

GOD Project

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***GROW ORGANIC DAIRY project***



**Results and Resources**

***Grow Organic Dairy Resources***

- Healthy Soil
  
- Healthy Pasture
  
- Healthy Animals
  
- Healthy Livelihoods

## **A successful project has generated lots of new knowledge**

The four year Grow Organic Dairy (GOD) project that concluded in March 2013 was a unique collaboration between farmers and applied scientists to measure exactly what the farmers were doing - and then help them do it better.

*“It wasn't just a case of one party listening to another”, says Waikato dairy farmer John Vosper. “It was a two-way conversation, with farmers and scientists talking to and learning from each other.”\**

His view is seconded by Kerry Harrington, senior lecturer in weed science at Massey University, who says *“Part of our job as academics is to feed information back to the wider community and this was a good chance to do this. But it wasn't just a case of dishing out advice. We were learning from farmers at the same time.”*

The GOD project was managed for the ODPG by Wairarapa-based scientist Esther Dijkstra, whose consultancy EcoAgriLogic specialises in the science of agricultural sustainability. It was funded by the Sustainable Farming Fund and DairyNZ.

The ***main objective of the project*** was

- **to research and share successful organic management practices**

with a view to

- growing the organic dairy network
- lifting the production of individual farms
- increasing innovation
- &
- making sustainable dairying production methods attractive to other farmers

The project focussed on ***four key areas of farm performance***:

- soil health and fertility
- pasture health and management

- animal health and productivity
- financial health and efficiency



The **methodology** of the project was to create a team of farmers (covering 9 farms from 3 different regions – Waikato, Taranaki and Manawatu – all non-irrigated but otherwise quite diverse in their size, soils, rainfall, stock numbers and type, etc.) and scientists (5 staff and 3 post-graduate students) from Massey University, with a range of specialties, plus project co-ordinator Esther Dijkstra. The team then worked on studying each farm's performance separately, using the Dairybase and Overseer data collection and analysis tools, plus everyone got together as a group many times to compare findings and build up a knowledge base on what was working well, and why, along with identifying problems that needed addressing and possible ways to do this.

Waikato farmer George Moss commented on the process: *“On a personal level I really enjoyed interacting with other farmers and swapping ideas. I respect their experience and it was great to be able to get feedback on what we are doing.”*

Mark and Jane Pike, a Waikato farming couple, felt that the GOD project process helped reinvigorate their enthusiasm for organic dairying. They have been doing it since 2000 and as Mark said: *“You get used to doing your own thing day after day and it can become ordinary. But this project definitely helped keep the 'grey matter' ticking over.”*

Soil scientist Dave Horne was impressed with the farmers' attitude towards the application of science, saying *“They were eager to get a scientific view on everything they did, and they wanted the facts to speak for themselves.”* Professor Nicola Shadbolt felt that using Dairybase was very motivating for the farmers involved, saying *“As they started getting the figures, they rose to the challenge of trying to improve year after year. It became a very healthy competitive environment.”*

The **outcomes** of the project are in line with its objectives, as follows:

- the organic dairy network has been strengthened as a result of the research collaboration, and is beginning to grow accordingly;

- all of the farms participating have learned ways to lift their production;
  - all of the farms have tried and are using new farm management techniques, and have shared their own own-farm innovations with each other and with the scientists;
- &
- a range of information sheets, research papers and notes have been produced to make sustainable dairying production methods easily accessible to both organic and non-organic farmers. These are all available on the ODPG website.

Farmer Mark Pike thinks that the trial work conducted and experience gained will benefit the organic farmers of the future. *“Hopefully it will maker life a little easier and less painful for those entering the industry”*, he says.

A **summary of the findings** in each of the four key farm performance areas is given below, along with links to the Resource pages where all the information collated by the GOD project plus other relevant material can be found.