



# Seasons



*Mt Taranaki Dairy*

## It's bikes for Africa at Vern and Jenny Coxhead's Opunake place.

The couple have four adult children, and help look after their nine grandchildren – seven boys and two girls aged from eight down to six months.

They're also about to become grandparents again very soon.

"Our family is the main emphasis of everything," Vern says. "They have a ball," he says, and he doesn't just mean the children.

They still live on the home block of their dairy farm which they've owned since 1985.

"Farming has been good to us. We started out with nothing and luckily have got most of it left," he jokes.

And most of the family is involved in the dairy industry too. Eldest daughter Debbie and husband Mark are 21% sharemilkers on their Midhirst block 30 minutes away near Stratford, while son Warren, with his three boys all under 10, is a 21% sharemilker on the home farm. He also has a terrific worker Carl Mundt helping him.

Youngest daughter Michelle has recently started working on a local dairy farm too.

"We run an all grass, low cost system and do about 260,000kgMS in total off both blocks."

He and Jenny bought the original farm, which was then 81ha, just a year before the 1987 crash.

"Our payout went to half of what we needed, interest rates were 24% on the mortgage and 27% on the overdraft, and the farm value dropped by half."

Still, they got through, and over the years have added extra land, with the 95ha Midhirst block bought last year, as well as a neighbouring block to the home farm.

Now they have 376ha altogether and farm it as the Pūnehu Trust. The home block milks 450 cows once a day on a platform of 202ha, and carries all the young stock. The Midhirst block milks 215 cows on the 95ha.

Now Vern rarely milks, instead he helps Jenny to look after the children and has a full time job as the sales manager for Opunake-

based Corkill Systems. Before he became the manager at Corkill Systems he had fitted one of Steve Corkill's Varivac computer systems to control his vacuum pump in their dairy shed. "I found that not only was the shed a lot quieter but the cows' somatic cell counts were lower."

"I came back to Steve who said: As a matter of fact a lot of people have said that. I think because it's quieter, the cows are happier."

"I didn't believe him and so we reverse engineered the Varivac. We took the main sensor, and hooked it up to a laptop." They found that the main improvement the Varivac made was to take out the vibration.

Vibration in a vacuum pump is to do with the regulator which contains a valve with a spring: the harder the pump sucks the more it pulls the valve open.

"We took all that vibration away and the pump runs about one third of its original speed, and it is quiet."

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That's not all; it also saves 40 to 55% of the total power bill in the shed.

After 18 months of work, and modifying the programme, which has 600 separate settings, they reached the perfect setting. Now they guarantee a power saving and a reduction in somatic cell counts with the Varivac, otherwise farmers can return it.

"What happened was, because I was a farmer, everyone I talked to about it bought a Varivac. I realised I had sales ability, and Steve said to me we should work together."

So for the last eight years Vern has worked on commission at Corkill Systems, travelling the country selling a range of electronics and control products including the Varivac, which is now fitted to 1000 sheds.

Their products also have C-tick certification which ensures they don't cause electromagnetic interference.

Corkill's growth has been great for the local community, employing eight staff directly, with another six to 10 employed in businesses who manufacture components for them.

Now they couple the Varivac with a very efficient vacuum pump system which dramatically reduces

power use in the dairy shed to about 10% of that previously needed by the vacuum pump.

"A 50% bail rotary normally uses 15kW, but we can run it at 1.5kW. This combination, which we call the SuperVac, is starting to sell really well in these hard times as farmers repower their sheds, as it is designed for a retrofit."

Corkill's products are a good fit with Meridian's work on power savings, Vern says.

"Meridian people were impressed with our gear but they thought there was no way we would save that much power. They did tests and were impressed with the product, and trialled it in a shed with stray voltage, which we sorted out for them."

"We work together with Meridian and if we can help each other we will."

Vern and Jenny fitted SuperVac's to both farms as soon as it was developed. "Jenny now swears by them, and it takes a fair bit for her to be impressed."

The SuperVac made an amazing difference in reducing shed noise. "It's nice and quiet and you can talk to each other. The cows love it."

"Some sheds are so noisy it is horrendous, and a lot of cockies are deaf from those two to four hours a day in the shed."

Noise levels in sheds with a SuperVac have been brought back to the level of 80 to 85 decibels, compared to some other sheds which have been measured at 120 decibels, he says.

Vern reckons noise is an industry problem but farmers put up with it and nobody does anything about it. He'd like to see new sheds meeting acceptable noise standards.

"It's a bit like old tractors, which were noisy and people had to wear ear-muffs. But now new tractors have cabs. But people stand in sheds and milk without ear muffs because it's too hot and uncomfortable to wear them."

Vern says his only problem now is he can hear Jenny say he's not listening!

Vern is a real enthusiast for the dairy industry. "We are lucky we are in the industry we love. We've done alright, and managed to have our kids involved."

"Farmers are very lucky they get to hang out with their wife all day, and have their kids there at work." ■

## Tiny but true: the same amount of power a 100W light bulb uses is enough to power 40km of electric fences on a 400ha farm.

