

WOMEN ACHIEVING IN FARMING

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Why don't more females consider dairy farming as a career? It offers the opportunity to manage a multimillion-dollar business in a dynamic environment. Sometimes your work is like one of a teacher or farm adviser, an HR manager, a vet, a soil scientist, an agronomist, an accountant and the list goes on.

I spent six years dairy farming before I went to Massey to do a Bachelor of Applied Science in Agriculture. I had been enjoying dairy farming but had got to the stage where my progress was being limited by a lack of business knowledge (all I knew was cows and grass) as well as lack of confidence. I was young and I was a girl – I needed to be extra confident and competent if I was going to convince a farm owner that I was capable of managing their entire farm.

While at university I kept my options open looking at other possible careers, but my goal of large herd management remained. Receiving a Landcorp scholarship was my first introduction to Landcorp. In my final year I rang the Landcorp office and asked for a job. Initially they let me know about farm technician jobs they had vacant — at that stage they had never employed a female farm manager — but I gave them details of my past work experience and insisted that I was management material. I was then given the opportunity to apply for the management job at Takou Bay Dairy.

Landcorp is keen for their managers to have tertiary qualifications so this was in my favour. My past work experience, a lot of which was with large herds, also helped as did the fact that I had worked for some great employers; a huge part of what makes a good farmer is who taught them to farm. These people are also your referees and if their opinion is respected in the industry you're off to a good start. Lastly what helped me to get the job was simply having the confidence to tell them that I could do it. I knew I had worked for good people, I knew I could farm well and I had the education, and above all the drive, to do a good job.

Working for Landcorp at Takou Bay Dairy

Takou Bay Dairy is an 1100 cow split calving farm in KeriKeri, Northland. Recent development takes the effective area to 470ha. Within 5 years the farm will be milking 1300 cows with an estimated production of 585,000kgMS, 1245kg/ha. There is a 35ha calf-rearing unit 8 km down the road where all bull calves and replacement heifers are reared to 100kg before going to other Landcorp Units. To help me manage this block I employed 5 full time staff and a calf rearer.

Some of the things I enjoyed most about managing Takou Bay Dairy were:

- Designing and implementing farm policies and systems
- Attention to detail required for split calving system
- Planning the long-term direction of the farm
- Financial and physical budgeting
- Coaching staff to ensure results are achieved
- The co-operative nature of Landcorp – where every farm is like a paddock on a big nationwide farm
- Watching plans unfold – how decisions that my team made impacted on results
- Liaising with contractors to carry out cropping and development plans
- Seeing healthy well fed cows grazing in a paddock or chewing their cud in the cowshed, knowing that I was responsible for those 1000+ cows

Present situation

Below is a diagram, which illustrates the business plan that my partner Matt Wade and I developed last year to reach our goal of land ownership within eight years.



Figure 1: 2005 land ownership business plan

In June we took on an 800ha lease block in Rotorua as part of our plan. To achieve required equity growth we would build stock numbers and maintain cash income and I would work off farm in a salaried position as a Farm Supervisor/Manager/Advisor. I have recently started as a Farm Consultant working for Farmwise and I am looking forward to meeting lots of Bay of Plenty farmers.

Challenges of working as a female in the dairy industry

- I think that as a female in the industry you need to be one step ahead of the rest – I don't think I would have got the job at Takou Bay Dairy had I not done my degree. In most cases you won't out-muscle them, so out-smart them
- It's easy to get to Herd Manager level. Females are generally great with stock and with people and they are conscientious in their job. Farm owners love these qualities in an employee. It can be more difficult however to get to management level; some farm owners take a little more convincing that a capable female can have the skills necessary to manage the entire operation.
- Learn to laugh - you will still get plenty of situations when it is expected that a male is doing your job. For example, while I was at Takou Bay there were a few times when people would ring up and say, "I'm wanting to talk to the manager – is your husband there? Or worse, "Is your dad there"?"
- Some people have trouble believing that a female can have a great farming career and that it's not just a way for her to meet a farmer to marry.
- Having the confidence to manage staff that may not have had a female boss previously. Knowledge breeds confidence – if you're not confident in a particular area learn as much as you can about it until you are confident.

Tips for other females considering dairy farming as a career

- Training is available everywhere. Get as much tuition as possible – that is the easy way to get to management level.
- Interview potential employers, make sure they cut the grade - they need to:
- Be positive and motivated about their farm, the industry and you
- Encourage your career advancement
- Have a performance appraisal system in place
- Provide good working conditions, including good time off, comfortable accommodation, good remuneration and safe working environment
- Be able to teach you what you need to learn
- Be able to explain their farm system and policies to you
- Empower yourself by getting as many practical skills under your belt as possible; know what you need to learn and then find someone capable of teaching you that.
- Look after your body. Get fit before calving starts. When the cows are dry over winter, keep doing exercises to maintain your strength so you don't hurt your back when calving starts. Have a plan for how you will cope with the extra workload over calving, such as

arranging house cleaners, cooks etc. If you are not coping then tell your boss. A good boss will help you to find a solution.

- Don't postpone joy. Make sure you schedule time to do what matters most to you. This can be difficult when you live on the job. While working for Landcorp, I was able to continue with competition on my horses and hunting. I did this by:
- Scheduling personal time on my to do list and onto the work roster
- Training staff to cope in my absence and trusted their ability
- Turning my cell phone off when I was on days off – they could leave a message if it was important
- Having a holiday every year. So as not to conflict with our financial goals, we budget 5% of our earnings each year for travel. As our earnings increase so to will the extent of our travel
- Don't feel that you've got to be good at doing everything. Know your strengths and utilise those and then surround yourself with people whose strengths compliment yours
- Ask people for help – there are so many people in this industry keen to help. Get yourself a mentor!
- Don't let a bad employer put you off dairy farming– for every bad employer there's probably a hundred or more good ones.
- Accept that everyday won't be a good day and be realistic about it - all jobs have their good and bad aspects – dairying is no exception.
- Back yourself and surround yourself with others that back you too.
- And remember, girls can do anything!

What will encourage more females to consider dairy farming as a career?

- More television programmes like Macleods Daughters? Not likely. The industry needs to come up with more options for career paths, i.e. what happens when farmers want to have a family?
- Not having adverts on fencepost that say, “Wanted young guy for the 06/07 season with a genuine interest in farming”.
- Employers maintaining good flexible time off for employees, including during calving. Tools like annual leave and workload planners can be used to ensure that staff numbers are adequate right through the season to provide cover for injuries etc.
- Continuing to profile young women working in the industry through initiatives such as *Lets Talk Dairying*, *Window to Dairying*, and *Women in Dairying*.



Figure 2: The speakers at the 2006 WTD career day in Northland. Four female dairy farmers were profiled