

Succession plan close to success

A Porangahau farming family is less than 18 months away from owning their family farm. They spoke to **Kate Taylor.**

The wind is starting to pick up as lunch is served on a hot summer's day at Arataura Station.

That's not a good sign for Wade and Helen Stoddart as the farm has so far kept a tinge of green unlike a large swathe of Hawke's Bay.

Arataura's downfall is the wind. "We get the equinox winds in October and March," Wade says.

"But usually not October through to March," Helen adds.

Arataura is as far south as Hawke's Bay goes – half the farm is in the Hawke's Bay Regional Council catchment and the other half in the Horizons region. The main access for the neighbouring property, Tautane, is from Herbertville.

The Stoddarts live 20 minutes from Porangahau, which is where Sophie, 8, and Charlie, 6, go to school. Three-year-old Max is still at home with Helen.

Wade's been back working on the 830ha family farm (715ha effective) for 17 years and has been managing it for his parents Mark and Chris Stoddart for the past 12. Official succession has been marked in the dairies for June 2018, which includes plans for his two brothers, Gray and Sam, and their families.

"They're both on similar-sized farms as well – one next door and one at Mangatorapa. We operate under one cheque book at the moment but we farm separately. Mum and Dad have moved to Porangahau Beach although Dad still works full time on Arataura. He's still a valued part of the day-to-day operations here. After the businesses split hell work between the three blocks as needed."

Mark and Chris bought Arataura 1977 when a third of it was covered with scrub with no woodshed, no house and only seven paddocks.

"It's all developed now with Dad and my grandfather spending winters fencing and summers cutting and pushing out scrub and



Helen and Wade Stoddart on Arataura Station at Porangahau.



Romney cryptorchid sheep on a pasja crop.

turning over paddocks. It was a big development programme to start with.

"Mum and Dad went on to buy another three farms over the years – a total of 2230ha. They scrimped and saved to get three boys into farms. We are lucky they thought about the next generation like that. I only hope we can do it for our kids."

Arataura Station has a large amount of mature native bush and two QEII National Trust covenants – a 5ha block near the house that was covenanted 10 years ago and a 25ha block covenanted three years ago that is one of the longest sections of fenced and QEII-protected coastline in

New Zealand.

"That block is mainly flax and contains the cliffs separating the farm from the sea. There's also another 30ha area of mature bush that has been fenced and retired for about 30 years, including a huge matai that's about 500 years old and towers about two-thirds above the canopy of the other trees."

The couple have been planting 200-400 trees a year, although the survival rates are low because of the wind and summer dry. This has dropped to 150-200 while they spend money on new nowafollow drainage.

The stock ratio on the 715ha (effective) property is 80:20 sheep

to cattle running 9.5 stock units to the hectare.

Romneys are bought from Hildreth Romneys in Hawke's Bay and angus genetics are bought from a mixture of Central Hawke's Bay breeders. They calve 160 angus cows with the top 55 steers sold to Anzco's Five Star Beef feedlot as soon as they're weaned.

"In the past three years they've averaged 284kg off mum and the weaner steers last year netted \$1020," he says, with a glance at his notebook.

For the past three years, 3300 romney ewes have docked 151 per cent (ewes to the ram) with a scanning percentage of 169 per cent without counting triplets. All sheep are killed at Alliance in Dannevirke with 700-800 of the lambs sent off mum before Christmas along with 600 cull ewes that have been put to sutlex rams and lambed three weeks earlier than the main mob.

"Our springs don't really hit until early November so our lambs battle to get underway when a lot

of our mates at Wanstead or wherever have got rid of twice as many. But now we make it up. They're brown as anything and we're still green."

"Touch wood it stays like that," Helen adds quickly.

Wade says they have tried hogget and heifer mating with no real success.

"Our paddocks are too big and we can't fence more because of that ground movement. We found our romneys weren't mature enough early enough. Plus it gives us another class of stock in a year like this. The ewe lambs are out the back and they're getting pinched at the moment."

They've also been breeding for the weaner market for so long the average birthweight is too high even when using low-birthweight bulls.

With the help of Wade's father Mark on the tractor, 15-20 hectares are turned over every year.

"We put in a winter crop such as kestrel kale and swedes to finish the cull ewe lambs, then a summer crop such as pasja for finishing the male lambs then grass. It takes the pressure off the rest of the farm."

Annual fertiliser costs are \$12-\$16 a stock unit.

"Between 250-500kg of sulphur super is applied a year depending on what we can afford, but we never cut back, so it's at least 250kg every year no matter what." The economic farm surplus (EFS) for the past three years, excluding interest, was \$450 a hectare.

Wade and Helen have also been sharefarming another 400ha next door to Arataura for six years with Richard and Jean Kibblewhite. It carries 500-700 dairy cows in winter from three farms in Kumerua, Norsewood and Dannevirke.

"We set stock at two to the hectare with plenty of cover and we clean up with steers once they're gone. They put on at least a condition score while they're here," Helen says.