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AHUWHENUA TROPHY– BNZ MAORI EXCELLENCE IN FARMING AWARDS

Wairoa's Historic Hereheretau Station is Finalist

Hereheretau Station, west of Wairoa, has overcome drought, poor natural soil fertility and rampant blackberry infestation to become one of three finalists in this year's prestigious Ahuwhenua Trophy – BNZ Maori Excellence in Farming Awards.

First farmed in 1922 by the Maori Soldiers' Trust, to assist Maori soldiers returning from World War 1, the historic 2229 hectare property was in need of substantial investment by 1999 when its current administrator, John Paki - the Maori Trustee, decided to implement new strategic directions.

Mr Paki appointed an experienced farm supervisor, Peter McKenzie of Lewis Wright Valuation & Consultancy Ltd, to work alongside him and his representatives (Vince Connolly & Maui Tangohau) and farm manager, Gary Watson. Together they formed 'a very fluid management team'.

"Unlike Maori incorporations which are necessarily answerable to a large number of shareholders, we were able to develop a strategy and make decisions rapidly - even changing them if circumstances demanded. This is a huge advantage in managing Hereheretau", says Peter McKenzie.

Between 2000 and 2004 the team invested heavily in fencing, building dams, upgrading buildings, vehicles and machinery. They also implemented a pasture regeneration programme through forage cropping and embarked on a much needed blackberry control programme.

"We've got Wairoa blackberry plants, toughened by years of goats nibbling on them and it was a big problem. As part of a two-year programme we have sprayed approximately 150 hectares at \$1,300 per hectare. We were really 'buying the farm back' again, but had to be done," says Peter McKenzie.

Hereheretau Station has three permanent employees, including head shepherd Paul Te Aho, who has worked on the property for 15 years. Peter McKenzie describes him as 'the engine of the farm'. Contractors are used for shearing, fencing and blackberry control.

Together the team focused on upgrading stock performance on the property, which is situated on second-class hill country with low natural soil fertility and erosion problems. It currently supports 51 per cent sheep and 49 per cent cattle – almost having achieved the medium term objective of a 50:50 ratio.

The district's generally dry climate and the type of hill country being farmed were the main factors in the design of the farm's business strategy which Peter says is: low input for high output.

"Of the 6700 ewes, 1580 go to a terminal sire and are lambed early in July. Those lambs and ewes go off the property before Christmas when prices are high - a move that also saves labour costs and animal health issues later in the year," he says.

In recent years, Hereheretau has shifted its sheep farming focus from breeding and selling store lambs, to finishing stock, with the bulk going to the works as prime lamb.

A 570 Angus/Hereford cross breeding herd is run, with most progeny being fattened to 300 kgs carcass weight at 2.5 years. This policy is flexible and if drought conditions prevail stock are sold on the spring grass market. To help with this fattening programme, a 110 hectare beef unit has been developed on the easy/rolling country towards the back of the Station.

A secure bull unit (220 bull capacity) has also been developed in the front.

"In a semi-drought area like ours flexibility is strength," Peter says.

Flexibility is also reflected in the Hereheretau governance model. Working on five-year projections the management team reach a consensus about what they want to achieve and set their short and long-term goals accordingly. The proposed business plan is then approved by the Maori Trustee, who is also the deputy chairman of the Maori Soldiers' Trust.

Peter McKenzie says the Hereheretau management team gets huge support from the Maori Trustee and his representatives.

“Everything is debated, but they back us 120 per cent. If things change we can get a decision approved quickly so we have the luxury of responding to changing conditions.”

Over the last five years Hereheretau Station has provided grants totalling \$221,000 to the Maori Soldiers’ Fund and Sir Apirana Ngata Scholarship, which benefits young Maori from all over the country. The education fund became the major recipient of Hereheretau Station profits as its original beneficiaries, (World War One soldiers), gradually passed on.

Conservation values are also important at Hereheretau - 172 hectares of native bush has been fenced off, and gullies have been planted with willows for erosion control and to provide stock with shade. Twenty- four hectares of the ‘harder country’ has been planted in pine trees.

The purchase, four years ago, of a neighbouring farm was another fortuitous move that has provided greater economy of scale to the whole Hereheretau enterprise.

“There’s a huge potential to ‘grow’ the business, and provided it is properly managed and financed, the funding for the Maori Soldiers’ Trust for education will be substantial. It fits our philosophy, which is simply to farm better and smarter with the land we’ve got, and to create a stronger balance sheet, so if opportunities for growth arise Hereheretau is in a position to fund them”, Peter McKenzie says.

The public will have the opportunity to visit Hereheretau Station when a Field Day is held there on 23 April 2009.

The supreme award winner and recipient of 2009 Ahuwhenua Trophy – BNZ Maori Excellence in Farming Award will be announced at a gala dinner in Gisborne on June 19.

BNZ is the Platinum Sponsor for the Award. Gold sponsors are: Te Puni Kokiri AgResearch and Meat & Wool New Zealand. Silver sponsors are PGG Wrightson, and Ballance Agri-Nutrients, and Bronze sponsors are: the Maori Trustee, MAF, Agriculture ITO and BDO Spicers. Other sponsors are: Landcorp, Tohu Wines, AFFCO, Poutama Business Trust and DB Breweries.

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