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Short gestation market niche for Shrimpton's Hill



WORDS LIC / KATE TAYLOR PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED

SHRIMPTON'S HILL HEREFORDS, in conjunction with LIC, has chalked up one million straw sales since short gestation length semen lifted off in the dairy industry.

John and Liz McKerchar's 1430ha South Canterbury stud operation is tailored to service the dairy industry.

Up to 25 bulls were used for the stud's 2019 mating, either naturally or in its embryo transplant (ET) and artificial insemination (AI) programmes. Its short gestation breeding programme was established in 2001, selecting only for this single trait, specifically for the dairy bull and semen markets.

The couple's decisive entrepreneurial flair means they've carved out a classic market niche within the fast-changing dairy industry.

"To top one million straw sales is incredible; 19,000 of them having been sold to export markets in the past season," John says.

Until 2012, Shrimpton's Hill had been ticking away as yet another supplier to what was an established, mature, beef industry. But John says things changed in the early 2000s with the increasing dairy cow numbers and the phasing out of inducing.

"It was pretty simple for us to say, 'well, if you've got a shorter gestation bull you've got a greater opportunity to market it than a longer gestation bull'. That gave us a point of difference we were looking for. We sourced the shortest gestation bull we could find on Breedplan, in the Hereford world, and started breeding from there.

"To be fair we didn't do that with our whole herd – we just added it as a sideline... and at times there we nearly gave it away because some years you'd sell little or no semen, and then you'd get a sale to the odd company and that would encourage us to keep going.

"But inducing was forgotten about for a bit, and dairy herds were expanding that fast that everything was being kept, and a lot were being induced."

In 2012, Malcolm Ellis, at the time LIC's bull acquisition manager (nowadays LIC's general manager New Zealand markets), gave John and Liz a call out of the blue.

"We were just ticking away here doing an AI programme, but Malcolm encouraged us to do embryo transplants and scale up our

AI, and we agreed to a contract. With the LIC supply agreement in place it really gave us the confidence to reinvest, and it was easy for us to commit the whole herd down the SGL path."

2019 will see 60 embryos MOAT – Multiple Ovulation Embryo Transplant (fresh) and TVR – Trans Vaginal Recovery (frozen)) implanted and approximately 200 females artificially inseminated.

John says their operation still sells bulls to the beef industry and it remains an important aspect of the business. But they saw an opening in the dairy industry with the white face calf being so easily identified.

"We asked ourselves, 'what does the dairy industry really want?' It wants days in milk."

With shorter gestation length (SGL) today firmly entrenched in the dairy industry (generally put over lower breeding worth cows and later calvers in the herd), it's estimated by LIC that more than \$2.5 million in extra production was collectively added to farmers' milk dockets last spring, all courtesy of the shorter gestation lengths of Shrimpton's Hill Herefords.

"That's a significant number; \$2.5 million of extra income in the industry. We are very proud of that."

WHAT NOW?

John concedes big initial gains in gestation length are getting incrementally thinner and harder to make as time goes on.

"We go to the extremes of the bell curve when we're looking for genetics that will enhance the SGL programme, but we're mindful of a lot of the other traits that we have to keep an eye on. To run our cows on the tussock country we need them to be good-doing cattle, they need survivability, and we like to buy semen out of bulls with high scrotal circumference so they've got good fertility; that's crucial in our environment."

But the real Achilles heel is new bloodlines so John says they've turned to Australia.

"We've imported semen from quite a few bulls from Australia because their population is simply larger than ours and there's a lot more AI done over there – we can only purchase genetics that have been AI'd.

"So we've found a stud over there where everything is measured – they concentrate on low birth weight, high growth rate bulls, and there's very good carcass data. Every now and again they pop out an SGL bull so we hook into that and we're basically getting all those other traits for nothing."

Shrimpton's Hill will take two new sires a year from the leading Australian Wirruna Polled Herefords stud for the next five years.

