

A Walton family is working to promote sustainable dairying practices. Gerald Piddock reports.

David and Raewyn Bennett want to be an example to others in the dairy industry.

That means running a business that is profitable, sustainable and always improving.

It is also why Raewyn agreed to participate in the Dairy Environment Leaders Forum, which was in Wellington in December last year.

Now in its seventh year, the forum's aim is to use the skills and standing of participants in their communities and speed up positive change in the dairy industry.

"I'm interested in what's happening with farming and the environmental side of it," she said. "We want to have a good sustainable farm."

The central message from the forum was creating dairy farming leaders who would play a positive role in the industry.

That meant trying to change some industry perceptions held by urban people.

Raewyn recommended the forum to other dairy farmers.

"The calibre of speakers was really high and it was really good to listen to these people. You learn a lot off the farmers you meet as well."

The speakers at the forum also encouraged farmers to get involved early in issues that affect their industry so they would have more say on final outcomes. Farmers often sat on the sidelines until it was too late then wanted their voices heard, she said.

Farmers often saw investing money in environmental protection as money taken away from the bottom line, David said.

"If the forum can promote farmers that are really profitable, and are also spending quite a bit of money on the environmental side then other farmers will accept that as good business. That's the key." But it also means being profit driven.

"Being profitable means you can afford to be sustainable," David said.

The cliché of having to be in the black before a farmer could be



Key part: Walton dairy farmers David and Raewyn Bennett want to play a positive role in the dairy industry.

Setting an example

in the green still rang true, particularly when the dairy payout dropped.

In these circumstances it meant planning the big changes for when the milk price was high and making small and affordable differences, he said.

"Some things like building a bigger [effluent] pond that you take out of your cashflow, you wouldn't be able to do that during a low payout, but the next year when the payout's up, you can," Raewyn said.

For the Bennetts, that meant

leading by example in their dairy business at Benlee Farms near Walton, which is about 18 kilometres from Morrinsville. The pair, with their son Jeremy and his wife Lucy, had always invested large sums of money in environmental improvements.

Benlee is also a family business. Jeremy is the operations manager on both farms and he and Lucy own shares in the farms. Their second son Jonathan also works for the business and they employ seven other staff on the two farms.

A year ago, they added a 6-million-litre lined pond to their effluent system, which already had two ponds and a solids separator which removes the solids from the effluent. The liquids go to the ponds and are then sprayed on to pasture and their lucerne and maize crops. The solids are spread on crops and pasture that don't receive liquid effluent.

They are also building four herd home shelters on the 282-hectare home block to go with the single home built last year on

their second smaller 150ha farm a few kilometres away.

These new herd home shelters are due to be finished in mid May.

The \$2 million investment will allow them to catch the bulk of the effluent from their herd by letting the effluent fall through the slates in the floor of the homes into a pit. The urine then drains off to their effluent system where it is eventually spread back on to paddocks and their

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Full on: The Bennetts milk 1200 cows year round on their 282ha farm near Walton.

Running two farms

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crops. "With the herd home shelters, because everything's stored under the floor, we can spread the effluent when the crops are sowed, harvested and ground conditions allow," David said.

They maintain that it is possible to farm sustainably while operating a high stocking rate and high input system.

The farm's rolling land means the Bennetts have to be careful where they spread the effluent to avoid it running down into gullies or waterways.

The herd home shelters replace their concrete feed pad and bark standoff pad that were costly and highly labour intensive.

The cows will still spend 80 to 90 per cent of their time on pasture.

They understood the negative perceptions of this type of farming, but believed the investment made economic and environmental sense.

The homes will run on the same concept as a feedpad. The cows are out on pasture and come into the homes for milking.

If it is very wet or hot, they will bring the cows in early. In a drought the cows could stay in the shelters to prevent heat stress.

David said studies showed that cows preferred lower temperatures and liked to be in the shade when it was hot.

"They run to get into them because they know it's a nice environment to be in."

It was easier on the cows' feet as over time hardened effluent that didn't fall through the slates formed a soft mat for the cows to stand on.

The two farms run in conjunction, milking 1200 cows on the home farm and 280 on the second block. It is a high input system where the cows are milked all year round.

The second farm always calves in autumn while they split the calving between autumn and September on the home farm.

Pasture is the cornerstone of their feed system and Jeremy carefully monitors pasture growth, quality and is flexible with how much supplement they feed out.

"It plays a huge part," David said. "We grow as much pasture as we can and harvest as much as we can, it's a much more flexible option."

The supplements they feed to the cows include maize, lucerne, potatoes and palm kernel, all from the feedpad.

They run the cows on the home block into three herds that are at different stages of lactation. At the top is their elite high performing herd that is given the best feed to produce the most milk.

Next is a middle herd and then the low producing herd – mostly cows at the end of their lactation.

The milk flow of the elite herd is monitored weekly and any cows that do not meet the required production go to the second herd.

David said this latest project would be the last big capital expenditure on the farm for now. But it would not stop them looking at ways to improve.

"We're always looking to make improvements and make little tweaks."



Going up: Work continues on the Bennetts' new herd homes. The Bennetts are building four of the homes on their 282ha farm.

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