

Stock

Increasing their options

Burd Rd, Oropi, Bay of Plenty



Dairy farmers Shaun and Fiona Kehely have tried various things in their drive to improve production. They say two HerdHomes they have built are already saving them time, effort and money but, as they tell **Sheryl Brown**, they have installed their own stall and drainage systems to make things even better for the cows and the environment.

An average annual rainfall of more than 250cm allowed Shaun and Fiona Kehely to milk through the drought without having to feed out any extra supplements on their Bay of Plenty farm.

But getting through the winter with 1100 cows is another story and this year they have two 90m long HerdHomes to help them.

Oropi Bushlands is a 900ha family-run company which leases steep land in the area. Shaun and Fiona farm a 430ha milking platform and had been looking at options to make it a more productive enterprise after trying once a day milking then a 16-hour milking interval.

The decision to build two HerdHomes side by side is already paying off, with the recent rain and cold fronts justifying their decision.

The cows' energy was put into milk production or body condition rather than keeping warm, Fiona says.

"The cows are also eating less because they are not walking as far."

And she and Shaun aren't losing sleep over cows pugging up paddocks and destroying pastures.

The return on investment is making itself obvious on the bottom line because they are already saving \$2000/month on fuel plus a wagon-load of silage/day as well as the four to six hours it used to take to feed out. Without tractors being driven all over the farm their races are also in better condition.

"The HerdHomes have increased the choices for the farm because we are not limited by weather or the seasons any more."

The couple at peak will be milking 900 cows with a goal to produce 300,000kg milksolids (MS) this season.

They have supplied Open Country Dairy for five years and are in its top payout bracket. They receive a premium for their winter milk as well as another for their high protein ratios which are 5-6% above the average supplier.

OCD milk supply manager Matt Young says they are clipping the ticket all the way along by maximising the firm's unique payout system.

Their cows are split into three small herds throughout the year, including winter milkers and two spring mobs with three vats and three supply numbers. Their four Filipino staff are responsible for their own herd which drives competition to get the most production.

The HerdHomes were originally installed with one rail down the middle in the sand which is the driest and warmest part of the shelter.

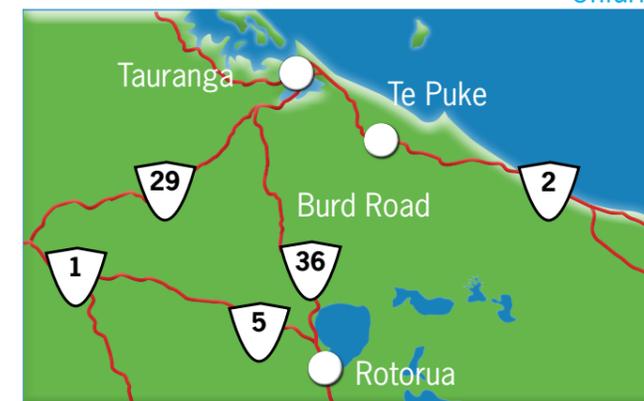
The hope was the cows would stand along each side of the rail as if they were in a herringbone but they ended up just walking up and down the sand.

Shaun and Fiona went to plan B and installed wooden rails to make individual stalls for 140 cows in each HerdHome. The stalls aren't concreted in so they can be removed or changed at any time.

"At night 80% are sitting down in the stalls after only two weeks," Shaun says.

"That will only increase. I think it will take them a few months to really get the hang of it."

Because the cows are sitting on the sand they arrive in the dairy with clean udders but Shaun is thinking of putting a rail on the ground to shift the cows backwards a few centimetres so their manure will go straight through the shed's slats and into the bunker underneath, making less mess.



Location: Burd Rd, Oropi, Bay of Plenty

Owners: Oropi Bushlands

Managers: Shaun and Fiona Kehely

Area: 430ha

Cows: 1100

Production: 230,000kg milksolids from 750 cows in 2012-13 season.



Shaun and Fiona Kehely.



The end of the road – two HerdHomes 90m long.

A unique addition to the HerdHomes is a drainage system that captures urine from the bunkers and directs it to their effluent pond.

There's more urine coming out than they had estimated at about 2000l/day from a mob of 470 cows so they will have to monitor the effluent to ensure urine levels aren't too strong to apply directly to pasture.

'The cows are also eating less because they are not walking as far.'

The bonus is that is by separating out the urine this increases the storage capacity of the HerdHomes bunkers and hopefully they won't need to be emptied so often.

The cost to build a HerdHome sits between \$1500 and \$1800/cow, HerdHome chief executive Hamish McMillan told a field day at the Kehelys' farm in late May.

He said banks are also starting to recognise the profitability potential of the shelters and are taking that into account with farm budgets.

"These are not winter barns. They should be used 12 months of the year to get full benefit from them."