

Ep 18 - Smarter Wintering: Practical Strategies for Healthier Stock, Soil & Teams

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Sarah Thorne: Catchment Convos with Thriving Southland. Your link to Southland Catchment groups and their impactful projects. Each episode will dive into grassroots efforts by local farmers and communities that are driving change and sustainability in our region. Listen in for inspiring stories and insight. Real people, real Change the Southland Way.

Welcome to Catchment Convos. My name is Sarah Thorne, and I'm your host today. I'm one of the Thriving Southland team and have the wonderful job of working with Southland's Catchment Groups.

Joining me for today's episode are Hedgehope Makarewa Catchment Group members Andrew Miller and Simon Topham to talk about wintering - their systems, key information, top tips, and how they're continually improving what they do to get the best outcomes for their land, water, and businesses.

Both Andrew and Simon winter their cows on farm and use data and expert advice to continually improve their systems. They've also been [00:01:00] involved in industry and regional trials, along with local Catchment Group projects to help make great decisions for their farms and the environment.

Together, we'll look at their wintering systems, why they winter this way, the information they used to make key decisions and what they're looking at doing next.

So let's get into it.

Welcome to Catchment Convos Andrew and Simon, it's lovely to have you on our podcast. Would you like to introduce yourself to our listeners and tell us a bit about your farms?

Andrew Miller: Hi, I'm Andrew Miller, farming out at Glencoe in Southland. We're farming 620 hectares, sheep and beef and dairy support, and we also have a 400 hectare dairy farm, almost neighboring to our sheep and beef property.

Sarah Thorne: Thanks, Andrew. Simon.

Simon Topham: We're dairy farmers at Hedgehope. We have a family farm here that my wife and I own part of, and we lease. We've got two little kids running round. Elliot, who's six, and Sophie who's turning four in May. They keep us pretty busy and [00:02:00] other things that keep us busy, feeding the cows over winter. We've got 800 cows. Some indoors, some outdoors, and fully self-contained with a runoff. So we do all our own young stock.

Sarah Thorne: You both have strong family operations. Can you tell us a bit about your wintering systems and why you choose to winter this way?

Simon Topham: We've evolved over the last four years since we've started a new farm with the wintering barn. So we used to be all outdoors and did a mix of crop and baleage and grass, and now we're 500 cows indoors and then outdoors is about 400 to 440 head of stock and the stuff at the dairy farm is baleage grass with PK. There's a reason why which I can go into and then the stuff at the runoff is a mix of crop and the rest is pretty much baleage and grass and they're all sort of more young stock or fat cows that don't sort of need to go on the barn 'cause they'll get too fat for spring.

Sarah Thorne: And you were saying about your baleage and PPK.

Simon Topham: The ones that [00:03:00] are on baleage and PK at the dairy farm are the skinny cows or lame cows. So they need some real special care. Quite often they're skinny 'cause they don't like the barn. So they've probably not sat in the beds when we've been trying to extend lactation and things like that. So they get dried off early and go on PK to sort of drive weight gain and dry down the cost of wintering.

Sarah Thorne: Bit of tender loving care there just to bring them on.

Brilliant. And you, Andrew.

Andrew Miller: We're wintering about 650 cows all outdoors on kale crop. And then also wintering the young stock, about 200 heifers and about 220 replacement calves as well. We all sort of changed our systems. We used to winter, just the traditional way on Swedes until we bought the dairy farm about four years ago now and that sort of pushed us to change what we were doing. It wasn't well suited to winter and cows and our [00:04:00] climate. So we had a go at block grazing on kale, which really changed the way we winter, in a good way for us. It wasn't really working the traditional way, with the soil types and

the winter climate for us. If we couldn't have found a better way to do it, we were gonna outsource it, to another area that was better suited. So, that's been a bit of a change for us and a learning experience. It sort of evolved over the years, fine tuning it as we go. But it's working really well so far.

Sarah Thorne: Did the seed of the idea for the block grazing on the kale come from the Georgie Galloway, Graham Marshall Lower, Oreti Field Day.

Andrew Miller: It did, yeah. So prior to that, didn't really know a lot about, for cows anyway, block grazing, how it looked, how it was done, yeah. Went along to one of the field days and thought this is a great idea. We should have a go at this and that's sort of how it all started really.

