



Farmer to farmer: Getting the best out of your natural system with a legume first approach

Ben Jaunay is the Ngāi Tahu Dairy Operations Manager. He oversees 9000 cows across 9 dairy farms on 2,700 hectares. He chats to Ballance Corporate Account Manager, Aaron Stafford, about how they use a legume first approach to get the most out of their natural farm system.



Aaron Stafford



Ben Jaunay

Ben also shares their journey improving the pasture health of their ex-forestry farmland through a two-pronged strategy: 1) Fixing pasture fertility and 2) Implementing an intensive re-grassing program, targeting 20% of their farms each year. As Ngāi Tahu Farming enters their fourth year of this strategy, they have seen some phenomenal responses, find out more below.

How do you assess soil and pasture health?

"About two years ago, we started whole farm soil testing with the help of Ballance. This gave us a good picture of what strategically applied fertiliser was actually needed rather than dealing with an average, and to create a two-year plan. Recent tests have shown that we've got our soil fertility to where it needs to be and that this year we can pull back to just maintenance, and continue to perform at a high level!"

How do you use technology on farm?

"We've got variable rate irrigation technology on every pivot, we can put effluent out across our whole farm to evenly spread these valuable nutrients back to the soil. It was quite clear with last year's soil test that particular pivots were getting more than their share of effluent, with really high soil potassium levels in those areas, yet other effluent areas having low soil potassium and needing more K-fertiliser. Our key learning was that we have the opportunity to make even better use of the technology we have at hand, improving the spread of effluent nutrients back to the soil, and in doing so, further reducing our fertiliser use."

What other testing do you do on your farm?

"Two years ago, we herbage tested and identified that we were really low on molybdenum, it was almost non-existent. A subsequent molybdenum application corrected this deficiency. Fast forward two years and we now have a thick swathe of clover."

We've started fixing more nitrogen and growing more grass, we've probably grown the most these farms have ever grown through the autumn and that's due to the re-grassing programme coupled with the targeted fertiliser plan. You can see it; we didn't apply any more nitrogen compared to the years prior, but I think through the extra N-fixing and the increased soil organic matter our farms look healthier and more alive. We're up to about 30-40% clover content in the heat of summer."

Contact your local Ballance Nutrient Specialist to chat about making the most of your nutrient spend.



Do you apply any other nutrients to your land?

"Two years ago, we started applying mushroom compost to every dairy farm every year at 3 tonnes per hectare. It may not sound like a lot, but it's a lot across 2700 hectares. It's had a huge impact."

What keeps you optimistic about the future of dairy farming?

"I think we are the most well positioned farmers in the world to produce the highest quality milk the most efficiently and with the least impact on the environment. We don't always get it all right and we've still got areas to improve on, but it's pretty cool what we're able to do."

Looking ahead, there's been a lot of talk that this year is supposed to be a strong El Niño. Have you planned any changes as a result of this?

"We've made one key change this year, we've pulled our 20% re-grassing program forward to have it all done prior to Christmas. We'll also look at irrigating at higher application rates resulting in better water use efficiency, with 10mm applications to get the water down to deeper depths so that those plants get their roots down a bit further. We've seen some really good results from that. We get hammered by the northwest winds here. So, we could lose that irrigation water pretty quickly if we only applied at 5mm per pass."

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