



Andrew Robb's two HerdHomes winter 380 cows and the entire herd of 885 cows is calved in them.

Farming in a fish bowl

Life in the public eye can be challenging, but for West Coast Regional Council chairman and monitor farm owner Andrew Robb it's also been very beneficial. He told **Anne Hardie** the independent monitoring has meant access to vital information.

Farming a monitor farm might be like living in a fish bowl with everyone peering into the nitty gritty of your business, but for Greymouth farmer Andrew Robb it's already paid dividends in production per hectare and he recognises there's still a way to go.

The West Coast has four monitor farms scattered around the district, with an 84 hectare Westport farm milking about 236 cows, one at Ikamatua milking 820 cows on 300ha, another further down the coast at Kowhitirangi milking 295 cows on 130ha and Andrew's Greymouth farm that spreads over 365ha and milks an expanding herd of 885 cows.

February was the time for field days, when farmers like Andrew had their farms scrutinised using the mass of figures collected by DairyNZ including everything from independent weekly pasture monitoring to reproductive and financial key performance indicators.

As chairman of the West Coast Regional

Council, Andrew is used to being in the public eye, but opening up the financial aspects of a business is a whole different ball game.

Andrew and his wife Michelle are majority shareholders in the business with four other shareholders who have developed the farm in the past 12 years from scrubby, neglected land to a humped and hollowed farm that produced 1147kg milksolids (MS)/ha last season. Some of the shareholders work on the farm that lies not far from the outskirts of Greymouth and it has got to the stage of employing an administration manager to handle the compliance requirements, among other administrative work.

The farm is a relatively recent addition to the sponsored monitor farm project and just into its third season of data collection, while the other three farms have six years of information.

"When I was asked to become a monitor farm I was pretty dubious, but the benefit for this farm is the actual monitoring

KEY POINTS

Location: Greymouth, West Coast
Majority shareholders: Andrew and Michelle Robb
Total area: 365ha
Runoff: 145ha
Cows: 885 crossbred
Production: 1147kg milksolids/ha 2013-14.

of pasture and getting really good information for making decisions, and to see those decisions come to fruition in the next year."

In the time it has been a monitor farm, milk production has risen from about 400kg MS/cow to 473kg and much of that is because of the ongoing development work. Much of the farm is made up of Pakihi soils that have an impervious layer that means the water-logged surface turns into bog. In the early stages of its development the farm was humped and hollowed, then regressed which means some of those areas are "just doing okay".

In the past three years, they have begun to flip the worst areas of the farm; digging over the land to bury the impervious top layer and bring the stony soil beneath to the surface to create free-draining



The property has gone from scrubby land to a productive farm.

paddocks. So far, they have flipped 16ha, including 6ha that will be used to winter 60% of the herd this year, which not only provides a firm, dry stand-off area for the cows, but deposits a good dose of manure

Financial KPIs for 2013-14

Farm working expenses	\$4.85/kg MS
Gross farm revenue	\$7.45/kg MS
Operating expenses	\$5.07/kg MS
Operating profit	\$2.38/kg MS
Operating expenses	\$5814/ha
Operating profit	\$2728/ha
Return on dairy assets	9.4%

Farm trends since 2011-12

- ▲ 9% cow numbers
- ▲ 100kg in liveweight/ha
- ▲ 21% in per cow production
- ▲ 32% in per hectare production
- Relatively stable gross farm revenue
- \$6.27/kg MS to \$7.45/kg MS
- Highest operating profit (EFS)/ha: \$2728; lowest \$894
- FWE range: \$4.54 to \$5.17/kg MS

to begin building up organic material on the stony soil. This year they will sow the flipped wintering pads in oats which Andrew says has produced good results on flipped ground elsewhere on the West Coast.

Developing the farm was always going to be a long-term project, so an older digger was bought to flip the land themselves. That helped cut costs to about \$2000/ha before fertiliser and regrassing is added. It still adds up but Andrew says it's money well spent.

"We can triple the growth of those areas by getting it fixed up. The improvement you get off that ground is almost like buying another piece of ground. And it gives us the ability to have a good area to stand the cows off through winter."

For those reasons, Andrew plans to continue flipping small chunks of land despite the lower payout forecast.

"We do focus on our operating costs and it is more evident in a low-payout year. You've got to be careful that you're not focusing just on costs because if you cut the wrong expenses too much, it can actually cost you in the future. It has to be done for the right reasons. We're still a growth farm and to me, dairy farming is a long-term gain rather than a short-term gain."

Andrew estimates the farm has another 20ha that could benefit from major improvement, but once that is completed,

further development will be assessed on the margin between costs and benefits before spending money to get areas to the next level of production.

While the flipped land winters more than half the herd, two HerdHomes erected on the farm five years ago winter the remaining 380 cows, with the entire herd then calved inside and waste solids later spread over the flipped ground to add further organic material to the soil.

Though the primary reason for the HerdHomes is to stand the cows off the wet paddocks and reduce waste of supplementary feed, they also give the farm the option of winter milk. It's a choice for the farm rather than a contract to meet and last season they progressively dried the cows off later to reap more of the higher payout, depending on the calving date and condition of individual cows. This year, Andrew says they might milk 10 days into June if there's enough feed and the cows are still milking well.

