

Living the dream



George and Lucy Williams with their son Harvey, 4.

Wairarapa farmers George and Lucy Williams are used to setting goals and achieving them. With their sheep stud business now firmly established, the fourth-generation farmers are branching out into Romney-Coopworth crossbred rams. **Natalie Campbell** reports.



Tinui couple George and Lucy Williams set themselves the goal of farm ownership more than a decade ago. It's a goal they have not only achieved but they've also expanded on having helped implement a successful succession plan to buy the family farm. George and Lucy (Luce), are living and breathing their dream and are proud of it.

Goals of farm ownership, farming 10,000 stock units and establishing a sheep stud have all been realised. Both are originally from Wairarapa farming families and have a huge sense of pride in being on the family farm. Their farm at Tinui, east of Masterton, is 1580ha (1050ha effective). Grassendale is a summer dry, hill-country property on predominately sandstone and argillite soils. The topography comprises about

679ha steep hill country, 260ha medium hill country and 115ha flats. The farm is producing a total of 190kg LW/ha. The couple aim to reach production of 210kg LW/ha. Gross farm revenue for the past financial year was \$950/ha and standard expenses \$470/ha. Grassendale's economic farm surplus is \$400/ha and the return on capital averages 5.6%.

The Williams' continuing goal is to increase the income and efficiencies of a traditional sheep and beef farm by using best management practice and continuing genetic improvements. One big step they have taken towards this is by establishing a stud sheep operation.

In 2009 the Williams purchased a Coopworth stud from nearby Tinui breeders, Ross and Bev Seymour. The stud was originally known as Valley Coopworths and the Williams renamed it Grassendale Coopworths. They now sell to about 50 clients who are regular and repeat buyers.

The couple acknowledge the sheep component of their business is their priority. However, they are quick to point out that the success of their flock



The front aspect of Grassendale.

wouldn't be possible without the influence of the breeding cow herd and the role it plays in grooming pastures.

The Williams bought their first farm of 311ha in 2005 with the support of both their families. It is a neighbouring property to the family farm that they later purchased from Lucy's parents, John and Sue Dalziell.

The purchase of the Dalziell family farm, Grassendale, in 2009 occurred via a succession plan that was implemented with Masterton farm consultant Phil Guscott.

"We are now fourth generation on the farm," Luce says. They have three children – Max, 7, Sofia, 5, and four-year-old Harvey.

Luce says without the succession plan and support of both families the move wouldn't have been possible.



The role of the Williams' cattle herd is to groom pastures to maximise sheep production. Photo: supplied

Quality the key

Growing up on the Little Avondale horse stud near Masterton, George Williams always had an interest in genetics and the breeding of high-quality livestock. He also spent time working for Derek Daniel at Wairere as well as working on several 40,000su stations in the South Island.

George and wife Lucy also undertook a sharefarming venture with Derek Daniel in 2006. They bought 1000 recorded Wairere Romney ewes and 700 Romney Texel ewes and began producing their own high-quality genetics which they sold back to Wairere.

The couple say this was a key to their success on their first farm because while two droughts followed their purchase at the height of the market, the sharefarming venture gave them the ability to focus on bodyweight for production and performance.

Wool is viewed as a valuable product on Grassendale and fleece characteristics are monitored, despite George recognising there are some people who still consider wool as a by-product of sheep.

The couple believe the fortunes of wool will return and they say it has a lot to offer as a product.

"It's a superior and completely renewable product – it is a better product than man-made fibres," George says.

Well-stocked flock

Production and maternal traits attracted George and Lucy Williams to Coopworths.

"We don't scan less than 200% in our recorded Coopworth ewes and each year we dock an average 160%," he says.

They also recently bought a Romney stud – the Raho Ruru stud of Marcus Edge and John Hulme near Pirinoa – and have joined the Wairarapa Romney Improvement Group.

"The Romneys and Coopworths complement each other," George says.

They have established a flock of Romworths – half Romney and half Coopworth genetics. In the Romworth flock they have stabilised the gains of hybrid vigour and along with their Coopworth and Romney rams will offer the crossbred rams for sale later this year.

George says sheep farmers are looking for stabilised sheep breeds that offer extra production. The Williams run 5000 ewes

in total – of which 2000 are recorded with SIL – comprising of 500 recorded Romney ewes, 1000 Coopworths and 500 Romworths. The stud ewes are all single-sire mated along with the recorded hoggets.

This year the two-tooth and four-tooth Coopworth ewes will be mated to a Romney ram to stabilise the Romworth. The remainder of the commercial ewe flock is joined to a Sufrex ram. The flock replacements are bred from the four-tooth and six-tooth ewes.

The total farm docking tally last year was 148% from a total farm scanning of 177%.