**Mark Harris, the marketing manager for Gallagher Animal Management Systems says its incredible how little power electric fences use.**

But he always advises farmers to have enough power on hand: having a little bit of reserve capacity is money in the bank especially when feeding crops and the like.

He's currently break feeding turnips to cows on his northern Waikato dairy farm and knows first-hand how important it is to have good power around the place.

"When feeding off crops using portable fencing hooked up to the permanently powered electric fences, the last thing I want to do is have them feeding uncontrolled. You don't want the whole fence network down."

The dairy farm has been in Mark's family since 1938 – which coincidentally is the year Gallagher set up in business.

In a relatively dry area and on a rolling contour, Mark milks 370 Friesian cows, producing

125,000kgMS from a milking platform of 180ha. Next season the farm will milk 420 cows.

Naturally, there is a great deal of electric fencing: the 214ha property has 60 paddocks and 28km of fence.

To illustrate what Mark means about having enough back-up power, he gives the example of Gallagher's largest energizer, the SmartPower MX7500 Energizer, which stores a massive 75 Joules of energy. This energizer can power 160km of multiwire fence, but he recommends it for 40km in practical New Zealand conditions.

Being a SmartPower product, it has in built technology which uses only as much power as is actually needed by the fence.

This helps minimise power consumption and shows the farmer how hard the energizer is working – and thereby showing if there are any new shorts. Mark says "It's a bit like cruise control on a car. As grass grows at the base of the fence the fence can use a little bit more power."

Another advantage of this system is it comes with an integrated SmartPac remote control and fault finder.

Like a remote control, it has an inquiry button which sends a message down the fence to the energizer, which sends back the energizer output levels.

That means that while you're out in the back paddock you can tell if you've fixed the shorts, Mark says.

Solar fencing systems are now in great demand, with the worldwide trend to reduce energy consumption and disposable battery usage, he says. And when it's too expensive to run mains

power lines out to the back of the farm, solar units are very handy.

A solar panel charges a rechargeable battery by converting light into electricity to operate a battery powered energizer, and it operates day or night and when it's cloudy.

There are many portable solar fencing options for lifestyle block properties right through to large blocks, he says.

More information? Check out [www.gallagher.co.nz](http://www.gallagher.co.nz) ■



# Getting our hands dirty

Members of Meridian's Agribusiness team have been out on the farm getting their hands dirty completing a National Certificate in Rural Services through Ag ITO - and farmers will benefit from their newfound knowledge.

Agribusiness Manager Natasha King has a decade of dairy farming behind her - "I can milk cows with my eyes shut" - but only two members from her team of twelve staff come from farming backgrounds so she wanted to ensure the others all understood the challenges faced by Meridian's more than 10,000 agricultural clients.

"I needed to get these guys thinking like farmers. Too often (farmers) are served by people who understand how to run a nine to five business, but they don't understand how to run a farm, and what's required to be good at it. If you lose a cow that's \$1500 - \$2000, it's really important for a townie to realise how much is at risk."

King has already noticed a major change in the attitude of her staff who are now more aware of the pressure on farmers during mating and calving. "In the past, occasionally you'd get a staff member who would get ratty

if someone was rude or abrupt, but now they understand the whole seasonal driver."

"We're dealing with people who have a fairly black and white attitude. They don't want shiny salesmen and they don't want to be mucked around. It's not rude if they're like that, that's just the way they operate."

The level three Certificate in Rural Services is aimed at people working in rural retail outlets and businesses such as stock and station agents, but Ag ITO key account manager Roger Irvine says Meridian selected units that would be relevant to the Agribusiness team.

"It's certainly going to enable them to communicate with farmers who don't like talking to townies unless they can speak their language, so it will give them more confidence to be able to relate to their rural customers."

The 72 hour course covered everything from soil types and what fertiliser to use, to farm safety and cow shed hygiene. Theory classes provided by the National Training Academy at Meridian's Christchurch office were supplemented by practical sessions including lessons on how to drive an ATV and erect electric fences, and the team also had a go at milking cows.



Glenn McWhinnie - Senior Account Manager, Agribusiness.

It was quite an eye opener for Senior Agribusiness Telephone Account Manager Glenn McWhinnie who had not set foot on a farm prior to joining Meridian two years ago after working for a telecommunications company.

He says helping milk a herd of 700 cows really brought home the havoc created by ill timed power cuts and the importance of ensuring outages for maintenance do not happen during peak milking periods.

"We can go to the network and say 'right, this will really impact on the customer, can we look at a more suitable time?'"

McWhinnie found the unit on different crops and soil types and their impact on farmers' irrigation needs particularly useful, and realised the hard work involved in keeping up with farm maintenance when they spent half a day putting up electric fences. "I didn't realise it was quite as tricky as it was."

Ag ITO tutor Dave Ashby says a visit to the Lincoln University farm gave

the students an idea of where dairying is headed.

"It's not the family farm situation, it's more of a factory situation where you're harvesting grass, and we need to be able to measure that and put a figure on it."

