



Finding a new niche

With a growing demand for alternative and premium milk products, sheep and goat milking is a niche but growing industry. **Lynda Gray** met two Auckland farmers making the most of it.

Most of Wairere Creamery's ewes are from Spring Sheep Milk Co.

Experienced cow and goat dairy farmers James Wallace and John McLaughlin are perfectly placed for sheep milking. Their location, just south of Auckland, is well positioned for easy distribution to both Auckland and Waikato. On top of that is their practical know-how of commercial-scale cow dairying which is being put to good use in developing a hybrid goat and sheep milking system.

On 70ha of lease land at Karaka the pair have developed a milking platform for 300 goats and 670 sheep. A 16-aside herringbone shed for cows was converted for goat milking last year. It was a relatively straightforward process, requiring not much more than changing the cups, pulsation rates, and stall heights. The goat configuration appears to work well for the sheep, the first of which were cupped up on 12 August.

There are four casual employees who help out with milking and feeding; it's been surprisingly easy to get the staff.

"We've found that once people give goat milking a go they don't want to go back to cows," James says.



The goal over the next year is to get in place the basics of stock management and feeding to supply goat and sheep milk year-round.

The pair are targeting 45kg/MS (290 litres) per ewe in the first season - that's the estimated break-even point, James says. But to be commercially viable the ewes will have to produce about 400-plus litres over a season which is typically what animals in established European sheep dairies manage.

The ewes are large and leggy East Friesian with a touch of Awassi. Most of them are

Above: John McLaughlin and James Wallace have applied their practical cow milking experience to get the goat and sheep milking business up and running.

from Spring Sheep NZ who have invested heavily in imported European genetics.

The ewes started lambing on 10 August, over six weeks, and some will lamb again in February.

They're grazed on grass with ad-lib lucerne silage and a 300gm/day supplement of maize, as well as minerals to balance the rumen.

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Left: Wairere Creamery milks 300 Saanen nannies.

The lambs stay on the ewe for 48 hours and are then taken to a sheltered covered yard area at James' family farm, a 10 minute drive away. The lambs have ad-lib access to milk from a Lely automated milk feeder. They'll be gradually introduced to grain and by three months will be weaned onto pasture.

James and John's goat and sheep dairy diversification started in November last year with the going concern purchase of Wairere Creamery, a goat milking business. The goat diversification appealed for a number of reasons; primarily the opportunity to provide a high-quality milk alternative with health benefits for the elderly and people with lactose sensitivity and allergies. The diversification also

stacked up financially with no share capital outlay needed as with cow dairy. Another compelling reason was that it seemed the right thing to do, given prevailing concerns from some sectors about the environmental footprint of dairy cows, as well as the growing demand for non-dairy and cow milk alternatives.

"I could see how the world was changing so when this opportunity came up I said 'why not tap into it'," John says.

At takeover Wairere Creamery had been struggling to meet the year-round supply requirements of the Countdown supermarkets supplied. However, this problem has been solved through management and more goats.

The milking of sheep came into the

equation on the realisation that although goat milk ticks the premium quality and health boxes, not everyone likes the taste. The decision was made to test run the milking of 100 ewes, but before long conversations and a relationship with Spring Sheep NZ led to a surge in the sheep herd from 300 then to 670.

This year the milk will be supplied to Spring Sheep NZ from August until early April, some of which will be used for fresh deliveries to supermarket customers of Wairere later in the year. Beyond April, when Spring Sheep will have dried off their milking herds, Wairere will continue to supply a lesser volume of milk so that their supermarket customers will get year-round supply.

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Above, left: A 16-side herringbone converted from a cow platform for goat and sheep milking. Morning and afternoon milking takes about 3.5 hours.

Above: Light-weight easily interlocked aluminium pens designed and constructed by a local engineering business segregate the lambs into age groups.

DAIRY DIE-HARDS

James and John have known each other for a number of years, and have gone into business taking on particular roles.

"John's the big thinker and good with project management side of things whereas I'm responsible more for livestock management and record keeping," James says.

James has a 20-year track record of milking cows, working up through the ranks from contract milker to 50:50 sharemilker and equity partner in a South Island business Rangitata Dairy. He sold his equity shareholding in 2012 and moved south of Auckland, where he has family

connections, to buy a broiler chicken farm. He enjoyed the diversification but had a yearning to get back to dairying.

