

Two farms, two entirely different systems

Rachel Graham

South Canterbury dairy farmer Arjan Van't Klooster's farming life is a life of contrasts. He spends half his time on admin and managing a busy team of 13 full timers and two part-timers, but the other half of his time is spent mucking in with the hard graft on the farm.

He also splits his time between two very different farms.

He farms two properties, one of around 270 effective hectares which he owns, and another of 360 effective hectares which he sharemilks. The larger farm has 1450 cows, while his farm has 950 cows. The farms are near Glenavy, both on good flat land by the banks of the Waitaki River between Timaru and Oamaru.

The farms are run under two very different systems, with the larger farm run as a System Five high-input farm with winter milking and split calving, and imported feed used all year—about 1.4 tonne per cow.

On that farm they have a herd home, where the winter milking cows are housed throughout the winter.

Arjan says that's a stark comparison to his farm, which he describes as having a more low-cost simplistic approach with just 250kg of imported wheat per cow per year.

He says it is interesting to be able to contrast the two systems, with benefits and drawbacks for both.

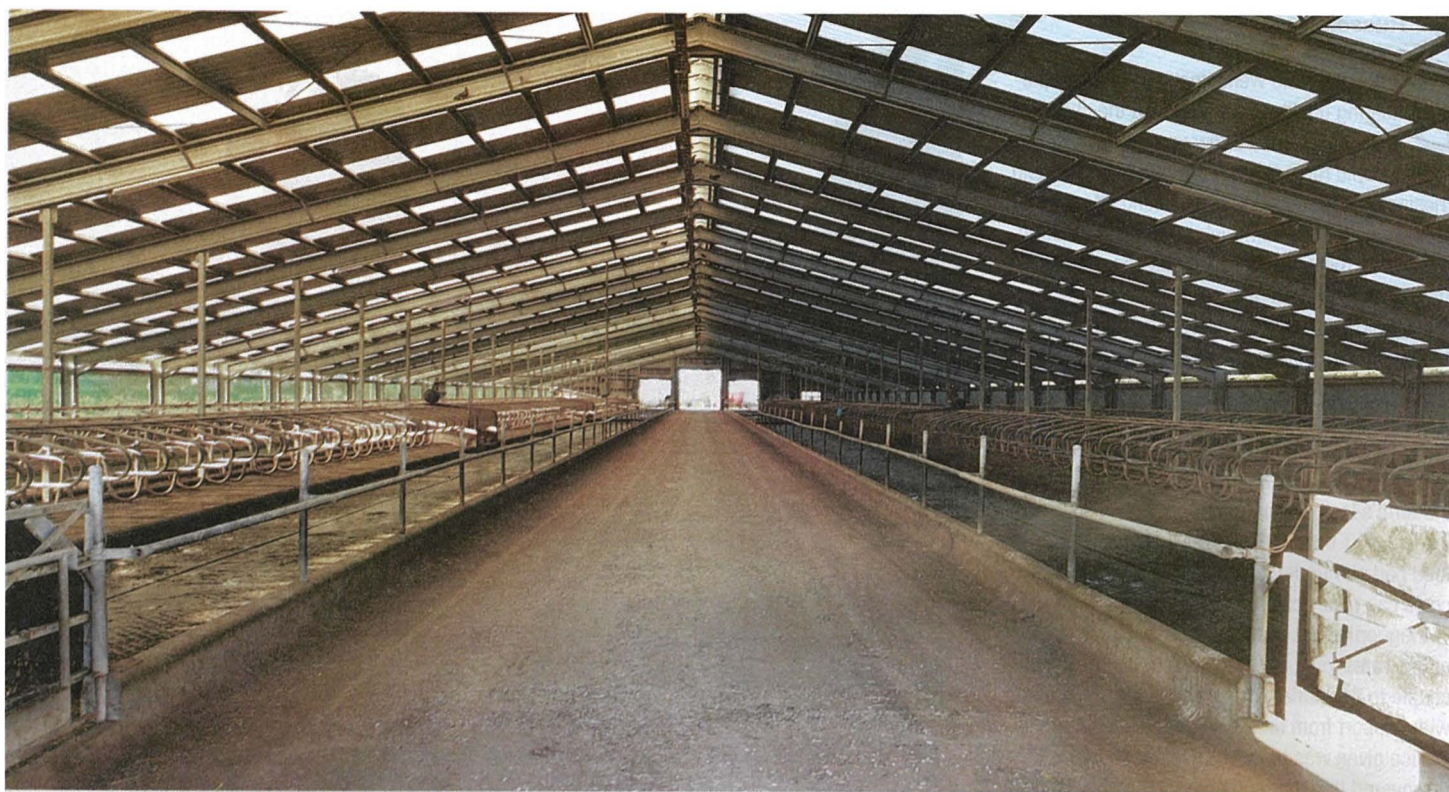
On the high-input farm they see very little feed wastage, with around 99% feed utilization in the wintering barn. Arjan says when the cows are done the only things leftover are sticks, stones, and hedgehogs.

"From what I've seen the high input farm has been more profitable. Providing you utilize that process as much as possible. But every year is different, and with the cost of inputs changing, and payouts changing, it can swing from one to the other."

He says the high input farm obviously costs more to set up and operate.

"On a year like this where costs are rising significantly, and milk pay-out is hopefully steady, then the simpler lower cost system is starting to become more favourable."

He says the milk production from the high input farm is a fair bit higher, at about 530kg MS/cow, compared to 425kgMS/cow on his own farm.



In addition to the imported feed, they also grow their own fodder beet, which they follow with oats, and recently also maize.

"We do all our own crop planting, spraying, silage harvesting and drilling. I don't think you save money doing it yourself, but it does give us more control over the timing of application and other work. It means you're not waiting on contractors who have a long list in front of them of other people eager to see them."

Arjan says he has no plans to change the formats on the farms at the moment, and is keen to observe more about the strengths and drawbacks of each system.

While Arjan jokes that his hands are getting a bit soft with so much time in the office, he says he does enjoy the mix of work.

"I think I'd get sick of both if I do either one of them for too long, so it's good to have that balance."

After ten years of hard slog, and the arrival of his two young children, Arjan says his next big focus is going to be on how to make more family time and make the most of all they have worked so hard to achieve.



The high-input farm includes a herd home where winter milking cows are housed throughout the winter. Arjan with dog Bell.

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