

More than just a job

Sharemilkers Sam and Jenna Hodsell are in it for the long haul, and that means building resilient and effective farm systems.

Farming isn't just a job for Southlanders Sam and Jenna Hodsell. It's a way of life they want to enjoy for the long haul – and building a resilient business means creating a system that fuels their passion rather than feeling like just another day at work.

As 50:50 sharemilkers, they know that a thriving farm is about more than just production numbers. It's about happy staff, well-cared-for animals, and a profitable business for both them and Sam's parents, Craig and Gaewyn Hodsell, who own the farm. By focusing on resilience, they're ensuring farming stays rewarding – not just for today, but for the future.

"It's doing what you enjoy, doing the basics well, and looking after your people so you have a good team around you," Jenna says.

The farm is fully self-contained. The Hodsells winter-graze their cattle on a support block near the farm, and they use swedes, kale and fodder beet for winter feed.

It's a pasture-based system. The 600-cow herd is run as two separate herds, with the older cows calving on August 5 and the heifers 10 days earlier, running through late October.

The Hodsells say their low stocking rate of about 2.5 cows per hectare helps their farm system remain resilient in the face of climate and milk

price fluctuations. They can maximise the pasture harvested by balancing demand and supply across the entire system, enabling the cows to fully utilise it and consistently achieve grazing targets.

They monitor the pasture with a plate meter at key times and through pasture walks, recording the data in their grazing book, which is then used to create a grazing plan displayed on a wall planner.

By doing regular farm walks they have the information required to make changes to round lengths during crucial periods of higher or lower pasture growth.

With a lower stocking rate, maximising milk production per cow becomes a priority. By observing grazing residuals and animal behaviour, they ensure cow intakes are maximised during peak growth periods by remaining flexible with grazing rotation lengths.

"When there is surplus grass, we're trying to get the cows to harvest that as much as possible," Sam says, "and we usually make 250 bales of baleage through spring."

There are three key strategies they follow throughout the season.

"Until October, we follow the DairyNZ spring rotation planner, and once we're in surplus, we're feeding the cows to appetite as much as we can, so if they're hungry, they'll get shifted on."

Once summer takes hold, they shift to a more formal rotation length, and the diet is topped up with palm kernel extract (PKE) on the exit lane, or silage as required.



A low stocking rate helps keep the Hodsells' system resilient, allowing cows to make the most of available pasture.

"They're on 24-hour grazing, so when we get them in the morning, we can see whether they are going to need any food during the day, and that allows us to make sure they are fully fed at night."

To benchmark their performance, the Hodsells use data from a local accountancy firm and DairyBase. This helps them track their spending and see where they stand before looking at anything new.

They regularly discuss ideas with Sam's parents, who support them in trying new approaches.

"Our mentality is to try new things on the farm each year, to see whether it works, and we carry on with it if it does or drop it if it doesn't," Jenna explains.

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For example, this season, they tried more sexed semen in their artificial breeding programme. In previous years, they experimented with once-a-day (OAD) milking, which led to milking all cows OAD for 10 days post-calving – a change that has positively impacted their reproductive performance.

The Hodsells have a passion for genetics and breeding, and after six seasons of focus, their herd sits

Farm facts:

Location: Taramoa, Southland
Structure: 50:50 Sharemilkers
Effective area: 242ha
Total Area: 296ha
Herd size: 600 cows
System: 2-3
Production: 1,300kgMS/ha
Operating expenses: \$3.42/kgMS*
Operating profit: \$2,022/ha*
GHG emissions: 9.2kgCO₂e/kgMS
 (*for the 2023/24 season)

in the top 5% in New Zealand, with a breeding worth of \$352 and a production worth of \$395. Sam does the artificial insemination himself, and fertility, confirmation and production are the key traits they breed for.

Sam says he gets a lot of satisfaction from seeing the resulting progeny grow into the herd after selecting the bulls.