"I missed the pasture and the milking."

John was born and raised on a dairy farm at Westport. He moved to Karaka in 2012, establishing an 850 dairy cow milking business on three leased farms in the area. That same land leasing and milking arrangement for cows could also apply to sheep in the future, John says.

The pair recently employed a marketing manager who has the responsibility for relationship management with the growing number of supermarkets in Auckland, and the upper North Island.

James combines the sheep and goat management around the broiler business and family: Stacey, his wife, and kids Karley (13), Ashton (10), and Emilia (2 months). Similarly John and partner Wendy juggle the demands of their kids Taffy (2) and Billy (1) with the cows, goats and sheep. It's a full-on time for both families but they're motivated to succeed in the sunrise industry.

"It's early days and we're learning as we go but we believe there are lots of opportunities for premium milk products," James says.

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Joint-venture fine tunes



BY: LYNDA GRAY

By 2023 all of Spring Sheep's raw product will come from outside suppliers.

"We're marketers and as we grow the markets we'll back-fill supply," Spring Sheep chief executive Scottie Chapman says.

In the meantime, the company, a 50:50 partnership between Pamu (Landcorp) and sales and marketing company SLC, is continuing to fine-tune proof of concept sheep dairy systems on three farms. One of the farms is Landcorp-owned at Reporoa, near Rotorua, where a large scale indoor/outdoor system is run. On the two smaller farms near Cambridge, an outdoor and a hybrid indoor-outdoor system have been developed.

This season, which started in early August and will run until late April, Spring Sheep is milking 5000 ewes, and taking milk from one farmer supplier.

"We're only just starting to look at

extending the supplier bases. We hope that next season another four or five suppliers will be added."

There's been lots of interest in sheep milking, especially from cow dairy farmers who Chapman says are the ideal candidates.

"There's no shortage of potential suppliers but we're being careful about who we select."

As well as being within two hours of Spring Sheep's processing hub at the Waikato Innovation Park, potential suppliers need to align with the company's brand values and animal welfare systems.

Based on the company's trial work it looks as if a commercially viable system milking 800-1200 ewes could be developed from 45-60ha of traditional cow dairying country. The ewes would need to produce 250-450 litres per ewe per season to achieve a good return, which is now possible with the rapid upgrading of the ewe milking genetic base over the last few years.

Underpinning the trials is a \$30 million

Above: Spring Sheep chief executive Scottie Chapman is excited about the future.

Primary Growth Partnership project started in 2016 called Sheep – Horizon Three. The broad goal of the six-year project is to build a high value and sustainable sheep dairy industry that by 2030 will be generating at least \$200 million of annual gross revenue.

Chapman is no stranger to what naysayers might regard as fringe ventures. He and business partner Justin Hall launched Old Mout cider after being told that New Zealanders wouldn't drink cider. He copped similar flack when he decided to pursue sheep milking.

"Where we are now with sheep milk is where we were with cider 10 years ago."

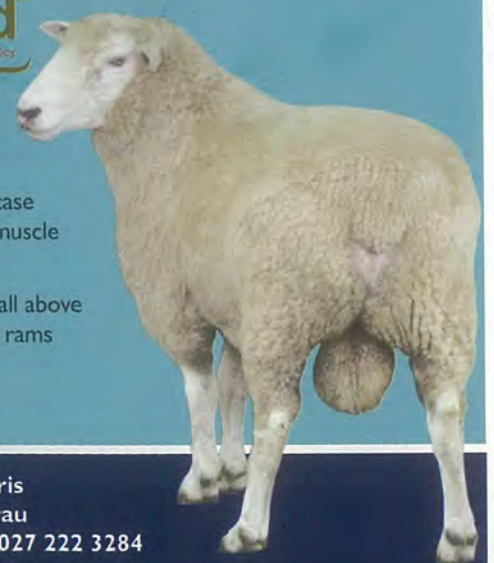
"Consumers are looking for dairy alternatives for health reasons and that have a reduced environmental footprint."

He believes that environmental pressures could lead to up to 20% of dairy farmers converting to sheep milking over the next decade.

