



A keen trumper, Tony van Gool proudly displays an area of tall tussock and flax wetland that provides clean water and would not seem out of place in the hills.

A LOVE OF THE BUSH COMBINES WITH FUTURE PROOFING' ON THE VAN GOOLS' WAITUNA DAIRY FARM

FARM OVERVIEW:

- Enterprise: Dairy farming; 425 cows; 191,000 kg milk solids.
- Property Size: Total area 152ha; effective area 145ha, 5ha wetlands and riparian strips, 2ha regenerating bush with mature canopy.
- Property location: Waituna, southern Southland plains.
- Average annual rainfall: 1050 mm.
- Altitude: 30 m a.s.l.
- Soil Type: Mokotua silt-loam loess.
- Ecological values: Remnants of several habitats which are now rare on the Southland plains are present and being restored; Podocarp forest, Red Tussock wetlands, Flax swamp and Riparian forest.

Tony and Raewyn van Gool purchased the property in 2000. Tony and Raewyn live in the Bay of Plenty and when looking to invest in dairy farming in Southland chose this particular property primarily because of its soils and pasture condition. With Tony being a keen trumper, the presence of native habitats was also an attraction.

After purchasing the property, the van Gools immediately got stuck into environmental improvements with the help of their first sharemilkers Barry and Barbara Smale, with whom they shared a passion for the environment. The first area to receive attention was a 2ha stand of mature Matai/Kahikatea forest. Due to having been used for winter stock shelter, this block was almost completely lacking an understory but had a number of weed issues. Now some eight years on, the plantings are coming away. Encouragingly, natural regeneration of native shrubs and canopy trees is already occurring indicating that the bush now has the viability to remain for many generations to come. Meanwhile, the benefits of having bush on the property are becoming

apparent with a marked increase in native birdlife, particularly since cat numbers were reduced.

The protection and enhancement of native habitats on the van Gools farm has been used as a means to achieve good buffer zones between the pasture and waterways. Several areas of existing wetlands in lower lying zones are being protected and a 5m wide buffer strip of plantings has been established along 650 m of the Waituna Stream that borders the property.

Tony has a pragmatic view of water quality issues in dairy farming, explaining that "it is easier for us to take the initiative and start the process of fencing, planting and protecting our waterways than to be told what to do by officials....And the latter would more than likely be the expensive way".

The various patches of wetland habitats on the property had persisted until the van Gools introduced their active approach because they occupied the poorly drained marginal areas with higher development costs. These patches form two fingers that bisect the farm forming the source of two tributaries in the upper catchment of the Waituna Stream, a stream that flows through the peatland into the internationally significant Waituna Lagoon before entering Toetoes Bay on the south coast.

Having been fenced off and planted, the understory of the mixed Beech-Podocarp forest is now regenerating well with the help of ongoing weed and pest control, making it more viable into the future.



Tony is proud to be helping to improve the aquatic life both on farm and downstream as far as the abundant fishery of the South coast; he hopes that more farmers in the catchment and beyond will soon engage in similar environmental protection measures.

Tony and Raewyn have not kept a close track of the costs of the habitat protection and restoration work but they estimate that what they have provided from the farm budget has been no more than a couple of thousand dollars a year. They consider this cost to be minimal for the benefit of healthier waterways. The main barrier to protecting all areas of native biodiversity present on the farm was an initial perception that valuable effective area would be lost but now Tony does not see such loss as significant given the small areas involved, the shelter benefits and the avoided capital investment for development.

A number of organizations have supported the van Gools with grants, advice and manpower. The NZ Landcare Trust and Biodiversity Southland assisted in gaining a grant of \$8000 from the Biodiversity Condition Fund (BCF) for fencing, weed control and some planting. Other groups that have provided advice and assistance include the QEII National Trust, Environment Southland, Southland District Council and Federated Farmers. QEII and the NZ Landcare

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Trust have also facilitated the involvement of the Conservation Corps to help with labour input as well as establishing links with the local Waituna Landcare Group.

The landcare group has provided plants and is a valued link with interested members of the local community, including school children.

It is impressive to see what progress has been made on this profitable unit in just eight years. Tony comments that living 1400 kilometers away does make it harder to get on with the programme of planting, weeding, fencing and predator control, indeed he adds that having supportive sharemilkers has been invaluable. Difficulties have been encountered along the way but looking back, Tony puts it all down to learning. Key learning steps Tony cites have resulted in improvements in methods for the best plant establishment such as weeding at the right time and marking plantings.

Looking into the future, the van Gools are keen to continue implementing their vision and hope to build on their success by encouraging other dairy farmers to do something similar. They also wish to welcome community groups to maintain involvement in the project, particularly in order to give school children the opportunity to learn first hand about how to care for the natural assets that we are losing from our agricultural landscapes. Goals for the coming five years include placing a covenant on the bush, completion of fencing around the wetland areas and the establishment of well placed native shelter belts. The overall aim is to ensure that all wetlands, waterways and areas of native vegetation no matter how big or small are protected because "we need to find a balance between making money and caring for the environment.....we need natural areas and once we have lost them we will never get them back"



This 5m riparian buffer strip along Waituna Stream was planted in 2002 with native trees. The objective was to stabilize the bank to reduce sedimentation, shade the stream so as to combat aquatic weed growth and the need for mechanical clearing and of course to filter out excess soluble nutrients.

This area of Red Tussock is next on the list to be fenced off and with limited plantings below it will be connected with the flax swamp that seeps into Waituna Stream. The visual amenity of the tussock area in the context of intensive pasture is particularly apparent during a windy sou'wester that was blowing when photographed.