

Dairy Industry Awards

Farming is a family affair

Hugh Stringleman

hugh.stringleman@nzx.com

Northland's Sharemilker/Equity Farmer of the Year, brothers Ian and Tim Douglas, have in three years expanded further than most dairy farmers would in a lifetime.

The pair equity manage the 300ha family farm they are shareholders in, along with their parents, Murray and Marcelle Douglas, at Titoki, near Whangarei. Although not part of the awards entry, the brothers also sharemilk on a 400-cow dairy farm at nearby Matarau.

And with an enormous jump from that springboard, the Douglas family have a Brazilian conversion dairy farm underway in south-west Bahia State, managed by younger brother Rodger. The Douglas brothers have been involved in the Titoki farm's management for as long as they have understood farming, but have only been in the partnership for the past three years. Ian is trained in hotel and restaurant management, and has managed Gordon Ramsay's Melbourne restaurant, as well as being the Northern grand finalist in this year's ANZ Young Farmer of the Year Contest.

Tim is a commercial pilot with experience in Africa and Europe.

Rodger is a Massey-qualified former DairyNZ productivity developer. While at Massey and afterwards he encouraged the development of Brazilian student exchanges and is happy establishing the 100ha irrigated tall fescue farm with over 500 Kiwicross cows supplying the nearby Leche Verde UHT plant, pioneered by the Wallace family. The vision is for five farms and 3500 cows within five years, to expand while Brazil still has to import some of its milk requirements.

Douglas Farms at Titoki is itself an amalgamation of five smaller dairy farms and now runs 950 cows in three herds through a modern 54-bail rotary and older 30-aside herringbone.

The rotary has two associated HerdHomes, a 70m by 30m feedpad and a four-pond effluent system.

Employment is six full-time-equivalents (FTEs) on cow work, including Ian and Tim, plus two casual calf rearers, a maintenance man and a tractor driver.

Ian's partner Rowena is the office administrator and Murray and Marcelle are nearby for relief work and projects. The rotary can milk more than 300 cows an hour with one person getting the cows in (the "cowboy") and one person milking (the "milkman") and automatic cup



Ian, left, and Tim Douglas, Northland Sharemilker/Equity Farmers of the Year on Douglas

removal. Two herds are milked twice daily.

Only half of the total farm area is milked off, the rest containing 200 beef cows, 60ha of plantation forestry and an 18ha lake, which provides irrigation water over 100ha. The combined property spreads 7km north and south and includes considerable Mangakahia River frontage, which regularly floods.

Around 30ha of maize is grown annually using HerdHome and effluent pond waste for nutrients.

The brothers have learned, from their parents and from their own experience, that timing is everything in farming.

"The difference between a good farmer and an average farmer is only two weeks," they said in their awards entry.

The opportunity to go sharemilking at Matarau was the catalyst for the brothers to return home, form ITR Ag (Ian, Tim and Rodger) and buy most of the resident herd and some spare cows from Murray and Marcelle. Ian spends at least a day a week at Matarau with the manager and staff.

"While we enjoyed our occupations very much, they do not offer the equity growth opportunities of dairying, especially with our family access to cash flow and good genetics," Ian said.

He is struck by the contrast between

the Dairy Industry Awards (DIA) and the Young Farmer Contest. Second last year in the Northern regional final and a clear winner this year, Ian puts in weeks of preparation and days of intense physical competition and mental concentration.

For the DIA presentation of the farm management goals, systems and achievements takes place in two hours of monologue, or in the Douglas case duologue, without questioning or feedback.

But whatever the opportunities, the Douglas brothers are great self-starters. They also took out the NDS Fuels Innovation Award, the DairyNZ Human Resources Award, the Ecolab Farm Dairy Hygiene Award, the Honda Farm Safety and Health Award and the Ravensdown Pasture Performance Award.

Runner-ups were Johann and Jemal Guitry, 50:50 sharemilkers at Wellsford who also won the Agriseeds Strategic Planning Award, the LIC Recording and Productivity Award and the Westpac Business Performance Award.

The Federated Farmers Leadership Award went to Cam Hansen and Amy Deal while the Meridian Energy Farm Environment Award went to Andrew and Vicky Booth.