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Sheep dairy industry comes of age

by CRAIG PRICHARD

Sheep dairying in New Zealand has entered a new era. New product launches this August have underlined its strengths and helped to shed its reputation as a quirky and fringe farming sector.

Key to this has been demand for sheep milk infant formula. After a long development project, Spring Sheep, the Danone (Landcorp) joint venture, now with two 800-ewe farms near Cambridge as well as its 2700-ewe operation near Waikato, launched its new stage three infant formula in Malaysia in August. And hot on its heels, the European-owned formula giant, Danone, launching its Maui Milk-

sourced stage three sheep milk product into the Australia market. Both Spring Sheep and Danone plan to have stage one and two products available in the new year as supply increases.

Meanwhile, the first of Spring Sheep's contract suppliers began milking 670 sheep near Karaka in South Auckland (see related story p32) and Maui's first contract supplier, Toni and Allan Browne's Astra Farms near Cambridge, is gearing up to start milking 800 hoggets in the 2020-21 season. And not far from Cambridge, the new Food Waikato-run specialist milk dryer, which will produce much of the powder for Spring Sheep and Maui, is expected to be ready early in 2020.

On the back of this, North Island farmers

are catching on to sheep dairying. Maui and Spring Sheep are both working with a strong list of potential new entrant suppliers keen to pick up the sheep milk baton. For the many hundreds that visited the SheepMilkNZ stand at National Fieldays this June, sheep dairying seems to have lost its connotation as a 'whacky or bizarre' farm diversification option. Instead, it is increasingly seen as a serious means of producing a higher value product, offering protection against bovine milk price volatility and potentially improving environmental performance.

BRAKE ON IN SOUTH ISLAND

However, outside the Waikato, the sheep dairy story is much more mixed.

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Right: Sheep milking is a new frontier for New Zealand farming.



Last year the sheep milk business owned by industry pioneer Keith Neylon which had been milking New Zealand's largest dairy flock, and which featured extensively in *Country-Wide's* 2015 sheep milk feature, didn't milk a single sheep during the 2018-19 season. The company failed to agree a milk supply contract with Chinese-owned Blue River Dairy. In what is clearly a huge blow for New Zealand's fledgling industry, Blue River owner Yuanrong Chen shut Blue River's Invercargill sheep milk dryer and began importing both whole sheep milk and sheep whey protein powders from Sardinia. Chen bought an Italian sheep milk powder producer, Alimenta, in 2017. The company now mixes imported Italian sheep milk into infant formula at its Invercargill factory, taking advantage of the New Zealand reputation for premium infant formula production, before it is labelled 'Manufactured in New Zealand' and sent to China for sale. Antara Ag's failure to milk last season was a huge financial loss to the company. However, the expectation is that this business will return to milk production next year, having spent time strengthening its breeding programme and farming systems, and working on new

manufacturing options.

The closure of the Blue River milk dryer, and the lack of other large-scale manufacturing options is acting as a brake on the sheep milk industry in the South Island and not just for Antara Ag. At a special sheep and goat milk workshop in Canterbury earlier in the year, which attracted more than 80 potential new entrant producers, access to a specialist milk dryer was the main focus of discussion. If

a dryer was available, there's little question that sheep dairying would quickly shift from small-scale artisan production to a serious conversion option for Canterbury farmers - particularly those facing higher irrigation costs and rising environmental pressures.

With that said, however, the group of Canterbury sheep milkers, like others around the country, are finding a market for their milk with local artisan cheese

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Above: East Friesian/Coopworth ewes in the rotary at Maui Milk's Taupo operation.

makers. Miel Meyer, board member with the NZ Specialist Cheese Makers Association, told this year's SheepMilkNZ Conference in March that there was strong interest from NZ's supermarket chains in sheep milk cheeses, and he and many of his fellow producers were dead keen to work with milk producers on supply arrangements. However, he noted such arrangements would likely require close to year-round supply and deliveries in thousands of litres rather than the hundreds of litres that small artisan producers work with.

SUPERMARKETS INTERESTED

Foodstuffs and Countdown representatives confirmed their interest. Sherrell Smith, head of Chilled Foods at Foodstuffs, said sheep milk was on the rise. She was interested in bringing New Zealand sheep milk cheese and yoghurts into the company's supermarkets, but consistency of supply had so far proved the key stumbling block.

