

# Converted to Dairy Sheep

By Craig Prichard (Massey University)



Felicity Cameron, farm manager at Spring Sheep Milk Co's 55 hectare Waikato pilot farm

She has wrangled buffalo in Canada, shepherded in the back blocks of New Zealand, started her own calf rearing business at 19, and milked more goats and cows than most of us have had hot showers. But it is dairy sheep that has won over Felicity Cameron.

Cameron, 35, is farm manager at Spring Sheep Milk Co's 55-hectare outdoor Waikato pilot farm. Last season she and her crew of one other full-timer, and a bevy of seasonal lamb rearsers, milked 600 of the company's prized East-Friesian dairy sheep over a 235-day lactation and reared hundreds of their young offspring. While she says the first season on what is New Zealand's newest bovine-to-ovine conversion had its challenges, including ensuring the sheep were well protected from facial eczema and fly strike, the results were encouraging.

"I was absolutely rapt with them," she says. "Being outdoors, I was a bit worried that the heat was going to get to them. But they milked exceptionally well and I think a lot of it was due to grazing them during the day in the shade, where there were trees. They did a lot better than what we thought they would do. They will get stronger and stronger, and I can't wait to milk the 2016 girls. The 2015 girls made up of 300 mixed aged East Friesians and 300 hogget born from the new genetics imported from Europe in 2017, averaged 240 litres each

over the eight-month season. Such a figure might seem modest but it is a marked improvement on New Zealand's historical industry averages of 1.12L. Spring Sheep is predicting that the new genetics together with its focus on feed and breeding, will hit 350-400 litres per season in the next few years.

Spring Sheep Milk Co is a joint venture nutrition company owned by Parma (formerly Landcorp) and SLC Group, a marketing company that specialises in taking the very best New Zealand products to consumers all over the world. Spring Sheep Milk Co is also a partner to the PCP Central regions.

After completing a large-scale dairy sheep farm near Taupo in 2015, which is milking 2,800 ewes, the company has turned its attention to the Waikato and in 2018 developed two sheep dairy pilot farms on leased blocks near Hamilton. The first of the two, near Cambridge, is a greenfield indoor-outdoor hybrid system with three full-time staff and milking 850 ewes. The second farm, Cameron's show how a low-cost bovine to ovine conversion can be achieved with minimal infrastructure investment.

On this site, the shed conversion included a new bale system, new vat and clusters. Outside the shed, changes were made to the yarding and a nearby shed was repurposed as the lamb rearing unit. Across the farm, extra wires were added to secure the fences and 12 hectares of chicory was planted. For Cameron there were two highlights to her first season in charge. The first, after

the development work was done, was just "getting the girls into the shed and actually seeing them produce so well."

"Dairy sheep is exciting, it's an old but new industry, people are really starting to get into it. And the other thing is the genetics. I can't wait to see two years down the track and see the change in the girls and what we can actually do, with the high-performing genetics lines, they'll have the potential to produce 600-1000 litres per ewe per season!"

The other highlight, she says, was just seeing how happy the sheep were. "My girls, they would run to the shed, every single day, and I got a bit worried isn't going to be good for them, but they ran back out of the shed and it didn't do them any harm. They were just so happy, jumping and leaping. I knew they were really content."

"They certainly won me over." If you'd like to learn more about sheep dairy conversions, sheep milk foods and nutrition we call in sheepmilk@fieldays.co.nz or 022 in the dairy present at Fieldays.

the company is actively looking for sheep milk suppliers in the Waikato and Central regions.

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