

Great escape from winter frosts

When a colleague questioned the methods he had used for 39 seasons, a Reporoa dairy farmer turned to tunnels as the answer.



Owner: Iain McGillivray
Location: 5km south of Reporoa
Area: 133ha
Herd: 500 Jerseys
Dairy: 40-aside herringbone
Production: 175,000kg MS last season
Calves: Rears 120 replacement calves each year
Calving: August 1, finishing in mid-October
Mating: 3.5 weeks AB, Jersey bulls to finish until Jan 10
Empties: Nine percent.
 Cows wintered off farm



Iain and Andrew McGillivray.

Iain McGillivray is no stranger to rearing calves, having been dairy farming on his Reporoa farm for 39 seasons.

But he changed his calf rearing methods five years ago because conventional techniques were not working.

"It was comments from a colleague at a farm discussion day which prompted me to look at alternative methods," he said.

He was told his heifers were too small.

"I respected his opinion. We needed to do them better, to give them a good start right from the beginning."

McGillivray felt he was doing as much as he could with the calves, rearing them in small paddocks with a mobile calfeteria but decided to look into alternatives.

Reporoa has a cold climate with frosts "all year". The calves were not handling the conditions and were not developing well.

Fieldays held the answer.

He saw the FlexiTunnel demonstrated as a calf rearing house and decided to give it a try.

Five seasons on, McGillivray and son Andrew, who works on the farm, are both

pleased with the results.

McGillivray could see from the demonstration that the tunnel house setup could protect the young calves while still making the most of sunshine and fresh air.

"We farm intensively," he said.

"We have a high stocking rate which we can manage because we also irrigate."

The soil in much of the central plateau is free-draining sandy pumice so the ability to irrigate allows the farm to be pushed all year despite the cold winter and spring.

Jerseys favoured

McGillivray is a "Jersey man".

"We farm proper cows," he said with a grin. "Always have. I bought a Jersey herd when we started sharemilking and have stayed with them."

Five years on, his heifers are now a much better size – a result he puts down to rearing them in the tunnel houses.

The plastic-covered calf rearing shelters are easy to work with and the calves seem to be very comfortable in them during the bitter frosts and rain which comes with each winter and spring.

"There is the initial capital outlay, but the results speak for themselves," he said.

"Because the FlexiTunnel gives them shelter and warmth the calves are putting their energy into growth and development, not just trying to stay warm."

The yards are set up on a base of sand to help good drainage and at the beginning of each season fresh shavings are loaded into the covered end of each yard.

The shelter is not completely closed over. When it is wet or cold the calves are in under the plastic shelter at one end, and when it is a warmer day they are in the yards.

McGillivray said the system works well for observing the calves each day and checking if any are not well. He has had no disease during the last five years.

"We don't have to wander around the paddock looking at each one," he said. "In here they are easy to keep a close eye on and any calf which is not well, can easily be caught and isolated until well enough to return to the yards."

The calves go into the tunnel house from one-day-old with each pen holding about

15 to 20. The yard system allows the calves to be kept in their relative age group.

It is Andrew's job to raise the calves and he appreciates how easy the tunnels make the job.

'So much better'

"It takes me about 20 minutes to feed and check the calves," he said.

"The calves work out the weather angle. I came out here after a night of heavy rain and there was only one wet calf. The rest had all stayed under the shelter.

"I wouldn't go back to the old way – this is so easy and they do so much better."

The calves are raised on the second tier of colostrum. The first two days' colostrum is supplied to Fonterra and the calves receive the next supply.

It is a simple job to bucket colostrum into the 16-teat feeding troughs which hook over the end of each yard. Andrew takes the troughs away once the calves have finished feeding, to prevent them chewing on the teats.

Meal is available in each yard from the beginning and the calves soon work out how to feed at will and each yard has its own water trough.

The McGillivrays start calving August 1 and will finish mid-October. The calves stay in the tunnels until just before weaning at six to eight weeks when they are put out into small paddocks.

McGillivray has tried the tunnels in two different locations.

"It was more a matter of finding the right place, the best location for the calves and the best location work-wise," he said.

"It takes two of us one day to put it up from scratch. It is not difficult or strenuous and we have learnt as we have gone along."

The tunnels cost \$6/calf/season calcu-



Jersey calves in the FlexiTunnel.

lated on a 10-year depreciation span.

McGillivray has replaced the plastic twice in the five seasons he has used them but admits he used a slightly lighter grade for the second change, finding it didn't stand up to the plastic-loving calves as well as the stronger grade.

The yards sit slightly away from the

plastic shelter so the calves cannot reach the plastic to chew it and the flexible tie-downs mean the young animals are not hurt if they run or bump into them.

The final positive note for the McGillivrays is in summer. That's when McGillivray grows a "great crop" of tomatoes inside the tunnel house.