

FODDER BEET PERFECT HIGH ENERGY FEED FOR SOUTHLAND

FODDER BEET IS WIDELY KNOWN AS A HIGH ENERGY SUPPLEMENT FEED, AND IT IS GAINING FAVOUR WITH SOUTHLAND FARMERS BECAUSE IT IS WELL-SUITED FOR THEIR GROWING CONDITIONS.

Now, as farmers and contractors have gained more experience growing fodder beet, some are taking it to the next stage and

developing ways to harvest, wash, and store it rather than simply break feed it to their animals.

Lifting their fodder beet crop is especially attractive to farmers with indoor wintering systems and feed pads as the beet can be fed in combination with silage to provide cows all their nutritional requirements.

Southland dairy farmers Jim Cooper and John Van Hout together with Ben Walling of Walling Contracting Southland Ltd have run trials with fodder beet last winter. They found

the cows loved it so much that when the beet ran out, they got quite angry.

Cows fed on beet had condition and production after calving that was at levels usually reached only at the peak months and could be attributed to the high energy intake that the fodder beet provided.

John says cows look to eat fodder beet before anything else in a mixed ration.

"It definitely has a place in wintering barn systems. We fed our animals two kg of fodder beet dry matter from May to September last season, and this season we will lift it to four kg. Cows at calving were half a condition score better than the previous season."

Jim Cooper milks 1100 cows on 360 ha near Winton. His UK workers told him that in Europe it is common to lift fodder beet and feed it to barn-housed stock. He talked to animal nutritionists who said UK farmers feed it to their milkers and for fattening.

Jim approached Ben about the idea, and eventually Ben and partner Sarah Flintoft invested in an Agrifac Big Six Beet Harvester and a Cross Rhino de-stoner and washing machine.

They experimented and worked with agronomists to figure out the best growing conditions for the beet and how to lift and store the crop. From June they lifted 200 tonnes at a time, which lasted Jim's cows about a fortnight.

Jim feeds them 4.0kg DM of fodder beet per day.

"We chop up the beet and spread it out in the paddock. You can chop it more finely and mix it with other feeds on a feed pad. It's great for cows in winter barns," Jim says.

His says his cows are doing well. In October they were still producing 2.6 kg of milk solids and 33 litres, even after three weeks of terrible weather. They are also cycling better, their coats are shiny, rumens are fuller and they're a good weight.

"Fodder beet is a very high sugar feed. It's ideal in spring when the grass is high in protein to keep a balanced diet. In autumn they need that starch to keep the weight on," Jim says.

Another attraction is that it is inexpensive. Ben says you won't get anything as good for the price.

"On average it costs 10 to 12 cents to grow and 10 cents to harvest, so it's just over 20 cents for one kg of dry matter. And the ME is 14.5."

A field day held at John Van Hout's property in June attracted a big crowd of farmers keen to learn more about growing and harvesting beet.

WALLING CONTRACTING'S AGRIFAC BIG SIX BEET HARVESTER CAN HARVEST 100 TONNE AN HOUR.

THE AGRIFAC BEET HARVESTER IS A BIG BEAST.

It weighs 26 tonnes and carries a payload of 25 to 30 tonnes of beet. It is 14.5m long and 3.2 wide. It has six-wheel drive and large tyres so that the weight is spread, and the harvester can go just about anywhere.

It ambles along at up to 6km/h and can harvest 100 tonne an hour, with a truckload leaving every seven to eight minutes.

The front part of the Agrifac is a flail mower that cuts off the leaves and the top of the bulb. The tops can be dealt with three ways: mulched onto the surface, put aside in a row, or broadcast. Ben usually broadcasts them, returning the fertility back to the paddock.

The lifter has vibrating shears that cut into the ground and bring the bulbs to the surface. The bulbs go into the carousel where rotating rings with slated bars pass them to the centre of the machine and knock the dirt off them.

Within 10 seconds of being hit by the mower the bulbs are in the holding tank until they are unloaded into a truck.