The ram joins the ewes on March 25 for two cycles with the target of a ewe mating liveweight (LW) of 64-67kg LW for the mixed-age ewes. The goal for the two-tooths is 60-63kg LW. Hoggets are mated at a minimum of 42kg LW and a total of 1200 hoggets are mated across



Romney and Coopworth two-tooth rams will be used for mating this year.

the three breeds. George says the hoggets typically scan 130% and dock 98%.

"That's useful – I'm not a believer in having stock not producing," he says.

Single-sire mating means the Williams end up with 20 mobs of recorded sheep to manage. These are consolidated into two mobs for winter management running over two 60-day rotations once the ram comes back in. George says before scanning the ewes are used to clean-up pasture but post-scanning they are fed as well as possible.

Lambing starts on August 20 and the aim is to have all lambs weaned by the end of November.

"That is part of our drought mitigation plan. We try to get down to our wintering numbers prior to Christmas. It's a dry, hard sandstone-based property," George says.

The lambs are sold early as stores, weighing an average of 28.5kg LW. Last lambing was the first time the entire lot were bought by Rathmoy Farms of Hunterville for finishing.

The ewe lambs go on to a crop of plantain in February where they stay and lamb until the following December with the aim being to allow half of their time on the crop without lambs. This encourages the ewe hoggets to grow out into a good two-tooth.

The ewes, which are bred for efficiency, are put through a rigorous animal health policy.

There is a nil-drench policy in place for mixed-age ewes with ewe hoggets receiving a final drench when their lambs are docked. The stud rams receive a drench at weaning in November as lambs and then again in March before being sold as two-tooths the following November.

"It's a good opportunity to put them under natural pressure for selection," George says.

Their ram breeding philosophy is to breed hardy, resistant sheep with high production, efficiency and structural soundness.

George says clients notice the structural soundness and thicker shape of the rams which are suited to hill country.

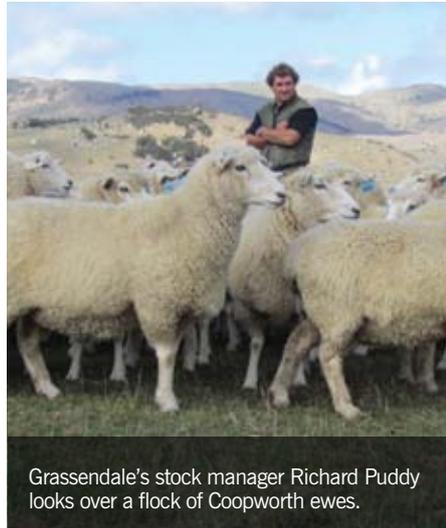
"We cull hard to breed what we feel farmers want – it's about breeding the right ram with the perfect shape."

The sale rams are mob stocked and rotated. They are scanned for eye muscle and all fleeces are weighed and classed. Culling takes into consideration performance data and eye appraisal.

"We measure them on five traits – reproduction, meat, growth, survival and wool," George says.

Then they are all tipped up and checked for soundness.

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Grassendale's stock manager Richard Puddy looks over a flock of Coopworth ewes.



The Grassendale Romney flock. Photo: supplied



Tinui farmers George and Lucy Williams have a huge deal of pride in being able to continue the family farm.

Drought strategy

Livestock systems and management policies on George and Lucy Williams' farm have been established to help lessen the effects of farming in a summer dry and high-wind area.

George says given the prolonged drought experienced this summer all their livestock classes are looking well.

"We have set up systems to minimise the effects of drought."

He says management decisions they make early lets them get to the start of winter with stock coping well.

"Our policies allow us to mitigate the risk of drought."

One is to mate 1200 ewe hoggets. Any weighing under 41kg LW are sent away to graze along with hoggets scanned not in-lamb. The sale of store lambs early in the season also eases feed demand during the dry.

They have also spread 70kg/ha of urea over 400ha in a bid to boost pasture growth and maximise early winter rainfall.

A mixture of Greenly cocksfoot, clover and plantain has been planted on 15ha as a permanent pasture on the harder, more exposed country. Direct drilling was used to sow the mix to reduce topsoil erosion. Another 15ha has been planted in ryegrass and oats which will be break-fed to either weaners or ewes.

The ewes have been put into two mobs and are now grazing on two 54-day rotations. George says there is very little residual pasture cover as utilisation is high but all the ewes are in good health.

The cows have recently been mobbed up and stocked on ineffective areas of the farm, such as in pine tree blocks.



Grassendale carries 170 breeding cows, predominately Simmental with some Angus. Photo: supplied

Groomed for performance

The cattle policy on Grassendale is very simple and the role of the cow herd is clear: they are there to groom pastures to maximise sheep production and performance.