A PROUD HISTORY

The Shrimpton's Hill Hereford Stud was established in 1969 by John's parents, Hamish and Jean, with cows from the Maungahina Trust dispersal sale. In 2020 the herd consists of



LEFT: McKerchars with LIC chairman Murray King.

750 females and approximately 750 support stock. Females have been added over the years from the Seafeld, Braxton, Broadacre and Leader studs.

The family also has a Border Leicester sheep stud that was established in 1869 in Southland.

While daughter Fiona works in the IT business in London at present, she is very involved in the business. Son Hamish, who is a helicopter pilot in Queenstown, will return home in autumn 2020 to take over the property, as well as continuing to fly.

"Liz and I are very aware of the privilege of now having a sixth generation involved farming pedigree stock since the first McKerchars arrived from Scotland in 1864. Our history and heritage are very important to us."

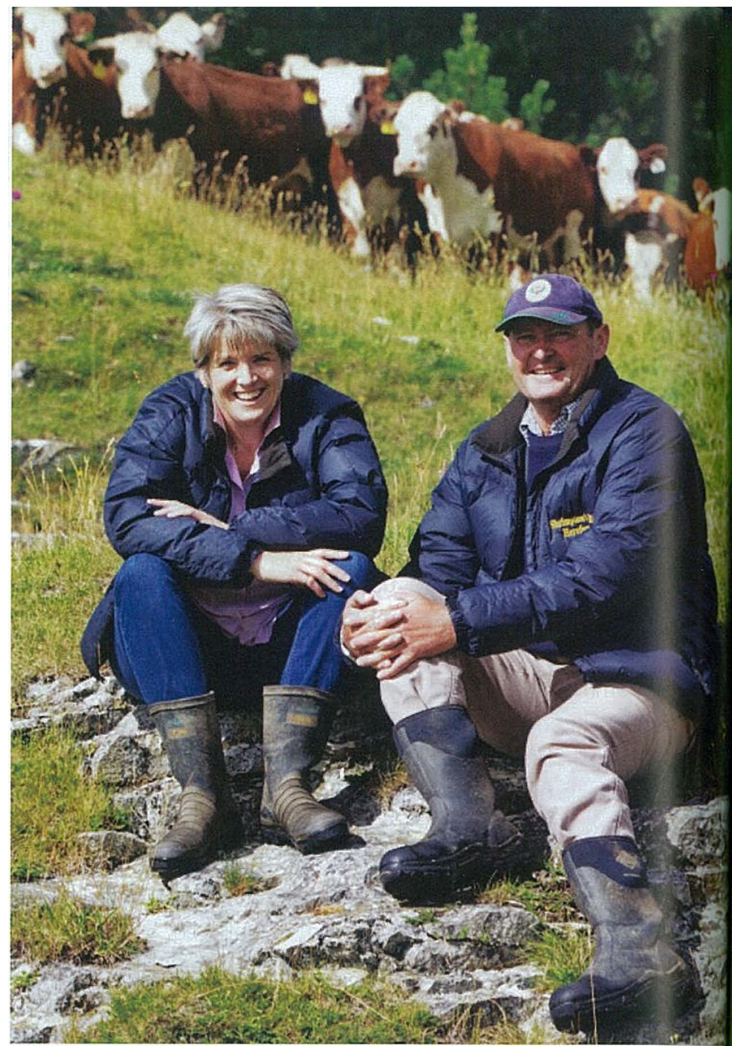
The Cannington property is a mixture of tussock and rolling farmland, John says.

"The home farm is the breeding unit and the other two smaller properties are used for growing young stock and having our bull sale."

In 2019, the stud sold all of its 174 R2 bulls at auction for an average price of \$2800 and sold a further 27 privately.

"Most of those were sold into the dairy industry – they have gone from Bluff to Nelson and the West Coast."

Their goal is to market 300 bulls annually and to scale up their regenerative farming practices, which they see as a game changer in the future. ■



ABOVE: John and Liz McKerchar at Shrimpton's Hill Herefords, Cave.