

Breeding better and better cows.

About halfway between Hamilton and Raglan lies the small township of Whatawhata and the Karakariki Valley. It's here that sharemilkers Chris & Jenny Knight have been milking on the Kirkbride 150 acre farm for over 15 years. It's a hilly farm with some steep parts that the dairy cows can only be on for a short time. So they plant turnips on the steeper paddocks and run a few beef bulls to make the most of the resource. The steep terrain means the 440 dairy cows aren't your typical Friesian herd - Chris needs lighter, more nimble animals.

"Because it's a hilly farm, we don't really want the big Friesians, so we've more of a crossbred cow. We crossbreed them back to crossbreeds and are slowly building up our BW..."

For Chris, BW makes a good herd. He's not particularly interested in looks, but more focused on performance. High BW cows, that are nice and quiet and produce lots of milk.

It's all in the genes.

"You can't improve what you don't know" is a phrase often used by farmers and Chris Knight is quick to point out that products like LIC's GeneMark are an essential part of his herd management. Chris explains:

"We use DNA testing to get the parentage right on our calves. When you're trying to breed high BW cows, it's important to make sure they're out of who you think they are..."

Chris has been using LIC's GeneMark since 2016. One reason was he'd moved off the farm and didn't want to leave the whole responsibility to staff to try and match calves to their mothers. When the first results came in, he was shocked by the amount of mismothering in the herd. He even discovered that some calves weren't from his AB bulls. Or as Chris put it: *Certain bulls get over fences!*

GeneMark takes away a lot of the worry and stress - particularly at calving time. On Chris's farm, calves can wander miles away and it's easy for them to get mismothered. But there's no point stressing about it as GeneMark will quickly match them up correctly later and that makes everyone's lives easier.

"We think our future is in breeding better cows. If the future's going to be fewer cows on the same area we need to breed elite cows and ensure we keep the right replacements through GeneMark parent verification."

Adding another layer of accuracy.

In his drive for better cows, Chris has also recently stepped up to LIC's Genomic Evaluation service to add an extra layer of accuracy. The Genomic Evaluation Service increases the reliability of an animal's breeding worth as well as individual breeding value traits from approximately 30-35% to around 50-55% - giving a more reliable prediction of a calf's expected performance before they start milking.

These days you need that extra reliability in young stock so you can breed from the best earlier and drive your genetic gain with confidence. Chris explains:

"We think our future is in breeding cows, not breeding bulk cows, but better cows. We want to bring in elite cows...the future's going to be fewer cows on the same area and the only way to do that is through breeding."

