New Zealand focus

Whananaki Coastal Charolais

In an idyllic eastern coastal setting in Northland, more appropriate for a holiday than a farming venture, is the very successful Whananaki Coastal Charolais stud belonging to Greta and Craig Harman, in partnership with Greta’s parents Jeff and Betty Carson. Successful, because not only is this young couple doing what they are intensely passionate about, but also because in 2001, they won the prestigious Northland Seedstock Producer of the Year award.

The main family property has 270 hectares of effective grazing. The area is prone to dry summers, however their 50 flat hectares of reclaimed marine swamp, provide some insurance against these events. The remaining grazable land is medium/steep hill country. In addition, they lease an unfertilized 40 hectare runoff and last year on the home farm, an area of 60 hectares was intensified, using semi permanent electric fencing, for a bull finishing unit.

The predominant pasture species are kikuyu and paspalum with some ryegrass and clover. Mulching is used to control the kikuyu and undersowing with winter-active species is practised, to increase winter pasture production. Soil phosphate levels are above average, however selenium and copper are deficient and are delivered via the fertilizer and orally by capsule.

Stock wintered at Whananaki include 187 stud Charolais cows, 30 commercial crossbred cows, 67 rising two year old Charolais stud heifers, giving a stocking rate of 9.7 stock units per hectare and net production of 223kg of beef per hectare (up from 146kg three years ago). Bulls are sold at an annual sale in June and privately, with some being leased. Of the 50 bulls sold annually for breeding, 80% go to commercial beef producers, 15% to dairy farmers and 5% to stud breeders. Remaining bulls are finished, along with 136 crossbred bulls, on the recently established bull finishing unit.

The Harmans have a very defined but simple breeding objective, based upon their goal “to breed terminal sires to improve the long-term profitability of their clients”. Their focus is firstly to get a live calf on the ground, then to get it to grow as quickly as possible to 400 days and “finished” for processing at around 600 days, at a carcass weight in excess of 300kg. To achieve this the EBVs they target are Calving Ease, 400-Day Growth and Retail Beef Yield%, with breeding soundness and temperament being their highest priority selection criteria. Extreme EBVs are avoided in their quest to operate a balanced breeding programme, thereby allowing enough flexibility to cater for all production systems. Over the last 6 years average Birthweight EBVs in the herd have remained the same, while the average EBV for 400 Day Weight has increased by 12kg. A small embryo transplant programme is undertaken, to make greater use of the genetics of their ‘top’ cows and some AI is practised, to introduce new bloodlines and to target the polled gene and specific EBVs.

Northland springs are notoriously variable compared with autumn, which is one of the reasons heifers are mated at 18 months of age, for 6 weeks. This practice has improved the in calf rate, spread the spring workload and means heifers’ calves can be weaned onto spring pasture flush. Also, in choosing bulls to mate to heifers, growth rate does not have to be compromised to the same extent to improve their profitability.

The Harmans have aggressively sought information to assist them in their business. Australia has played host to them on two occasions recently. The Charolais Society Stud Skills Course and The Armidale Feeder Steer School.

Being frustrated by the absence of a national Charolais performance recording system catering for all their needs, they contracted ABRI, through the Charolais Trans-Tasman Group BREEDPLAN, to analyse their desired range of traits. They were the first seedstock producers in N.Z. to list their bulls, via the internet, on the