

## CASE STUDY



Mike McCreary and Liz Casey, Kumenga Farm

## UPPING THE NUMBERS WITH FARMAX

On the shores of Lake Wairarapa is Kumenga Farm, a sheep and beef farm with a difference.

There, on 540 hectares of lush green pasture land, farmers Mike McCreary and Liz Casey work hard finishing around 25,000 to 30,000 lambs and up to 1,500 cattle each year.

Kumenga Farm is known for its excellent quality meat produced from rye grass, and in 2015 was named as a regional winner in Silver Fern Farms' Plate to Pasture awards.

The farm produces an average of 500-600kg of product per hectare – an excellent result that few other farmers in the country would be able to replicate. Sheep are finished at an average ratio of 18kg of feed to 1kg of product – a very efficient result. The farm's cattle are finished at an average of 16kg of feed to 1kg of product.

### A NEW RITUAL

McCreary and Casey have been at Kumenga since 2008, when they went into a 50:50 partnership to buy the farm with McCreary's parents, Rob and Heather McCreary. Over the past nine seasons the farm has transformed thanks, in part, to FARMAX, as well as integrations with FarmIQ and Cashmanager.

"FARMAX has been a big game changer for us," says McCreary. "It's enabled us to pull lots of information together and helped us make good decisions. We are in a 100 percent different space to where we were a few years ago."

FARMAX helps McCreary plan for the future, running different scenarios on different aspects of the business, such as maximizing pasture utilization. It's an essential part of his farm business. "Every morning FARMAX goes on," says McCreary. "As a farmer you have to be

a Jack-of-all-trades, and you can't afford to slip up. It's important to keep up with technology and FARMAX is an awesome tool in our 'toolbox'."

### A REAL TEAM EFFORT

Running an efficient farm business is a key part of McCreary's success, but he is happy to admit that he has not done it alone. Expert advice and help from loyal stock manager, Paul Nicholson; Kumenga's valued farm advisor, BakerAg consultant Sully Alsop; and Tom Chisholm from Agdesign, has been instrumental to the success of Kumenga.

Stock manager Nicholson has been on hand to help with many changes and developments on the farm; despite originally planning to stay only three weeks, he has now been a valued member of the team for over five years.

Alsop met McCreary at a local field day held at Kumenga Farm about five years ago. The event looked at different kinds of forage and involved some FARMAX modelling. "I started doing some work for Mike after that," says Alsop.

At the time the farm was producing a lot of pasture, but not utilizing it effectively, something that became clear when Alsop and McCreary started using FARMAX.

"Kumenga Farm is a very nice farm, with good soils and Mike had developed it really well, everything was really good," says Alsop. "However, when we did some modelling with FARMAX we could see that with the amount of pasture he was growing, he wasn't utilizing all of it. It was a missed opportunity."

Adds McCreary: "We were growing about 15 tonnes of pasture per hectare but losing control of peak growth periods. We put a lot into balage and silage, which wasn't the best thing – there was a lot of waste. We

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were mowing 500 tonnes of dry matter of silage to straighten out our feed wedge.”

### TRUSTING IN TECHNOLOGY

With Alsop’s encouragement, McCreary began using FARMAX to record what was being grown on the farm and how that impacted the animals.

The results were revealing, and led to changes in the way McCreary managed his pasture. “With what FARMAX showed us, we changed the heading dates of our pastures to better manage our feed,” says McCreary.

Alsop also advised that, based on FARMAX modelling, an extra 5,000 ewe hoggets were required to eat the pasture that would be produced.

Initially McCreary was uncertain about whether to trust FARMAX, and purchase the extra stock. “We got to the stage where there appeared to be no feed on the farm, yet FARMAX modelling was saying we should be bringing more lambs in,” says McCreary. “So it was about trusting what FARMAX was telling us – and sure enough, the pasture was there.”

FARMAX has been a valuable tool for benchmarking. “In FARMAX we are able to compare grass growth this year to last year and it will tell us why any changes are happening. If you put stocking figures into FARMAX, if there are too many animals for the amount of pasture, it will tell you that the farm isn’t feasible. It will tell you if you are underfeeding or overfeeding. As long as the details you input are up-to-date, it’s a pretty reliable tool.”

He no longer focuses on per head profitability, rather per hectare profitability. “We are growing grass and want to get paid for the grass Kumenga produces,” says McCreary.

FARMAX is one way of taking Kumenga to the next level. Over the past three years McCreary and Casey have worked hard on upskilling and introducing new technology and governance to the farm.

They worked with Tom Chisholm from Agdesign to divide the farm up into 22 identical GPS-calibrated 48

cell systems totalling 240ha, which makes management much simpler. Any changes made in one paddock are replicated across the farm, with minor adjustments where required. They got in an independent contractor to measure grass growth once or twice a month, enabling consistent tracking.

These and other measures helped ensure valuable pasture was not wasted and animals reached maximum weight possible by the time they left the farm for the meat processor.

### GETTING THE NUMBERS RIGHT

Since 2013 the farm has gone from finishing 10,000 to 16,000 lambs a year to 30,000 lambs a year. They are now finishing up to 1,500 bulls, compared with 600 in the past. “We are running a hell of a lot harder and faster now than we were,” says McCreary.

Alsop says working with farmers like McCreary, who take information and advice, and apply it strategically, is rewarding; “the key thing with Mike was his enthusiasm and energy and drive to improve things, which is quite unique.”

McCreary says FARMAX has “added lots of power” to his farm. “Thanks to FARMAX we’ve been able to monitor what we can do, and run different scenarios to help with decision-making,” says McCreary.

He says technology is a key part of modern farming, and those not using tools such as FARMAX will get left behind.

He says the real strength is the integration between FARMAX and other tools such as FarmIQ, and the ability to share data. “FARMAX allows me and Sully to interact in the Cloud; he can look over what I am working on and I’m here on the farm and he’s there [in Masterton] so it’s a powerful tool in that regard,” says McCreary.

Plus, he says that the customer service he receives from Farmax is top-notch. “The Farmax staff are bloody brilliant, on the phone or remotely via computer – so if I am stuck or have a curly question, there is always someone around I can get advice from.”

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