Meanwhile Nikhil Sawant, Head of Perishables, Deli & Bakery for Countdown Supermarkets said that sheep and goat products are perceived by consumers to be healthier than cow milk products and while cheese doesn't occupy the 'health' slot for consumers, there was no reason why it couldn't in the future. He also noted there was significant scope to increase the amount of volume of specialist cheese consumed. New Zealanders eat about eight kilograms of cheese per year which is low by western standards, he said.

Efforts to grow the consumption of NZ

sheep milk cheeses with domestic and potentially offshore consumers could offer other returns. While significant volumes would be needed, whey from sheep cheese and yoghurt production is potentially a valuable by-product as infant formula makers will be required to import whey protein from Europe to make up these specialist powders. Substituting NZ sheep whey protein for imports would help support the quality and nutritional claims of NZ infant formulas.

Despite the many hurdles involved in producing sheep milk, particularly the ongoing challenge of increasing per-ewe production, a range of new specialist cheese, yoghurt and flavoured sheep milk products will be finding their way to more consumers in coming months.

In Wairarapa, the Ravenwood family began producing their Fernglen-branded flavoured sheep milks earlier this year. So far supply has been limited to the lower North Island, but the farm family business, which processes their milk at the Kingsmeade cheese factory near Masterton, is expecting to be sending supplies north to supermarkets in Hamilton and Auckland over the coming months. Meanwhile, well-known Gisborne cheese maker Waimata Cheese is about to launch a new range of sheep milk cheeses from locally sourced milk. In Hawke's Bay, former Waiheke Island sheep cheese producer James Clairmont is about to produce his first season of sheep milk with plans afoot to produce Craggy Range Sheep Dairy branded cheese and ice cream products in 2020. Alongside the Maui Milk and Spring

Sheep infant formula launches, these new entrants have buoyed the sector. But there have also been some casualties beyond the loss of the Antara-Blue River tie up.

PRODUCERS SHUT UP SHOP

Last summer's severe Nelson drought saw the temporary closure of sheep cheese and yoghurt maker Thorvald. Since then the company has switched to a more southerly milk supplier and new season production is expected to start shortly. In the North Island three small scale producers, each milking less than 100 sheep, have shut up shop in the last two years. For each, the cost of milking low volume dairy sheep on a small scale simply undermined their visions of making a living. However, in all three cases their animals, equipment and expertise have found their way to the homes with new producers looking to put their businesses on a sounder commercial footing.

While still tiny, even by comparison with NZ's dairy goat industry, and despite the casualties, the current crop of new entrant sheep milk producers are entering a sector that continues to ride a wave of consumer



Above: Craig Prichard is supervising several student projects on sheep milk industry development at Massey University.

focus in alternative milks, particularly those with compelling health, taste and environmental benefits. And while infant formula and cheese will inevitably form the industry's core products, there is significant scope for value-creating innovation in these areas. Cookable cheeses, drinkable yoghurts, and long-life milk products

including fresh infant formulas are likely to be important options for producers, particularly as the health benefits of sheep milk highlighted in the recently completed AgResearch and Auckland University clinical trials begin to filter through to consumers.

But perhaps there are other options, outside of food, that the new sector has yet to grasp? For example, just how sheep milk's unique fat and protein properties can be employed in hand, skin and face creams is unexplored. Whatever direction new products take the industry, 2019 will likely be recalled as the year that it came of age as a serious new farming sector.

More information and resources on sheep milking can be found at: masseyblogs.ac.nz/sheepmilknz

The 2020 SheepMilkNZ conference will be held next year at Lincoln University on March 30-April 1.

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Milking sheep pay like cows



BY: TIM FULTON

Sheep-milkers Guy and Sue Trafford put the total value of retail milk, meat and wool at about \$9000 per hectare – comparable to milking cows.

The founders of Charing Cross Sheep Dairy usually get two lambs from each of their 200 East Friesian-Awassi cross milking ewes. The lambs are a critical part of their sheep-farming profitability.

The lambs from their 40ha in central Canterbury averaged about \$140/head through the Coalgate yards over the past couple of years. The combined return from sheep-milk, cull ewes and wool was \$500 a head, Guy says.