The farm carries 170 breeding cows, predominately Simmental with some Angus. In the past a Simmental bull has been used but this year George and Lucy Williams bought Speckle Park bulls.

Lucy says when they bought their farm from her parents the Simmental herd went with it.

With much of the couple's focus placed on sheep it is hoped the influence of the Speckle Park bull will help moderate the size of the Simmental cow herd – their aim is to breed a moderately framed animal which is more suited to the hard hill country.

They have previously leased Speckle Park bulls from Mark McKenzie of Maungahina stud near Masterton and found the calves ticked the boxes so decided to buy bulls for use this year.

Weaning takes place in March and all bull calves are castrated. They leave Grassendale at the beginning of their second winter when they are sent to a finishing farm at 18 months old.

"We have a joint venture with a finishing property.

"Those cattle are weighed and valued as they leave Grassendale at about 450-500kg LW and the aim is to kill them off the finishing farm by Christmas time and we split the difference between the value of them leaving Grassendale and the slaughter price," George says.

All the steers kill out at an average of 320kg carcassweight (CW). The cattle that go to the finishing property are the steers and a B mob of heifers. The heifers on average kill out at 240-260kg CW.

The couple say the fertility, carcass data and yield are just some of the characteristics that attracted them to the Speckle Park bulls.

The bull joins the mixed-age cows on December 20, and the heifers on November 20 for two months.

The heifers are joined with a low-birthweight Simmental bull sourced from

Colin Hutchings at Dannevirke.

During calving the heifers are run among the recorded ewes and while they are seen every day during the lamb-tagging rounds, George says the low birthweight bull has meant calving management of the heifers has plummeted.

"There is minimal calving management," he says.

Heifers used to be calved behind a wire and shed out but George says keeping it as simple as possible has been key since the introduction of the sheep studs because they are fully committed to tagging lambs over those months.

Herd replacements are selected in March with selection made on type, size and structural soundness. On average, 40 heifers will be selected as herd replacements. Heifers are mated as yearlings at 390kg LW.

"We mate heifers for the production – we don't like having something not doing anything and it's easy with the low-birthweight bull," George says.

"Farms are production-based platforms and we need to harvest as much as we can each year."

The calving date has been pushed back a month and the Williams aimed to have farm pastures tidied up by the end of April in preparation for winter.

The couple leave the cows "away" for as long as possible before they are spread among the ewes after lambing.

George recognises the cows have added a lot to the sheep aspect of the business.

"We couldn't do it without them – they are an extremely valuable tool to us.

It is the key to their early weaning weight lambs and sale date.

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A mob of heifers on George and Lucy Williams' Tinui property. The cattle policy has a vital role in the success of the sheep operation. Photo: supplied



Weathering the storm

Tinui is known for its summer dry environment which means George and Lucy Williams prepare for that early, reducing stocking numbers down to winter carrying capacity in December.

Two of the biggest challenges facing George and Lucy Williams on their farm are the summer dry and wind. George says having early weaning and maintaining ewe condition all-year round gives them some insulation from these challenges.

He describes the wind run as fierce. The wind characteristics of the district were the reason there was a wind farm site proposed for the valley – had it gone

ahead it would have been the largest wind farm in Australasia.

On some days, the couple say, the force of the wind is such that it's impossible to stand up on the hills or hear anything other than a roar.

"The wind is ferocious and between that and our soil types the pasture can go off pretty quick."

George says the wind generally picks up in September, which is unfortunately

lambing time. He says most farmers lose lambs from southerly storms during lambing.

"We can lose a lot of lambs in a north-west storm," he says.

With management systems in place to help ease the effect of their farm's various challenges, George and Lucy have set themselves a list of new goals to tick off. To get there they have surrounded themselves with people they believe can help them reach those goals.

They have identified their strengths and weaknesses and have established a management team who they meet with twice during the year. The couple agree it's a process that has added valuable progress towards their goals.

Expanding the ram breeding operation is their priority.

They'd also like to position themselves to have capital to invest off-farm and ensure their own family succession is equal in opportunity for all three children and early enough for them to use the best years of their working lives.



Max, 7, George, Harvey, 4, Sofia, 5 and Lucy, are all active in the Tinui community and have developed a family recreational area on the farm. Photo: supplied

Busy times

Along with juggling the demands of a growing business and young family, George and Lucy Williams are heavily involved in the Tinui community. Lucy also practices veterinary physiotherapy part-time and is a keen horsewoman. George has recently discovered a passion for dirt bike riding.

As well as conserving stands of native bush, the couple have also developed bush tracks for walking and riding that lead on to an area of the farm developed as a family recreation area. They employ two labour units – stock manager Richard Puddy and general hand Stacy Torwick.