any exposure the Guscotts have to the dairy downturn. "Our grain prices are definitely down, but that is why I am thankful we put pivots in – we have diversity and are not reliant on any one thing. It's hard for dairy today, but it's been hard before."

Prior to taking on the farm, Mark worked at BNZ so has a solid understanding of risk and return. He takes a long term view of the farm's prosperity and is keen to invest in the future of Glen Eden.

"We are due for our next strategic review, and it's going to be a bold one. It's an exciting time for agriculture in New Zealand with plenty of opportunity. But it does require upfront cost to get the infrastructure in place."

Mark passionately believes in the importance of investing in technology for the long term benefit of the farm. "Technology is one of the most important developments for farming and as well as our soil moisture monitoring technology, we also recently bought a technologically advanced tractor and are looking at what drones can do to advance our production.

"I am open to change and try to take a long-term approach to the farm. Getting the right people is also part of this. Generally, the industry needs to upgrade the quality of knowledge on-farm, particularly around how to sustainably and efficiently intensify using technology."

The Guscott family has deep roots in farming; the 800ha farm having been in the family for 150 years. The land was originally broken in by an English ancestor who married a local Wairarapa girl. Yet Mark thinks it is important to move with the times. Mark and his wife, Susannah, are now running the farm and raising their three little children (Olivia 9,



Annabelle 7, and Ben 4) here. The kids help with feeding the stock in the cold, bleak winters but summers are spent swimming and playing in the Ruamahanga River which borders part of the farm. The river also supplies water for the farm's irrigation operation via three bores.

Glen Eden is currently consented to take 1.1 cubic meters at 104lt/sec from the river a year, but Mark says they don't use all of their consented take due to efficient water application and comprehensive soil monitoring. "And a spade!" says Mark. The soil monitoring system measures moisture levels via a tape underground and sends data every 15 minutes to Mark's SMART phone. He can then adjust his irrigation accordingly. Ensuring application at the right times also helps keep Mark's energy costs down. To run the pivots costs between \$1.80 and \$2.20 per millilitre applied – a good incentive to save water.

And saving water, thereby protecting the natural resources of the farm, is something Mark believes in more than just saving energy costs. "I firmly believe in looking after our resources – this includes water, land, bush and people. We are privileged to be able to use them and in response we should look after them. I agree that many of us still need to do better at this, but it's certainly moving in the right direction. It wasn't that long ago that farmers were cutting down bush, draining waterways for planting and using resources to get as much out of them – what was that, only 10–15 years ago? Things have changed since then and farmers are massively improving. Again, it's about taking a long term view. I want the farm to keep going for the next 150, the next 500 years and protecting my resources is a huge part of that. Our resources are our assets – and we need to look after them."

Parts of Glen Eden are also in the catchment for one of the proposed sites of the Wairarapa Water Project's storage dams and Mark thinks if it goes ahead it will notably change the region.

"It will be great for the region and I hope it does happen. It's the right idea and again, it's about taking the long term view. I know a lot of groundwork has been done and a lot is being learnt from other schemes developed around the country. Hopefully it will get off the ground."

SMART
IRRIGATION