

NZ Farmer profile – Tennent Family

By Kate Taylor, NZ Farmer



George Tennent, left, and his father David at the Hessett block in the foothills of the Ruahine Range.

Having four adult sons each with a long-term interest in farming has led to hard succession decisions for Takapau farmers David and Sally Tennent – the latest being the choice to sign up to Central Hawkes Bay’s proposed Ruataniwha Dam water scheme.

“That offers guaranteed rainfall in summer-dry country,” says David.

“Irrigation does create more options and options are what we want,” says David’s youngest son George.

The home farm at Takapau has been supplemented by the purchase of two other farms, one nearby and one about 45 minutes away near Dannevirke. The three are run basically in conjunction with each other but allow for some autonomy for two of the four sons.

George works on the trust’s Hessett block, the 258 hectare farm about 15km away from the home block farmed by David and Sally. Rob and wife Amy are leasing Glentui, a 331ha Mangahei property near Dannevirke, from the family trust and run the stud sheep operation (recorded Romney, Suffolk and Suftex flocks).

Former forestry manager James is working for horticulture company Coxco in Gisborne and Tom has been working on oil rigs in Queensland but has recently come back to New Zealand to work in the agriculture industry.

George is a former Smedley cadet and has shepherded in Wairarapa and Taihape, worked on a cropping farm in Western Australia and done time in the mines in Queensland. He says good communication is a huge key to the success of the family-run operation.

“The crucial part for us is to never fall out. We all get on really well and we all just have to keep talking.”

While the business is technically still David and Sally’s, he says the family trust owns the asset and the aim is for “the boys to have an even share of that business down the track” and for them not to be disadvantaged if they work elsewhere.

The boys are all involved with meetings about major decisions, such as whether or not to join the irrigation scheme. David says the decision to go with it gives them a wider range of choice for the future and he defends the rights of farmers to have that irrigation.

“It frustrates me that people who know nothing about farming have become experts on irrigation and farming systems. They jump to the conclusion that the Ruataniwha Plains will be covered in dairy cows. I do not believe this will be the case and in fact we have based our decision on figures generated by intensive finishing systems which will provide a return on investment of 14-17 % and will be no threat to the environment in terms of nitrogen and phosphorus.”

He says rules under Tukituki Plan Change 6 will also ensure management practices are correct.

“The Regional Council is doing its best to save the Tukituki system. The naysayers are thinking of themselves without availing themselves with all the information and not thinking about the future of the region and its residents. I have a responsibility to make sure this is a sustainable business for the next generation. I was given the opportunity to get into farming, through my father guaranteeing loans and things like that, so I am taking responsibility to do the same for the next generation.”

That responsibility comes in the form of a \$400,000 loan for the installation of pivot irrigation and infrastructure with a \$40,000 cost for water per year on top of the debt servicing. Initially 37ha of a possible 74ha would be irrigated. Irrigation NZ indicate dry matter per hectare could double under irrigation, as South Island experience has shown.

“You couldn’t buy another 74ha for that amount of money so it’s a sound investment for us. It gives us a business that is more sustainable going forward,” says David.

“With more production per hectare our workload goes up and we start looking for local staff to employ as well,” adds George.

The history of Pahiwi goes back to David’s father Pat, who founded the Pahiwi Romney Stud in 1956. David established the Suffolk stud in 1990 and the Suftex rams have also joined the terminal sire line up.

Hessett carries 1600 commercial breeding ewes and winters 150 Friesian R1 bulls and 350 hoggets. At 460 metres above sea level and in the foothills of the Ruahine Range, Hessett is summer safe with an annual late-spring regrassing programme and 5ha of winter crop (usually a kale/swede mix) for pre-lamb ewes. Pahiwi has green feed oats as a winter crop and titan rape in summer, as well as three cuts of a 4ha lucerne crop for balage.

The three farms are running 5500 sheep breeding stock units with all progeny finished or sold as breeding sires. The cattle policy is based around dairy bulls with some breeding cows and progeny.

George says Hessett and Glentui have similar grass growth, climate and altitude (460 metres above sea level) and are both summer safe while Pahiwi is summer dry.

Nearly 400 rams were sold from the three studs last year – two thirds romneys and the remainder terminal sire.

“Our market share has grown this year helped by enthusiastic input from Rob and George,” says David. They are using the Sheep 5K DNA test, which gives a profile of genetic traits.

“This gives us a better indication of how rams are going to breed rather than waiting for the progeny to tell us and obviously it’s faster,” says George.

The results have also shown a degree of genetic tolerance to facial eczema in the flock after including facial eczema-resilient sires in the breeding mix.