“Probably in future we’ll be putting terminal sires over everything but our replacements. If we breed 400 lambs – 200 ewe lambs but we only need 40 replacements – the vast majority should be terminal. So there’s a good market for the sheep meat.”

Guy has academic expertise in modelling agriculture systems and recommends other farmers starting out in sheep milking should aim for 200-250 litres per ewe and

retail it for about \$2.30/litre.

Based on that 200-litre production and that sale price of lambs you’re still making about 30% of your margin from meat, he says.

“That’s the good thing about it. You can set your flock up and have your (milking) sheds built if you want to, and if the market’s not quite ready for you, keep on farming as per norm.”

That flexibility considerably cuts the risk of investing in sheep milking.

You couldn’t yet describe sheep-milking as an industry, he says.

There have been high-profile investments in the North Island, most notably in the South Waikato by state-owned Pamu (formerly Landcorp) and the neighbouring Maui Milk.

But it’s been a mixed story in the South Island, highlighted by a large operator in Southland winding up and various processing and marketing plans in Canterbury either failing to eventuate, or yet to get off the ground.

Guy and Sue have had their own false dawns, lining up supply contracts with would-be processors only to encounter insufficient demand or unprofitable

Above: The Charing Cross sheep come from a line of Miles King’s Dairymeade sheep.

returns. It’s only now, several years into milking, that they’re securing regular sales in local markets and as wholesalers to various cheese and yoghurt artisans.

They’re excited about the prospect of soon moving into a covered 7-days-a-week inner-city market in Christchurch, operated by property developer Richard Peebles on the site of the former Re:Start Mall.

The Traffords farm 40ha at Charing Cross, among a cluster of small-scale “artisan” producers between West Melton and Darfield.

They moved to the area from Christchurch in 2012 as “earthquake refugees” and until recently both worked at Lincoln University. In January, Guy left his agriculture management lecturing position to spend more time on the farm and marketing the milk. With his own work story in mind, he recommends anyone starting out to weigh up how much time and effort it may take to rear

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» Continued from p42.

lambs in a sheep-milking operation.

The Traffords opted for ewe-rearing partly because Guy and Sue – a communications lecturer – both had day jobs. Even now, with farming and retailing his sole focus, Guy is keeping lambs on the ewe.

He estimates it costs \$70 to foster a lamb and about \$75-\$80 per ewe to leave them on the ewe. He finds the downside of mum-reared lambs is a small increase in udder damage and mastitis cases, perhaps when a single lamb drinks from only one udder.

But he stills finds it easier to let the ewe do the mothering through spring.

“If you let the ewe do it, it does buy you four to six weeks of time that you’re not committed to having to milk the ewe.” Rearing on mum is also a more attractive marketing story, he says.

For Guy, sheep-milking was a return to the coal-face of primary industry: he first considered sheep milking a couple of decades ago while managing a hill country station near Gisborne.

Tentative plans to take milk to market didn’t work out back then but the Traffords are giving it another go and encouraging farmers to do likewise.

Bolstered by their experience, the couple are working with other Canterbury sheep

RESILIENT BREED

The Traffords own 10ha and lease an adjacent 30ha. Part of the property is irrigated. They milk 200 sheep at the moment, but the shed could handle 400.

Guy says they find milking sheep need to be fed better, especially while lactating. “Once they lose condition it does take quite a bit to turn them around again. It’s a bit like comparing a Friesian cow to an Angus, almost. They do need more TLC.”

Production could comfortably rise to 300 litres or more through improved breeding, he says.

Charing Cross’s East Friesians are from a line of cheesemaker Miles King’s Dairymeads. The type is only 10 generations removed from the first purebred East Friesians brought to New Zealand in the mid ’90s but aren’t as fragile.

“They probably don’t produce quite as much either but they’re a bit more robust and resilient.”

One of the most important decisions in sheep-milking is deciding what to do with the lambs, Guy says.


“You can take them off mum at day one and foster rear them, or you can leave them on mum for four to six weeks, or longer... let her rear them and then milk the ewe after that.”

Larger sheep-milking farms tend to opt for foster rearing but the Traffords leave the lambs on the ewe. “We make it up a bit, partly because we don’t want to be rearing 400 lambs and milking a sheep and marketing it all.”

farmers to form a producer group that may ultimately be able to pool their supply to a single processor.

