



Rex Butterworth (left) with HerdHomes chief executive Hamish McMillan in the HerdHomes shelter.

Shelters not

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THREE YEARS ago Matamata farmer Rex Butterworth's farm faced a list of issues: to limit overgrazing, eliminate pasture damage, control nutrient leaching and improve effluent storage capacity. Butterworth, who sells rural real estate when not tending to his 500-cow farm in Walton, was after a solution "that ticked all the boxes" including a good return on investment.

After doing his homework, he settled for two HerdHomes shelters, each 75m long and housing 250 cows. They have proved

economical and have lifted his average milk production by 35000 kgMS. They provide cow comfort and take care of environmental issues.

HerdHomes were the most expensive option, costing him about \$1780/cow (which includes concrete and fencing works after the construction of the shelters), but Butterworth has no regrets, and expects the shelters to pay back within five years.

Butterworth's farm has a high stocking rate: 5 cows/ha, and with overgrazing there was pasture damage and pugging during the wet. "We needed to do something about it," he told *Dairy News*.

Then there were environmental issues. "We

wanted to minimise nutrient leaching. We were already in the bottom quartile in our region but the writing is on the wall, sustainability is major issue that we all need to consistently re-address. The farm also needed an effluent storage facility."

Butterworth notes it would have been easier and cheaper to build an uncovered feed pad to solve the overgrazing and pugging issues. But this would not have provided covered effluent storage, nor would it have sheltered the cows from heat and cold.

An effluent pond to cater for the existing farming system would have cost Butterworth \$45,000. Adding a feed pad would have lifted the effluent

No rise in complexity

HERDHOMES CHIEF executive Hamish McMillan says the shelter doesn't make a farm business complex.

He says Rex Butterworth's results show the benefits depend on how the farmer utilises the shelters.

"The traditional message out there is that feeding supplements and having shelters or both make the business more complex and more prone to losing money," he told *Dairy News*.

"Here's a farmer coming with none of these and building two shelters and saying the opposite. That's the general feeling among farmers we deal with."

HerdHomes is getting more enquiries from farmers with bigger herds. Smaller 150-200 cow farms have always been in this space.

"Whether you have 100 cows or 1000 cows the benefits are scalable," he says.

He also points out the HerdHomes shelters are different from cow barns used in Europe. HerdHomes shelters are based around pastoral grazing systems.

"It's not a fully housed system. A farmer might use it 24/7 for periods of the year, but it has flexibility [and still is] reliant on grass."

built on a whim



The two HerdHomes shelters on Rex Butterworth's farm in Walton.

pond cost to \$200,000 because of extra catchment.

There was also the option of a covered feed pad.

"A cover over the feed

pad would reduce the size of the pond and effluent storage needed, but then you're a long way towards [the cost of] building a herd home," he says.

In December 2012, he

decided to build the first HerdHomes shelter. The results were impressive and he decided to build the second one last year.

Matamata can get extremely hot summers –

hot days with little or no wind. The winters are mild and at times extremely wet.

"So with a HerdHomes shelter we have a covered feed pad, combined with

effluent storage bunkers underneath the shelter that are 25% bigger than standard providing plenty of effluent storage eliminating the need to irrigate when it's wet. By having cows stood off when the soils are too wet to farm efficiently we are able to reduce our nutrient losses

by a further 40%. We also get the benefits of shade in summer and shelter during the cold."

Butterworth says he doesn't regret going for the most expensive option.

"A feed pad would have been lot cheaper; this is the most expensive

option and in my opinion by far the best option. The investment's huge... that's what stopped us from rushing out and building one. I wanted to do my homework first. I wanted to make sure we were spending the money wisely and not just on a whim," he says.

20% MORE GRAZING TIME

REX BUTTERWORTH'S message to farmers is simple: if you can afford a HerdHomes shelter, go ahead and do it.

"We have always been profit focussed keeping our cost per kgMS to around \$3.50. Thanks to the Herd Homes we are on target to lower this \$3.01 due to increased production at no extra cost. Don't read too much into reports that say farmers lose money when using supplements and shelters.

That's why it took me so long to decide. I was reading all this about not going down the path of shelters but talking to farmers who were going in the opposite direction. I knew this would work and have no regrets."

He believes the two HerdHomes shelters on his farm decreased feed costs, through better utilisation and feed conversion.

"There is no waste. If I took away this shade these cows would not be eating. Shade is critical in bringing down the cow's body temperature so they will eat."

Milk production during summer has increased because cows spend more time under the shelter where there is feed and water available.

"Our cows now have the opportunity to eat, drink and display normal behaviour all year round, this is where I believe most of the pay back is being generated."