From there they are either stored as is, or washed and de-stoned and cut for feeding. Washing can bruise them, so farmers only clean what they can use within six to eight weeks.

Ben and Sarah anticipate that lifting fodder beets is going to become a big chunk of their winter work, though they doubt lifters will ever proliferate like silage machines.

They imported their Agrifac Harvester second-hand and have a large range of parts on hand.

In addition to the Agrifac harvester Ben and Sarah bought a Cross Rhino beet de-stoner and washer to get the best out of the beet and provide the full service for clients. **RC**





BEN WALLING IS ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO DIDN'T GET ON AT SCHOOL AND LEFT AT 14 TO GO CONTRACTING ALONGSIDE HIS BROTHER LEONARD NEAR CAMBRIDGE IN THE WAIKATO.

At 21 he met Sarah Flintoft and together they embarked on an adventure in the south after he was offered a position managing a dry stock farm. Driving a cabless tractor from Hamilton to Invercargill was a hint of what was to come.

"Once there, we saw Southland's potential and set up a medium square baling run," Sarah says. "That was in 1996 and today we have three children and a great business. Southland has been great to us and we still work for some of the original clients all these years later."

The business has grown to employ five permanent staff and 17 or more seasonal.

Walling Contracting is a partnership. "I wouldn't be anywhere without Sarah," Ben says. "She drove the rake for the first few years but when we got to a bigger size she needed to do more administration."

Ben and Sarah also have land and winter graze 3500 dairy cows, feeding out more than 6000 bales of baleage.

They live in Spar Bush, 10km west of Winton and work throughout central Southland providing a full range of services: pit silage, baleage with three McHale Fusions, cultivation, direct and precision drilling, farm conversions and now the beet harvesting.

He goes further afield for fodder beet. "We want as many people as possible to try it," Ben says. "I want it set up right. If you use the wrong gear, and make a mess of it, it gives it a bad name. It's not hard but you have to get it right."

Fodder beet is an asset for farmers and it is also a good thing for contractors. It's winter work from May to October that goes ahead whether there's rain, shine, wind, or anything else.

Ben predicts there will be increasing demand for fodder beet in Southland as more and more people realise its benefits, and he sees no reason why it couldn't be grown and lifted throughout the country.

If farmers or contractors want more information Ben is happy to speak with them. Call Walling Contracting 03 235 2233, email wallingcontracting@woosh.co.nz or visit www.wallingcontracting.co.nz. **RC**

FROM LEFT: JIM COOPER, JOHN VAN HOUT AND BEN WALLING DISCUSS A CROP OF FODDER BEET.

So far all Ben's beet clients are dairy farmers but it's also an option for sheep and beef farmers, or anyone who wants a 25 to 30 tonne cash crop. Ben is looking for land to lease so he can grow and sell it.

Last year he planted 50ha of beet for a few clients and he'll plant double that for this season. Every client who planted it last year will plant bigger hectares of it this season.

This year Ben will plant at a heavier rate to get uniform bulb sizes with row spacing's 500mm apart. This will make it easier for the machine to harvest.

Jim plans to increase the amount he sows from 22 ha to 30 ha.

"We can't grow maize down here, so this is the next best thing. It's a high-energy crop

and you don't have to cart it in. The cheapest feed is what you grow on your farm."

In Southland fodder beet matures in 120 days. It should be planted in October. It requires good, deep well prepared soils.

There are different varieties of fodder beets. The best ones for lifting grow with 75 percent of the bulb in the ground, like an overgrown carrot. High dry matter varieties store longer and are harder to bruise.

Weed control is important. A heavy weed load can knock production by 10 tonnes/ha, and weeds get caught up with the beets when harvesting.

Jim plans to have Ben lift his beets in April before the cows dry-off in June so they can maintain weight. Ben will lift the lot and then power harrow and sow grass. Later it can also be sown in cereal such as barley for whole crop.

One of the main advantages of lifting beet, is the paddock is left in good condition.