Meantime, knowing the uncertainty of start-up farming ventures, the Traffords are sticking to a habit of cautious investment. They originally bought all their milk harvesting gear off Trade Me

from a Canterbury dairy goat farmer, Ed Moorhead, who previously ran Gruff Junction near Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere.

It came at a “reasonable price” and Charing Cross Dairies near Darfield was able to set up its own harvesting platform, including other equipment and compliance costs, for about \$180,000. 

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Sheep milk suppliers sought

BY: LYNDA GRAY

A million dollars could set up sheep and beef farmers in the greater Waikato for sheep dairying. The estimate, from Peter Gatley, general manager of Maui Milk, factors in the cost of infrastructure, including a milking shed as well as 800-1000 ewes on a 70-80ha platform.

Maui Milk, a joint venture partnership between Shanghai-based Maui Food Group and the Waitahu Kuratau Trust, is keen to recruit suppliers with the goal of doubling milk production by next season.

Maui has a limited number of their specially bred Southern Cross ewes for sale, on condition that the milk is supplied back to them. There are two buying options: March delivery of ewes for mating at about \$400 each, or mated and scanned in-lamb ewes at \$550-\$600.

The ewes would be expected to cover their purchase price from milk and the one or two surplus lambs produced. Over the first couple of seasons milk production per ewe would be in the 200-250 litre range, generating income of \$600-\$750 based on Maui Milk's contract price of \$3/litre.

Ewe production would increase over

time in line with the age profile of the flock and selection to 300 litres, which was regarded as an acceptable New Zealand benchmark. However French farmers, milking sheep with some of the same genetics as Maui's Southern Cross breed, were producing 400 litres.

Gatley says there is interest in sheep dairy from sheep and beef farmers around Taupo, Rotorua and the King Country, but the proposition is possibly better suited to Waikato dairy farmers.

'We would envisage a typical farm as one milking 1000 ewes with a couple of staff over two hours.'

"It's potentially easier for dairy farmers because of their existing infrastructure. Another advantage is the shorter lactation than for cows and the reduced environmental footprint."

The estimated cost of adapting an existing milking shed, pipework and clusters could be in the \$200,000-\$400,000 range.

However, it wasn't out of the question



Above: General manager of Maui Milk Peter Gatley.

for established sheep and beef farmers to develop a 70-80ha platform. The number of ewes run would depend on the land but 15-16 ewes/ha was a general benchmark.

"We would envisage a typical farm as one milking 1000 ewes with a couple of staff over two hours," Gatley says.

Ideally suppliers would need to be within two hours of Waikato's Innovation Park where the milk is processed; the pick-up and delivery costs would be covered by Maui.

A gross farm income of \$1 million was achievable based on a flock of 1000 over a

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230-240 day lactation, per ewe production of 300 litres at \$3/litre, plus sale of surplus stock.

“The bottom line revolves around the milk per ewe and pay-out. Farmers know the pay-out and we can help them estimate the milk production based on the age profile of the animals.”

Maui’s call out for suppliers coincides

with the launch of a new Danone produced Karicare infant formula using Maui-supplied milk. The partnering with Danone, an established multi-national was a significant step in the business, Gatley says.

“Their role is critical and should give farmers confidence in the gate to retail shelf marketing chain.”

Above: Staff milking ewes on Waitahu Kuratau’s 80-bail split rotary milking plant. The platform allows handling of 80 sheep, and an in-shed auto feeding system encourages them in and relaxes and nourishes the ewes while they’re being milked.

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Maternal Composite

RAMS AVAILABLE MID NOVEMBER

The self-replacing Highlander® is the most FE tolerant and efficient open composite in NZ.

Highlander® ewes are early maturing and have superior milking ability compared to traditional breeds, resulting in excellent hogget reproduction and more prime lambs at weaning.

The Highlander® features a moderate mature size ewe with selection on FE tolerance, hogget and adult reproduction, lamb survival, growth and ewe resilience to consistently deliver more kilograms of lamb weaned per hectare.

For more information or to order please contact Norm Alderson, Livestock Business Manager, on 027 446 9884 or email info@focusgenetics.com

