

HerdHome helps create a resilient farm system for Walton dairy farmers

Warwick and Adrienne Wilcock talk about their journey to establish a resilient farm business, Gerald Pidcock writes.

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GERALD PIDDOCK/STUFF

Walton dairy farmers Warwick and Adrienne Wilcock have transformed their farm from a low-input operation to a more intensive farm that uses a HerdHome while reducing their nitrogen footprint.

Warwick Wilcock remembers the moment he and wife Adrienne decided to invest in a barn for their cows.

It was 2012, and they were struggling through a difficult, wet spring.

"Some afternoons you get the cows out and you just had to shut your eyes. I remember saying to Adrienne, 'we can't keep doing this, it's not sustainable'."



GERALD PIDDOCK/STUFF

Warwick and Adrienne Wilcock milk 465 cows split into two herds on their 156ha farm near Walton.

It was, he says, "the straw that broke the camel's back".

Neighbouring farmer Rex Butterworth was having similar struggles and had decided to install a HerdHome.



GERALD PIDDOCK/STUFF

Warwick and Adrienne Wilcock built their HerdHome in 2014 and plan to build a second Home beside it this winter.

"I thought that's great, he can be our guinea pig. We would wait and see how his goes. You could see very early on in the piece how good they were," Warwick says.

With two years they had built their own HerdHome. It changed their business, he told about 60 farmers at a Matamata Piako Three Rivers Trust field day held on their farm.

Before its construction, the Wilcocks' farm was a low-input system. It suited their lifestyle and gave them the time to take part in their community, which was important to them both.



GERALD PIDDOCK/STUFF

Warwick and Adrienne Wilcock recently hosted about 60 farmers at a field day on their property where they outlined why they built a HerdHome.

It meant that farming often came second at times, he says.

"For the last 30 years that has been very important to us and we have raised three children that are now adults."

But it left them heavily exposed to the vagaries of the season, particularly to the summer dry and as a result the herd was usually dried off in April.

Today's dairy industry is a lot more volatile than 30 years ago and farming has progressed from a lifestyle to a business that is now using science and technology more than it used to. The HerdHome built resilience in their system and the couple say they can now withstand whatever the season throws at them.

Adrienne says the capital investment of the HerdHome offered seasonal solutions, it was a good opportunity."

Warwick says they chose the HerdHome over other stand-off facilities because it ticked so many boxes around water use efficiency and ease of use.

This season their farm is milking 465 Friesian cows split into two herds on a 148ha milking platform. Since the HerdHome was built, the farm has shifted from a System 2 to a System 4 operation, using maize and grass silage, the bulk of which is grown on a 72ha support block 12 kilometres away.

Effluent from the HerdHome falls through the floor's grate system and is collected in a sump. Twice a year it is then stirred and pumped out to be used as fertiliser on the maize paddocks.

Warwick and his staff feed out a maize silage mix in the HerdHome and the herds come in one after the other to feed - the younger herd comes in straight after morning milking, the older cows come in next around midday.

Sometimes he lets them into the Home earlier if they are anxious.

"Cows have body language too, and if they are standing by the gate at 11am, they're not happy."

He then sweeps up any feed missed by the cows to make sure it is all properly utilised.

Plans are underway to build a second HerdHome this year to sit beside the existing one to ease labour intensity and provide both herds with shelter during weather extremes.

The shelter has improved the condition of their cows, as well as reduced paddock damage in wet weather and their chemical fertiliser usage because they can more easily recycle the effluent collected from the Home.

Waikato Regional Council data shows that using an animal shelter can lower nitrogen leaching by 2kgN/ha/year. Building a second shelter reduces that N leaching rate by an estimated further 2kg when modelled on a 440-cow farm milking 155,000kg of milksolids.

Warwick says it has improved the herd's efficiency.

"We are not only reducing the amount of N, but we are increasing the amount of milk we are getting."

He says they have a growing awareness of their environmental footprint and are part of the Farmer Engagement Group tasked with working with the Waikato Regional Council over the proposed Plan Change 2.

"We recognise the importance of being at the table rather than being on the outside and to be part of the solution."

The Home has allowed them to keep their milk production stable at over 180,000kgMS since 2013-14. Growing their own maize instead of buying in feed has helped keep expenses in check, Warwick says.

Their farm working expenses have been around \$3.50/kgMS produced since 2011. In comparison, the average FWE in New Zealand is \$4.65/kgMS.

The Wilcocks have steadily increased the amount of maize grown over the years to 12ha grown on the lease block while about 3.5ha is grown on the home block. Warwick also cut and carries grass silage from the support block if there is a surplus.

About 200 tonnes of palm kernel is also used and mixed in with the maize silage. This season they have supplemented the herd's diet with maize all year round, feeding out grass silage when the maize ran out.

Looking to the future, Warwick says he plans to reduce the herd's grass silage consumption while lifting the amount of maize grown and eaten.

This season he fed maize to the heifer herd before calving for the first time. It improved their condition and reduced their empty rate from a "horrendous" 19 per cent last season to 10 per cent this year.

While he is aware there is no science to support it, Warwick is convinced the maize played a major role in that turnaround.

The HerdHome has meant increasing their staff numbers from one to three, using an 11-days-on-three-days-off work roster and a salary package that reflects the staff house's rental value.

"We have always prided ourselves on our houses and we were always of the opinion that if we weren't prepared to live in them, why should anybody else," Warwick says.

Adrienne says their biggest opportunity is their runoff because they have control over their costs and having that supplementary feed helped plug those gaps.

They have also faced challenges. They entered into an equity partnership in Southland just prior to the GFC and exited after an unsuccessful five years.

They also had a severe outbreak of the parasite neospora caninum in their heifers in 2011, causing a 50 per cent empty rate among their heifers and they had to buy in cows to supplement their numbers.

The following year, one of their farm houses was destroyed in a fire and had to be replaced.

Adrienne says the neospora outbreak was demoralising. They had 117 heifers, of which 11 were scanned in-calf in February. By June 1, 59 were left in-calf.

"That sucks but you just have to put your big-girl undies on, or grow some balls and carry on. And have a sense of humour."

They plan to take a step back in the next few seasons and maybe bring in a lower-order sharemilker while concentrating on further developing the support block.

Adrienne says they will also fence off some of the lease block's steeper areas and plant some trees there. That will improve the productivity of that block with the flow-on effects coming back to the home farm, she says.

- Stuff