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Farmers upbeat over 'fantastic feed for milkers'

Jo Bailey

We were looking for the cheapest feed with the highest ME and beet was the answer.

When Southland dairy farmer Jim Cooper went looking for an alternative bulk feed for his milking cows, he consulted with several international nutritionists, who all gave him the same message – feed beet.

"They couldn't believe New Zealand farmers were feeding beet to dry cows when, once lifted, it is an ideal feed for milking cows," he says.

"I did a bit more homework and decided to give it a try myself."

Beet is a high-energy feed crop for both dairy and beef cattle, especially when fed in combination with silage.

Although grown in New Zealand for many years, it has only recently become more popular as a dairy-cow, winter-supplement feed.

Now in his third season growing beet for lifting, Cooper couldn't be happier with the results.

"It is a cheap, high-energy feed that the cows absolutely love and milk really well on. I can't recommend it highly enough to other dairy farmers. The return on our investment has been massive."

John van Hout, from Winton, is also sold on feed beet.

This season he is growing 29 hectares of beet as supplement for his 960 cows, 660 of which are housed in a wintering barn through the colder months.

"We were looking for the cheapest feed with the highest ME, and beet was the answer," he says.

"We chip it up and feed it from a mixer wagon so that the cows can't gorge or choke on it, and it doesn't get caught in the shed's effluent system. We don't feed it to the dry cows any more because they get too fat on it over winter, but it's fantastic for our milkers. We get a great return from it."

Ben Walling and Sarah Flintoft, of Walling Contracting Southland, have also seen the benefits of beet after planting and harvesting it for several local farmers.

"The results have been outstanding," says Walling.

He says the crop's versatility is one of its strengths, as it can be fed whole out in the paddock, or harvested for storage and fed out on feedpads or in wintering barns.

"It is important to grow the right variety of beet depending on how long you want to store it and feed it. A lower-dry-matter beet works well for feeding out in the paddock, but high-dry-matter beets are best suited for longer storage."

The high-dry-matter beets are also tougher, so it is beneficial to chip them up for feeding, he says.

"On the plus side, if they are stored properly, high-dry-matter beets can last for six months or longer without spoiling."

Walling says he enjoys the challenge of sourcing new ideas and ways of doing things that will be beneficial to clients.

In 2012, after discussions with Cooper and van Hout, Walling Contracting imported an Agrifac Big Six beet harvester, the only three-axle, six-wheel-drive harvesting machine of its type working in New Zealand.

"I looked at trailing machines for a start, but some beet-harvesting contractors overseas told me I'd be wasting my time and to go for the self-propelled. It's a great addition to our established silage, balage and ground-cultivation business, which already has a strong client base."

Walling is frustrated by some of the naysayers who say the machine is too big to do the job properly because he couldn't be happier with its performance over three seasons; it is purpose-built to operate in wet conditions.

"The harvester is light on its feet and leaves no marks in the paddock. It has large on-board capacity, so there's no need for tractors/trailers or trucks to enter the paddocks – it's these that have the potential to get stuck and make a mess."

The harvester lifts 100 to 120 tonnes per hour – "It's really efficient. We're in and out and gone."

He says it's also "well worth" farmers washing the beet after harvesting to aid storage and the cow's digestion and production.

"Our Cross Beet washer is the only machine of its type in New Zealand; it can wash 60-80 tonnes of beet an hour."

Both Cooper and van Hout are delighted with the performance of the harvester.

"I knew it would work well because I'd watched a lot of YouTube clips of it handling extreme conditions overseas," says Cooper. "This machine is well advanced on other New Zealand harvesters."

van Hout says the paddocks require very little preparation for the next crop following the beet harvest.

"Last year we direct-drilled wheat straight after the beet, with only a light harrow and no spray and got a really good crop."

Walling believes the awareness of beet as a cheap, high performing feed will grow.

"If it's done properly, beet is no harder to grow and harvest than making silage or balage. If you get the planting and storing right by following good advice from those experienced with beet, it is a crop with huge benefits."



Walling Contracting's beet harvester (top) and Cross-Beet washer (above). The harvester is the only three-axle, six-wheel-drive harvesting machine of its type working in New Zealand; the washer is the only machine of its type in New Zealand and is capable of washing 60-80 tonnes of beet an hour.

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