Another tactic they tried was shifting their two full-time team members from a salary to an hourly rate four years ago.

This change had the biggest impact on engagement, fostering a sense of ownership and boosting staff morale. Not long after, they also brought on another employee, further strengthening the team.

"It's allowed for more flexibility in the system both for the cows and the people involved," Jenna says.

"It's been welcomed by the staff," Sam adds.

"It allows us to treat them more individually and allows the team to work at a level of freedom that they want to.

"It's also taken the pressure off, having an extra person, and I think it's one of the key reasons why we do more milksolids than we used to."



A passion for farming, smart decision making and a long-term mindset are shaping the Hodsell's future in the sector.

Having more people on the farm has freed up Sam's time, allowing for greater attention to detail and the ability to make improved management decisions.

"We're not trying to do anything amazing. We're focusing on doing the basics, really," Sam explains.

When they first started, output was around 290,000 kilograms of milksolids (kgMS), and over the past five years it has steadily increased to a peak of 321,000kgMS.

Last season it dropped to 314,000kgMS after a tough autumn, and this season it is expected to be down again after the tough, wet spring across the region.

Sam says they tried everything they could to get through that period.

"It was pretty challenging.

"Our key decision on the farm was to try to minimise pasture damage because that has the longest-term effect on our season, so our decisions were based on that."

They were feeding PKE and dried distillers grain on the farm's exit lane as they tried to keep their cows fed to maintain body condition.

"At that moment, the financial costs of it didn't matter," he says.

"It was about surviving and looking after the farm and cows. We just had to buy the feed.

"It was the start of the season, and if we didn't look after our animals as well as we could, it would have impacted the rest of the season."

Their low stocking rate and cost-effective system mean they don't chase production with the current high payout.

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Their long-term goal is to own a support block or a high-country farm. To get there, they're steadily building equity through livestock trading, raising extra heifers, and keeping farm costs low while maximising income and production.

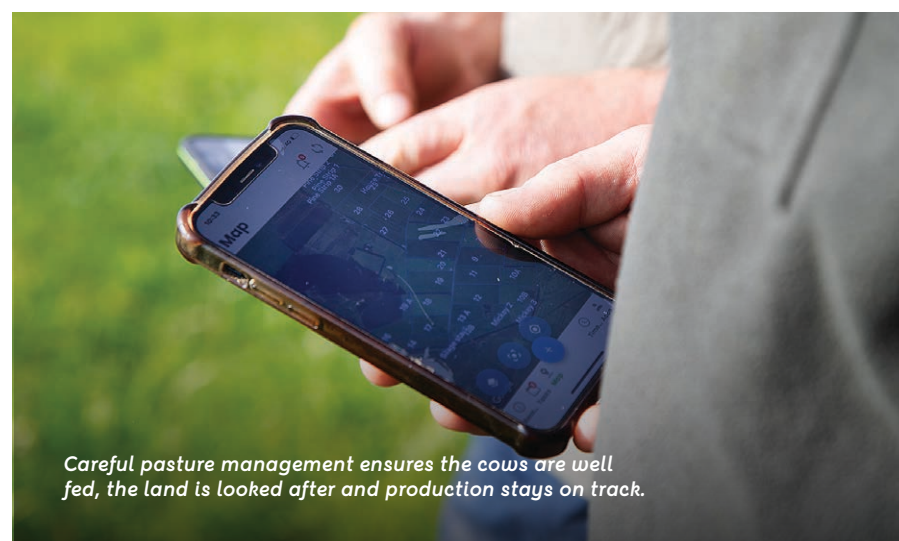
But they are happy accumulating their equity and enjoying their farming lifestyle.

View the Hodsell's farm

Scan to take a quick peek at Sam and Jenna Hodsell's farm.



bit.ly/hodsell-farm



Careful pasture management ensures the cows are well fed, the land is looked after and production stays on track.



Staff engagement is a priority in the Hodsell's business. Switching to hourly wages has boosted morale and given the team more flexibility.