He says for the Meridian account managers something as simple as knowing the most appropriate time to contact a farmer can make a huge difference.

"Understanding when a farmer will be available to talk, when he's not going to be under high stress levels."

Ashby says the Meridian students' work to date has been of a very high standard and he hopes they will spend a week or so on farms before the end of the year to top off their training.

"They will be able to have a lot of empathy for their clients, and make good decisions for Meridian and for the farmers. I think it has been an awesome course." ■



Shane Kelly - 2009 Farm Manager of the Year.



## Entries for 2010 New Zealand Dairy Industry Awards closing soon

Don't forget to put your entries in for the 2010 New Zealand Dairy Industry Awards as the close off date for all entries is 24 December 2009.

Meridian Energy is a proud sponsor of these awards which encourage excellence and progression through the dairy industry. There are three different awards to enter: the Sharemilker of the Year, Farm Manager of the Year, and Dairy Trainee of the Year, with more than \$700,000 in cash and prizes to be won.

Entrants must compete at one of the 12 regional competitions being held throughout the country with the winners from each region progressing to the national final.

Every year people enter the competition for the first time and discover the numerous benefits of being part of a New Zealand and industry-wide competition. Equally, entrants return to further their skills and develop networks that are beneficial to their careers and farming businesses.

To enter or find out more visit [www.dairyindustryawards.co.nz](http://www.dairyindustryawards.co.nz)

# Merry Christmas

The team here at Meridian love our New Zealand Christmas tree, the Pohutukawa, so much that we've committed to planting 2010 trees in 2010 - on top of all the regular tree plantings we do as the principal sponsor of Project Crimson.

Project Crimson is a national conservation trust that was established in 1990 to protect Pohutukawa and Rata trees around New Zealand by raising awareness of tree protection and supporting restoration programmes. Since then, with the help of principal sponsor Meridian, enormous progress has been made to arrest the decline and restore these precious natives in their natural habitats and in the hearts and minds of New Zealanders.

As a 100% New Zealand-owned company with a commitment to renewable energy and environmental sustainability, we think nothing could be more appropriate than helping ensure Rata and other native trees continue to flourish.

We would like to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year - we hope you all get the opportunity to spend time with your friends and families, and rest and relax.



# Annual Holiday Entitlements

It's that time of year again....Christmas holidays and staff leave, balancing roster's trying to ensure that the farm has enough staff to keep operating and trying to fit in some time for your own family.

We thought we could add some value by providing a brief overview of the statutory requirements for staff holidays and leave.

Working on a farm is no different to any other employment when it comes to annual holiday entitlements.

All your farm employees have a legal entitlement to take holidays and leave. Under the Holidays Act 2003 (the Act), employees are entitled to a minimum of four weeks annual holiday after the first year of employment.

In reality, as leave is accrued during the first year, an employee may take leave during that period and, generally, leave can be taken at any time agreed between the employer and the employee.

Employees must also be given the opportunity to take at least two weeks of their leave in a continuous period.

You can't agree to do away with any of these minimum rights, but you can negotiate and agree to better ones.

As far as Statutory Holidays go an employee is entitled to at least time and a half for the work that they are required to do on a public holiday.

It doesn't matter whether the employee is paid on a salary or wages.

If the day would otherwise be a working day (the employee normally works on the day that the public holiday falls) the employee will also be entitled to an alternative holiday on pay (also known as a day in lieu).

Public holidays that fall at the weekend are treated in two ways:

- Christmas and New Year holidays are "mondaysed" (i.e. shifted to the following

Monday or Tuesday) for those who do not normally work at the weekend, but are celebrated at the weekend by those that do. However, no employee is entitled to more than four days worth of public holiday payments for these holidays

- ANZAC Day and Waitangi Day are celebrated on the day they fall, so only those working on the weekend are covered by the public holiday provisions.

To take the hassles away, leave entitlements should always be agreed on and recorded at the start of an employment relationship.

Where an employees work pattern changes during the year, for example from part time to full time, the employer and employee should agree on how the entitlement to four weeks leave is provided. When a new agreement is reached it should also be recorded.

An employer must allow an employee to take annual holidays within 12 months after the date on which the employee's entitlement to the holidays arose.

An employer must not unreasonably withhold consent to an employee's request to take annual holidays. Given the seasonal nature of farm work there may be better times than others to take leave, and you should discuss that up front too.

You must keep a record of employees leave as an obligation of the act, which requires that employers maintain a holiday and leave record in addition to maintaining wage and time records. This will avoid any disputes over the amount of leave the employee has taken over the course of the year. It will also enable you to let employees know how much leave they have owing and have taken.

This article is only to provide a summary of the Holidays Act and is not intended to provide specific legal advice.

For any further information, we would suggest you consult the Department of Labour on 0800 20 90 20 or [www.dol.govt.nz](http://www.dol.govt.nz), or if you are a member, Federated Farmers also has some helpful resources. ■

## We'd like to hear from you

We'd like to hear what you think about Seasons, and what you'd like to see in future issues.

Please let us know by writing to us at:

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