



Pāmu's Environmental Reference Group, including Forest & Bird's Tom Kay, visited Southland farms in July to advise on how best to transition away from intensive winter grazing. © Tom Kay

CHANGING FARMSCAPES

The largest farming operation in New Zealand is phasing out intensive winter grazing. **Cathie Bell** talks to two Pāmu farmers about how they are doing it.

When Pāmu announced it would move to end intensive winter grazing for many of its farms, it was “a good day”, according to one of its farm managers, Travis Leslie.

The state-owned farmer, formerly known as Landcorp, announced in September last year that it would significantly reduce the effects of intensive winter grazing over the next three years. It means no winter cropping on many of the company's properties.

Pāmu says it is focusing on the wettest, most climatically challenging areas for pasture-only farming and will be seeking a 55% reduction in the use of intensively grazed winter crops area on the West Coast, 60% in Canterbury, and 35% on its Otago farms by 2023.

Travis Leslie manages Kepler Farm in the Te Anau basin. For him, the policy is a no-brainer.

“I came out of the north. We didn't do a lot of cropping up there. It was always a foreign thing to me. The scale of it in Southland is quite interesting,” he said.

He started reducing the amount of winter cropping and the number of animals that needed it at Kepler

Farm several years ago. Today, the farm has no winter cropping.

The shift meant changing the ratio of animals at Kepler from 80% sheep to 50% sheep and 50% cattle.

There have been some real improvements in animal health and production, especially in sheep, he says.

The farm uses a long-grass (deferred grazing) system that sees animals eat pasture all year round, and it seems they need to eat less than they did on the intensive winter crops.

Sheep crop better on grass, explains Travis, and the farm no longer uses pesticides as it isn't growing crops.

It hasn't lost any income with the changes, and Travis says getting rid of intensive winter cropping has improved staff lives too.

“When the farm was cropping, weekends had 30 hours rostered on. It was basically a seven-day operation,” he said.

“We have one person rostered on now.

They just drive around to see everything is OK. Thirty hours down to three. That's massive. I don't think anyone here would go back to winter cropping.”

However, he recognises that not all farms will be able to follow suit, as everyone is different.

We have to make the changes we need to or we won't be farming dairy cows in this area much longer.

“The thing is, even farms next door to us here in Southland are different. What works for us might not work for others,” he adds.

Justin Pigou is the Waitepeka area dairy support business manager for Pāmu. He is in charge of two dairy farms and a dairy support block just south of Balclutha.

His operation is moving out of winter cropping and into barns, providing shelter and feed for cows during the winter. Justin has three barns, housing about 480 of their 1350 cows, and is looking to build more.

There are benefits to housing the cattle in barns, both environmentally and for farm efficiency, he said.

Cows can destroy 50% of winter crop in bad weather by pushing it into the ground. Putting cows in barns overnight means they don't have to be fed extra food.

It also means farmers can take cows off paddocks at other times of year too – for example, when there are bad weather events in shoulder seasons.

The barns also help control the release of nutrients into groundwater, with the effluent being held over winter before being spread out onto paddocks when conditions are right and sent out over a large area.

Justin Pigou said there were “a fair few” barns being built around Otago and Southland. However, the majority of farms probably aren't in a position to spend \$1m on a barn, and they need to be well managed too.

“You can have animal welfare issues in a composting barn. All these things need to use best practice, good monitoring, and good processes,” he said.

Mark Julian, Pāmu's general manager for dairy operations, and Steve Tickner, its general manager for livestock operations, are jointly responsible for the policy to phase out intensive winter grazing.

Mark said Pāmu has been working through the company's operations, farm by farm, to look at how each could work without intensive winter grazing.

“Some farms we've looked at, we would never winter crop again, the way their soils react.”

However, a number of things need to be balanced in each farm operation to make sure the right methods are being used, including animal welfare, soil types, environmental issues, and staff wellbeing – as well as financial sustainability.

“We're trying to be proactive around challenging farmers with change but taking them with us. We want to be far enough in front that people are challenged but not alienated.”

Some farmers couldn't change, he said, because of issues around succession, generational change, and debt making it hard for them.

In the past, Pāmu has sent some animals to other farms to overwinter, and Justin Pigou says there are some farmers whose whole operation is geared to winter grazing, and it formed the majority of their income.

“Those guys were going to have to rejig their system



© Tom Kay

Otago dairy farm manager Justin Pigou is building \$1m barns on his Pāmu farms to feed and shelter cows during winter. © Supplied



and look at other operations,” he said.

“We have to make the changes we need to, or we won't be farming dairy cows in this area much longer. Get used to it. Change is coming.”

International markets were more and more aware of farming systems and their effects, he said.

“It's the right thing to do, but it's also a necessity. You're beholden to these markets. If you want to be there, that's what you have to do.”

Travis Leslie echoes this, saying: “It doesn't matter how we do things here. It's how the world sees us when it wants to buy things. Pāmu has the size, scale, and scope to do it.

“The stakes might not be as high for us as some, but we're much more in the public eye. We operate with an almost unreasonable level of scrutiny.”

But he sees the changes as an opportunity.

“We're in this really good period of change in farming. The next ten years, we're really going to start performing. We've got the technology, and the genetics, to pull it off.”

Pāmu farmer Travis Leslie has ended intensive winter grazing at Kepler Farm, in Southland. © Supplied



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