

Cow housing shortens path to farm ownership

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A HERDHOMES structure has got a Waikato couple onto their first farm a lot sooner than expected.

Nacre and Anthony Maiden share-milk 550 cows on 230ha at Tauhei 18km northwest of Gordonton. And on June 1 they will walk onto their own 63ha property two years earlier than planned.

The Maidens have three 200-cow HerdHomes shelters – two completed in August 2010 and a third the following year. Rarely a day passes when one part of the couple's herd isn't in there for a least some portion of the day, Nacre says.

Production has been about 250,000kgMS/year since the HerdHomes were commissioned, allowing the Maidens to keep stock onfarm with only low environmental impacts,

and reducing the uncertainties that arise with the extremes of summer and winter. The wet flat peat soil is extremely susceptible to pugging.

During winter, stock are able to stay largely in the structure, going onto paddocks only to graze pastures down to targeted residual levels before they go back inside.

Proponents of this method of grazing say it allows pastures good recovery times without the costs of regular mechanical harvesting.

Production had jumped 25% purely on the back of better supplement usage, Nacre says. "We fed basically the same amount of supplement but we were able to utilise more of it. It turned up in milk and condition on the cows' backs."

The Maidens have been able to keep down empty rates and vet bills with extensive use of the on-off system. One

of the homes has even been used to hold springing cows at calving.

Cows calve easier in the structure and it helps workers save time as it makes it easy to check on calving cows, divide calved cows from those still springing and deal with any that might be having trouble calving.

"It's handy at night, if we need to calve a cow it's right next to the cowshed so it's easy to walk her there."

Using the on-off system allows the Maidens to extend lactation, says Nacre, and production is relatively stable as a result.

Production hit 259,000kgMS the first year the homes were used and while things have slowed down this season they have already produced 240,000kgMS and are on track for their 250,000kgMS target by the end of the season.

The Maidens' consistently strong



performance as sharemilkers helped convince the banks to take them on, just eight years into their ten-year farm ownership plan.

With no interest in building an empire, the couple were hunting for a 60-100ha property, large enough to be profitable while small enough for a couple to manage – essentially a one-person unit. "This farm is not a stepping stone, we want to stay in Waikato."

In fact, looking for a suitable property turned out to be the most difficult part of the enterprise, says Nacre. "We could have been offfarm every day of the month if we wanted to, looking at property, but we still needed to keep the business running."

Their parents helped out, going to open farm days, eliminating weaker properties from the search. "Anthony's

mum called from one that was listed in the paper as being essentially a flat farm and said that there were paddocks you couldn't mow."

The couple eventually settled on 63ha about 10 minutes west of Te Aroha, Waikato. "It felt like we were able to get our dream farm straight away."

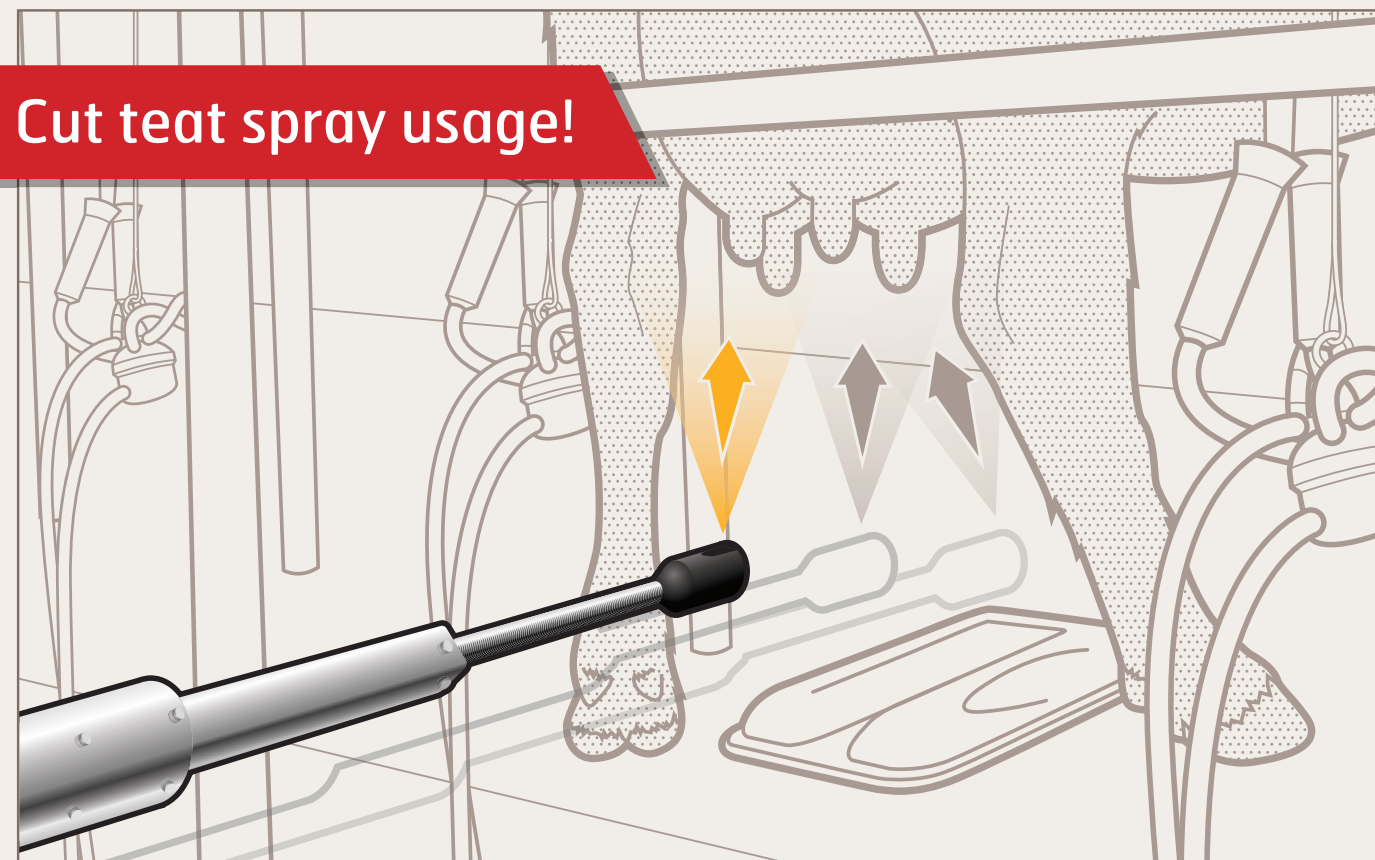
While the home and shed require some work, Nacre says they are thrilled with the property. It is evenly shaped, with no unproductive sidings or weed issues and fertile loam soil.

One of their largest jobs pending is reducing the herd from 560 cows to 200. While they have picked out top performers they still expect reasonable prices for the rest with BW averages of 137, PW averages of 151 and an average annual milk production capacity of 480kgMS.

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