Between the HerdHomes and the flipped paddocks, they now have the ability to feed out more supplements without wastage and they make the most of it.

Costs for supplements alone has risen from \$420 to \$675 a cow. Last year the supplements added up to 1291kg a cow, consisting of silage and barley, with all the silage made on the runoff. About 60% of the supplement fed to the cows is silage that Andrew says has been produced

reasonably cheaply. This year a small amount of palm kernel was added into the mix, with a small amount of barley for spring. Next season Andrew has contracted more palm kernel, with barley dependent on the forecast milk payout.

Because of the ongoing development work, the farm working expenses (FWE) are still relatively high – \$4.85/kg MS for the 2013-14 season – while its gross farm revenue rose from \$6.27/kg MS for the 2012-13 season to \$7.45/kg MS last season.

One of the goals now is to manage supplementary feed inputs and costs, while continuing to increase the amount of pasture and crop eaten by the herd. Last season, monitoring showed 10.1 tonnes/ha of pasture and 3.1t/ha of supplement was eaten, an increase of 15% in total feed. Next season Andrew intends lifting cow numbers by 60-70 cows at the peak to utilise more of the pasture grown on the farm.

He also wants to grow more pasture on the humped and hollowed ground. Some of it was left a bit lacking in topsoil on top of the humps when it was first recontoured, so now they're trying to rectify those areas to encourage better grass growth.

"It's almost like pot-holing, but on a large scale."

A challenge for most farms on the West Coast is the high rainfall and last spring was particularly wet, forcing Andrew to keep the cows off the paddocks far more than usual, and impacting on pasture management. Normally he would be pre-

mowing paddocks for pasture quality, but that was out of the question last spring.

"It's not an easy farm for topping because of the humping and hollowing. We had to go quite deep to get to gravel and still have quite a bit of clay, so parts of it still get quite wet and when you have slope and wet, it's not that easy to drive a tractor on it."

'We can triple the growth of those areas by getting it fixed up. The improvement you get off that ground is almost like buying another piece of ground.'

Wet weather is more of a problem than summer dry and the only time irrigation would have helped was during the nationwide drought of 2012-13. Andrew says there's little point in investing money in a once-in-20-year event, and the farm's topsoil continues to build up helping the pasture to hold out longer during drier periods, he says.

A significant achievement has been the improvement in reproduction. The first

three weeks of calving have risen from 56% to 75% and the six-week in-calf rate has reached 78%. First calvers starting their second lactation have lifted considerably to 87% and the overall in-calf rate for the herd is 92%.

Andrew points out, however, that the heifers were mated a week earlier which will have skewed the figures.

It's still a significant improvement that has been achieved through attention to detail, including touching up tail paint in the dairy every day during the artificial insemination period and identifying those cows in heat. Andrew spent three weeks in the dairy this year doing just that and training staff for the job, rather than spending time in the paddock looking for the cows in heat.

They're also vigilant with post-calving management and this year metri-checked which led to treating about a dozen cows, though Andrew says the biggest factor for in-calf improvement has been feeding the cows well.

"We condition score them four weeks out from mating and make sure those who are pumping it and taking it off their backs are well looked after. The lighter mob might get two-thirds of the paddock and the others go in and get the rest of it. And the lightest 120 cows still get fed grain.

"With the heifers, we're just growing them out better and getting them at a better size at calving. I do focus on young cows because I hate seeing them go out the door."



Challenging supplementary feeding

One of the goals of the monitor farm project is to use the data collected to establish trends that can then be used for decision making on those farms and other farms in the district.

DairyNZ senior scientist Dawn Dalley says the key with the monitor farms is to look at trends over time, which is starting to happen because data has now been collected for six years on three of the farms.

Information is collected each week from pasture walks with a platometer, using the same person for all the farms to get consistency. The results are used to estimate how much pasture has been eaten to produce the milksolids.

Figures for the monitor farms can't be compared against each other because each is at a different stage of development, has different financial years and different challenges. However, much can be gleaned

from six years of information on pasture growth rates for each month, drymatter percentage, monthly metabolisable energy, the trends in supplementary feeding and what that is costing each farmer.

The increased use of supplementary feed is a trend that DairyNZ consulting officer Ross Bishop says could be questioned, given that most farmers are also growing more drymatter.

"All farmers have increased their annual drymatter production and increased the use of imported supplements. There's a challenge for farmers who have embarked on that course to find out why they've done that."

Ross says many farmers he works with on the West Coast have been captured by the concept of bringing in extra feed to boost production and as a result, pasture utilisation rates have dropped.

"Yes, there may have been an increase in production – or not – but it has been at the expense of utilising the home-grown forage which is the cheapest feed available. And it is incurring additional cost which may or may not have been covered by the extra production which will be payout dependent."

Extra feed will have benefits such as increasing body condition score, but he questions the reasoning and decision-making.

"What the monitor farm project has shown is that at all stages of the season that the milking feed is analysed, the energy content and composition of the pasture is sufficient for all production and maintenance requirements. So why do we need the imported feed? Why aren't we able to make better use of the home-grown forage that is produced?"