

Different approach transforms farm

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It would be fair to say there was a reasonable amount of frustration at Shortlands Station a few years ago.

David Crutchley admitted he was "pretty unhappy" with where the property, near Kyeburn, was heading.

They could not get lambing percentages up in the halfbred ewe breeding flock and they could not get the paddocks growing or holding grass.

Yet Mr Crutchley and his wife, Glenis, wanted to expand the operation to help "set up" sons Charles and James, who are both farming, and daughter Zara, a registered valuer.

They might have been average-to-good farmers on their figures, but they were not getting the returns they should have been getting, Mr Crutchley said.

It was not a sustainable farming system and he candidly admitted the property needed help.

The frustrating aspect was he knew there was "huge potential", especially in the lower hill country, so it was time for changes.

A threefold approach was eventually taken, encompassing changes to the sheep and fertiliser policies and becoming involved in a business mentoring programme.

When it came to sorting the grass issue, Mr Crutchley decided he had better do some learning, and started reading and researching.

He also decided to interview "anybody and everybody" interested in selling him fertiliser, and most went back down the driveway empty-handed. He wanted a solution, not a product, he said.

That was until Bill Thompson, from Healthy Soils, turned up in 2008 and, despite not looking at the farm, was able to describe what was happening to the soil and why they were not growing grass, Mr Crutchley said.

Both he and Charles, who returned to farm on the property about 2001, were impressed by his knowledge.

They discovered they had lost the biology in their soils, which were fragile anyway. So impressed were they that when Mr Crutchley suggested they try half the programme, Charles said: "Do the whole thing".

Healthy Soils, a Dunedin-based company established in 2007, was the result of the amalgamation of three companies - Humatech, Folia Feed and Healthy Soils.

Its programme was about rebalancing soil minerals and establishing a healthy biological population. At Shortlands, there were simple but amazing results that got some biological action "going again", Mr Crutchley said.

Instead of oversupplying some base elements, they concentrated on balancing the elements. They used to grow 7000kg DM but now expected at least 12,000kg.

For Charles Crutchley, the changes on the property meant guaranteed feed supply every year, which was the basis of "achieving what we need to achieve".

Making the fertiliser change was not a big decision.

"It [prior to that] was pretty bad. We could always go back," he said.

"It was pretty much simple, really; we might as well try it. We haven't looked back since."

While it was a long-term programme, they were growing the tonnes of feed needed and there were virtually instant results in the first crops, even during a dry year. Feeding out in winter was much less busy now they had more feed.

"I just believed what we were doing was right, until it stopped working. I probably always saw it not working. I'd never really seen this farm with grass until about five years ago," Charles said.

Their price per hectare of fertiliser has halved and the area treated has doubled. Because the soils were now working, so was the cash flow and they now had quality animal-eating-grade food, Mr Crutchley said.

In a change to their sheep policy, they graded all the sheep and mated only the top two-thirds of the ewes, going to a Texel-Perendale and then a Texel-Romney cross. The lambing percentage went from 105% to 138%.

Mr Crutchley had a message to farmers: Good practices achieve good results but don't let good be in the way of great; great practices achieve great results.

Farmers only had to use basic principles and the market was at their fingertips with quality product, he said.



David Crutchley with a trial plot showing the benefits of guano application at Shortlands Station. Photo by Sally Rae.

David Crutchley's father bought Shortlands Station in 1946. An additional farm was bought at Palmerston seven years ago and another property added last year. James Crutchley is now farming 8000 stock units at Palmerston.

While the flats at Shortlands were "pretty much all up to speed", the next step was to get the hill country going.

There was "a wee way to go yet" but Charles believed they could "slow down a wee bit", having "really raced" to get where they were now.

It had all been "pretty positive" from the time they took the first step to change what they were doing. The goal in the near future was to utilise the hill country to achieve a strong position on both properties. A single worker was

employed on both properties to cope with the workload.

Utilising the people around them made them accountable, he said.

"We're constantly getting asked what we're doing by those people to justify those decisions."

David Crutchley stressed that science and innovation could be done by the farmer.

"Why do we have to sit back and wait for the industry to do it?" A field day would be held at Shortlands Station when science results from trials were ready to be presented, he said.
