

LIVESTOCK DIVERSIFICATION IN THE WAIKATO: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Data indicating changes in the numbers of livestock and farming trends for the Waikato/Thames Valley region are presented.

These data confirm the dominance of the dairy industry in this region. The expansion of deer (30% per year) and goat (90% per year) farming is shown to be above the national average.

Data showing the importance and growth of the equine industry are also presented.

Keywords: Pastoral, dairy, sheep, beef, goat, deer, equine.

INTRODUCTION

The major feature of agriculture in the Waikato is its pastoral nature. The lowlands are dominated by dairying and meat production while on the hill country mainly sheep and cattle are raised for fattening or for sale to lowland farms for fattening.

The area referred to in this paper includes the recognised Central Waikato area (including Raglan, Waikato, Piako, Waipa and Matamata counties); the Northern King Country counties of Otorohanga and Waitomo; plus the Thames Valley (Hauraki Plains, Ohinemuri and Thames/Coromandel counties).

This area, while predominantly flat to rolling contour, does contain areas of steeper hill country and encompasses a large number of soil types. Soil types are predominantly ash derived but include the range of clay, alluvial and peat soils. Most of the area, especially the lowlands, has been relatively intensively farmed for 40 years, with pastures producing 12 to 14 t DM/ha/year. A history of regular fertiliser in conjunction with increasing stocking rates and a relatively favourable climate have made this area one of the most productive pastoral areas in New Zealand. Mean annual rainfall varies from 1000 to 1600 mm over the plains and increases from 1500 to 2000mm over the ranges. Mean annual air temperatures are 14-15°C. The intensity of pastoral farming (14.5% of New Zealand's stock units) and the area's proximity to the majority of the populace has resulted in the area being well serviced. Features of this are the many export processing facilities, especially for meat and milk.

THE PASTORAL INDUSTRIES

The most significant industry in the region is dairying with some 46% of the nation's milkfat being produced on average between 1981-1985, a figure which has remained constant despite a 21% increase in national milkfat over this period. Table 1 indicates the growth pattern since 1937.

Table 1: Cows in milk in the Waikato 1937-1985

1937	1950	1960	1975	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
472300	450800	577400	712200	737700	733200	624700	788700	811500	825700

Two facts become apparent when reviewing these data. The first is the predominance of this industry in the region, while the second indicates a trend to a period of consolidation currently.

In this region, the beef industry is related closely to the dairy industry with approximately 40% of dairy calves being reared for beef. While there are no data available, most of these calves are reared for bull beef; an area that has experienced conspicuous growth in the last decade.

Table 2 indicates the growth that occurred in beef numbers and highlights the significant decline in breeding cow numbers from 1975 to 1984.

Table 2: Beef cattle numbers in the Waikato 1937-1985

BEEF COWS		1937	1950	1960	1975	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
				577450	236500	187400	176700	153600	150100	120300	143700
TOTAL BEEF		360371	473400	897800	883500	738300	759900	721600	717200	709300	725800

Total beef cattle for the region amount to 15.8% of the national total.

Of additional significance in the beef industry is the substantial kill of both cull cows and bobby calves from the dairy industry.

Of the major pastoral industries, the least important for the region is the sheep industry -amounting to 7.5% of New Zealand's total sheep.

Table 3 shows the growth in sheep numbers until the recent decline caused by the drop in profitability of farming sheep-this trend is expected to continue.

Table 3. Ewe numbers (m) in the Waikato 1937.1985

1937	1950	1960	1975	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
1.16	1.63	3.09	3.04	3.85	3.94	4.03	4.05	3.96	3.78

PASTORAL DIVERSIFICATION

Throughout New Zealand a trend from traditional livestock policies to the new options of deer and goat farming has been evident. This has been particularly so in this region, where the combination of a favoured climate and generally suitable soils have been factors in attaining good performance levels. The fact that the area is relatively established has enabled resources to be made available for alternative livestock policies.

Table 4 shows the growth in deer numbers for the last three seasons (data unavailable before then).

Table 4. Deer Numbers in the Waikato 1983-1985

	1983	1984	1985
Total Hinds	15948	22279	28684
Total Deer	24643	33710	41591
% Increase Per year		37	23
% National Increase		32	24

The dominant breed is the Red Deer which comprises 65% of the total.

Clearly the region is seen as a particularly suitable area for the expansion of deer farming. The region has 12.8% of New Zealand's deer and has grown 2% per year faster than national trends. The adjacent Bay of Plenty has 11.9%. Thus the two areas total almost a quarter of the national herd.

The same physical reasons which explain the growth in deer numbers also apply to goat farming. Buoyant store markets based on under supply have exaggerated the good returns earlier experienced, thus having a snowball effect on prices. This was illustrated in 1984 when demand pushed prices of feral does from \$20 to \$200 within a two-month period.

Growth in goat numbers has been even more spectacular and is indicated in Table 5.

Table 5: Goat Numbers in the Waikato 1983-1985

	1983	1984	1985
Total Goats	20198	38009	75551
% Increase per year	88	99	
% National Increase	16	140	

The average increase for the region is 20% greater than the national increase.

Of the total goats in June 1985 most appear to be feral. Data indicate that 72.4% are of non-angora cross, or non-dairy. Presumably they are ferals being farmed predominantly for cashmere or used for control of weeds such as thistle and gorse.

Of the balance, 20% are angoras, or crosses, while 7.6% are dairy goats.

The nature of diversification in the region has meant that the expansion of deer and goat farming has spanned the full range of pastoral farms in the area, from highly fertile dairy farms to steeper country. By and large, however, the high capital value of these livestock has seen most of them intensively farmed, on better country. The exception is weed control where **wether** goats in particular, have been effectively used.

The other substantial pastoral diversification has been the equine industry. Export sales have risen from \$13 million in 1980 to \$60 million in 1986, and over \$100 million to June 1987.

Of most significance to the region is the thoroughbred industry, with 80% of New Zealand thoroughbreds north of Taupo. This compares with only 30% of standardbreds.

Table 6 indicates the national growth in numbers of both thoroughbred and standardbred mares.

Table 6: Female breeding stock numbers in the Waikato 1970-1984

Year	1970	1975	1980	1984
Thoroughbred Mares	4874	7316	9894	10509
Standardbred Mares	3453	4516	6836	7291

CONCLUSION

The **Waikato/Thames** Valley region represents one of the most intensively farmed pastoral areas in New Zealand. The dairy industry dominates, producing almost half the national **milkfat** as well as substantial quantities of manufacturing beef either from cull cows or **Friesian** bulls. The three major livestock options for diversification (goat, deer, equine) have all grown at rates well above the national average. This is a reflection of the region's agricultural suitability, resource base and locality. While various factors (e.g. taxation values, supply changes) have caused a reduction in profitability of breeding options owing to substantial price drops, the move to more realistic market prices is not expected to slow the growth of these industries.

References

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