



Farmer to farmer: Productivity and efficiency tips on farm

Ben Johnson and his wife Ruth 50:50 sharemilk 330 cows on 135 hectares in Southland.

Ben chats to Ballance Nutrient Specialist, **Jess Mackay** about the changes that he's made on farm.

How do you assess soil and pasture health?

"We soil test bi-annually unless we're doing crop ground, then we do these annually as required. We also use production data from the cows to form a bit of a picture of how the farm is doing."

How do you assess pasture performance and approach pasture renewal in your farm system?

"We monitor our growth rates with a plate meter, we assess daily production data from the cows, the protein test in the milk is a very good indicator of what's going on out there. As part of our cropping regime, we pick out the worst affected paddocks, the ones that have been compacted, or perhaps have a bit of pugging, for renewal."

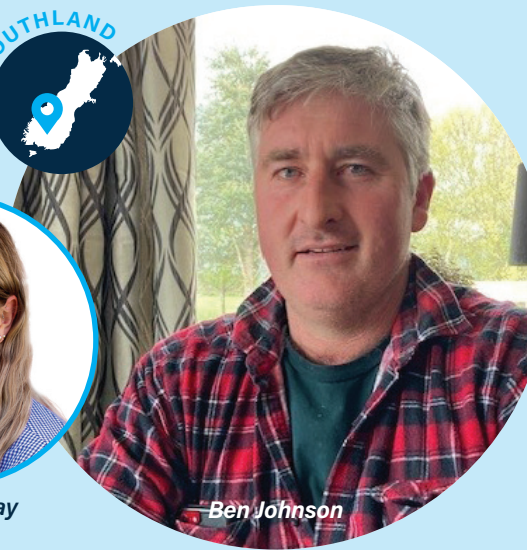
How have you seen your pastures and soils develop over time through good fertiliser and grazing management?

"The primary challenge we face here is soil compaction, and addressing this issue has become a top priority. To help with this, we're going to undertake some soil aeration this summer, once the ground conditions improve and few other jobs are out of the way."

SOUTHLAND



Jess Mackay



Ben Johnson

What are some tips you would offer other farmers?

"I guess that you have to identify your worst performing paddocks. Start from the bottom, fix the cheapest things to fix first and then work from there. The more pasture we can offer the cows, the more efficient our production is."

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Cashflow is looking tight for financial year 2024. How have you managed through tight times before and do you have any advice for others?

"I've found that doing little and often in regards to fertiliser works well for us. Also, making sure that things like soil pH (lime) that are cheap to fix, were the best things to do. I try to prioritise fertiliser based on return on investment; starting with crops first because they deliver the highest dry matter yield and getting them right are critical to the overall farm system, and then the best paddocks with the best quality pastures."

Last year was a strong La Niña weather pattern, while this year is forecast to be the opposite with a strong El Niño. How do you plan for this sort of variability and weather patterns and what are you doing differently?

"On the West Coast, where we're from originally, El Niño usually meant cold wet springs and not very good growth rates and we're experiencing a similar sort of pattern here in Southland, so we plan to have extra dry matter available for the cows. The only way to grow grass is to make the most of soil conditions and ground temperature when you can."

Phosphate, Potassium, Sulphur and Molybdenum nutrients are important for nitrogen fixing legumes. What is your approach with these nutrients?

"Little and often with some of these things seems to be the best plan of attack. You have to prioritise these nutrients. This year, I'm considering splitting our maintenance application. We're seeing growth rates that probably aren't as good as they could be. Just going on my experience and what we've seen in the past with high rainfall springs especially."

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