

SOME ASPECTS OF HILL COUNTRY FARMING ON THE EAST COAST

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INTRODUCTION

The following is my personal view on what it is to be a European meat and wool farmer in the East Cape region. Many of my comments while applying in general to hill country in the whole of the Poverty Bay/East Coast region, are more specific to the area between Cape Runaway in the north, Gisborne City in the south, The Raukumara Range in the west, and the Coastline in the east. The total area is 830,000 hectares, and of this class 7 country (locally known as Category 2 and 3) makes up 45%. Class 8, or Category 4 land, has been excluded from the total area. I will refer to my own property as a typical example of this country, giving some of the pros and cons of farming this land.

My property is in two blocks. The main block is 1,214 hectares of hill country running up to 630 metres above sea level, but the average ridge tops would be 360 metres to 450 metres above sea level. The smaller block where I live, is 156 hectares comprising 45% hill country, and 55% strong river flats. Both properties are situated 20 km by air from the coast (west of Ruatoria), and 135 km by road north of Gisborne. Interestingly enough, the main road (S.H. 35) roughly divides the region into strong productive land to the west, and lighter, harder country to the east, with some obviously mixed areas.

DISADVANTAGES OF FARMING ON THE EAST COAST

Erosion

To me, this would be the greatest single limiting factor to efficiently farming hill country in this region. More so in the western areas, as opposed to the eastern areas. This factor influences fencing (including floodgates), stock management, closer sub-division, dam and track construction,

Isolation

It would be fair to say, that cartage would be one of the biggest items of expenditure showing in the Working Expenses of a farmer's balance sheet. This is because Gisborne is the nearest main centre, nearest freezing works, nearest fertiliser distribution point, nearest major saleyards, and nearest railhead. For example, my property's cartage rates are:-

- Lambs to works \$1.10
- ~ Ewes to works \$1.20
- ~ Cattle to works \$1.60
- ~ Fertiliser to farm \$23.00 per tonne
- ~ Fertiliser on the land \$180-\$200 per tonne
- ~ Wool to railhead \$6.00 per bale, and
- ~ Railage to Napier wool centre \$10.00 per bale

No doubt there are many back-country places in New Zealand where these

costs are similar, or even greater, but they help to illustrate the cost of *shifting* production.

Sociological

Servicing Centres

This region is served by seven small shopping towns, or single stores north of Gisborne. They vary in size, and generally cater for everyday needs only for the farming community. An example is Ruatoria, which is one of the biggest centres, and a little more comprehensive. It has two stock companies, two garages, a Four Square store, a bookshop, a clothing shop, an electrical supplier, a butcher, a billiard saloon, a sandwich shop, a Post Office, a bank and a hotel. Naturally, the range of goods is not extensive, which means the more discerning buyer tends to support Gisborne shops, which has the obvious repercussions locally.

Forestry

This role of land use is starting to have a major effect on our social services within the region, mostly applying to country schools, *labour* supply, stock firms, carrying firms. Also, the ratio of Maoris to pakehas is increasing in favour of Maoris in an area which has always been predominantly Maori.

Land Ownership

By far, the greatest number of farming units are owned by Maoris in the Waiapu County. There are 280 farming units which are made up of 180 economic units, and 100 marginal units. Of the 280 units, 50 or 17% of these are farmed by pakehas. There are many other units which are not considered viable.

General

The region is now **labelled** a Forestry Development area, which discourages people coming into this region to buy farms. Hence, people selling out, are not being replaced by new landowners. Some of the bigger properties which could be divided, are unlikely to attract much interest, because of the fear of isolation, and pine trees for neighbours! There is very definitely a place for forestry, but there is a strong psychological reaction to it as a neighbour.

ADVANTAGES OF FARMING ON THE EAST COAST

Climate

This is generally mild compared with other districts, but we can be subject to extremes for short periods. Rainfall varies from 3,500 mm in the west to 1,000 mm on the coast, and is winter dominant. Nor-west winds are drying, and nor-east winds bring the bulk of rain in the north, whereas south-east winds bring the rain in the south.

Considering the width of the region from east to west is pretty narrow, the growth patterns vary considerably. My hill country place doesn't have much spring growth until October, whereas my home block can be underway in early September, but as a general rule, growth will continue on both places as late as June in favourable years. Except for the current run of dry years, the whole region can expect some summer growth, but good autumn growth is common, especially late March and April. This does help to shorten the winter season.

Fertility

The region as a whole, responds well to the application of fertiliser. The western

erosion-prone lands are particularly fertile, and many properties which have been broken in and well-maintained, would carry 10 su/ha. My property is carrying this number, and we have been maintaining fertiliser input at 120 kg/ha super-phosphate, before the current drought.

The river flats are generally heavy, and would be suitable for horticultural development. In the valley where I live, a neighbour is growing asparagus and kiwifruit. Grapes are being grown in a large way at Tikitiki.

Production

This does vary according to climate and management ability. Properties which have been cleared, well fenced, had heavy initial applications of fertiliser, and lie in the western erosion-prone region, are producing 100+% lambing, 80% calving, 5+ kg wool/ewe, fattening wether lambs and fattening some dry cattle. Properties which are poorly managed and are not cleared, not fenced, receive little or no topdressing, and lie in the drier eastern belt are producing, 70% lambing, 60-70% calving, 3 kg wool/ewe, selling most of the wether lambs and all their surplus cattle as stores.

My hill country property has a mixed performance pattern. That is, the ewes perform well, and the cows are only average. Our sheep policy was to aim at lambing in mid-August, with a result varying between 95% and 105%. This has been changed to the first week in September for two reasons. We caught the best autumn flushing feed at the beginning of April, and we have missed any severe lambing-time storms. The result is the lambing has gone from 105% to 121%. The calving was also put back to try and catch better feed levels, when the bulls went out. Results are still not good, varying between 75% to 90%. The sheep to cattle ratio on my property is 63/47. There is no doubt that well-balanced farms, which are well managed also, have sheep and cattle performing well.

SUMMARY

The physical ability of the better land in the region is financially rewarding to a keen farmer, but the changing land-use and changing social patterns, are starting to win the race. It may be of interest to give the reasons as to why I am farming near Ruatoria on the East Coast.

Inheritance

I had the opportunity to buy the small farm from other members of the family. It suited what I wanted to do, so I bought it.

Value of Land

This is generally cheaper than other parts of New Zealand and when I came here, it was possible to make a living and pay debts on a small place. Towards the end of the 1960's, it became necessary to get bigger in order to survive. Hence, in 1971 I bought the other members of my immediate family out of the bigger property. We now run 12,500 stock units on both places. To do that and service a debt, would have meant a large investment in land in any other part of the country.

Locality

Although 135 km from Gisborne, the community I live in could not be better, being supported by other members of the larger original family, together with good neighbours from both races.

Income

Now that the family holding is larger, our financial position is secure, and we have now weathered most climatic problems put before the farming community.

I have been farming here for 25 years, and I am happy with the results, but, I believe the next generation of farmers to continue in this region have some large hurdles to get over. There is no easy road ahead.