Sarah Thorne: That links on beautifully Andrew, to my next question actually. What information do you think is key in making good wintering decisions [00:05:00] on your farms?

Andrew Miller: Uh, the key decisions to make are look at probably your potential issues that you might run into and for your particular system, whatever that may be. Like in our instance, it was pugging and winter unfortunately can make a lot of mud if the weather's wet when you're wintering out outdoors on crop, obviously. So that led us to to look for a better way to try and improve and minimize that risk for ourselves.

Sarah Thorne: And you, Simon.

Simon Topham: I'll just build on from Andrew really. Our runoffs got a quite a variation in topography and soil type, so it's just picking how heavily stocked or heavily, you can go with the feed in terms of on the baleage grass system, whether you're better at a hundred bales, a hectare, or you know, sort of 70. Basically picking the right amount of feed for the paddock and then the right class of stock for the paddock as well. 'Cause we can vary all that.

Then also knowing the paddock history [00:06:00] from crop history. So if there's a issue around wild Turnip, which is our biggest challenge at the runoff, and you're like me and don't like using fodder beet, you've gotta use other tools. So it's just matching the stock up for the kind of feed you've got and the paddock that best fits them. And then just knowing the end goals. So if you know you've got a mob that you wanna hold and not put too much weight on you put them on probably a dry paddock 'cause you can possibly push 'em a bit harder. And then animals that probably you're gonna be really pouring the high quality feed into like a crop paddock. Slightly damper conditions and then just

mitigate that risk of there's less baleage, so just more crop and stuff, and they can pack the feed on that way and, move through that crop quicker. So that's the levers we pull to get the outcomes we want without damaging the soil.

Sarah Thorne: That's fantastic. When you know your key issues and challenges, where do you go to get your information from and [00:07:00] different ideas to resolve them?

Andrew Miller: We get a lot of information like being in close contact and talking about a plan well in advance. Your seed rep and your fertilizer reps and identifying the paddocks and the areas that you might wanna be wintering on, and making the right choices about what needs to go into that paddock.

And then also the likes of your catchment groups, which for myself is where we run into the idea of the block grazing. So yeah, keeping in contact with other farmers and catchment groups, agencies.

Simon Topham: I'm the same as Andrew. Catchment groups were really good and the Southern Dairy Hub. There was that big change of sort of wintering focus, and now it's a balance towards sort of animal welfare and the environment.

That whole change through then was really key to get out there and see how others were doing it. Everything from how they did porta water troughs, how they grazed paddocks and kept stock outta swales. And just seeing the massive benefits people were getting, [00:08:00] both their staff and re-grassing the paddocks quicker from those little tweaks that people were making.

And even a couple years ago, we saw two day breaks on one farm on baleage grass or three day breaks, and that sort of just reinforced that you don't have to do it the way it's always been done, just like Andrew's doing with the block grazing on kale. A small tweak and all of a sudden it's just like, man, this is awesome.

Sarah Thorne: That's a great point, Simon. You mentioned evolution before and you're constantly tweaking your systems, aren't you? And you're planning for winter grazing. That just doesn't happen the month before it happens. It's kind of almost over the whole year, isn't it? You're thinking about how you're gonna do it and how you're gonna make it work.

Simon Topham: Yep. Yeah, no, exactly. So right from where you put the bales and everything and it's always evolving. Every year we try something different just to keep the staff on their toes and try and make it better.

Sarah Thorne: So, I know your local Catchment Group very well 'cause I've had the pleasure of supporting them over, oh gosh, probably over a decade now. And you've had two amazing projects. One [00:09:00] was Winter Crop Establishment trial. And the other was understanding what's beneath your feet in your landscape. You were one of the first Catchment Groups, if not the first to kind of create a really visual, easy to use online platform so people knew what was happening on their land. They could see any spots that were a bit wetter, any spots that were a bit more prone to nitrate loss or phosphate loss and use it on your farms.

Have either of those projects helped you guys with your winter grazing systems?

Andrew Miller: Yeah, most definitely. It's a great tool. The more information you can have, the better your decision making. You can obviously identify areas that are not suited to winter grazing or, areas that might be able to handle a higher stocking rate identifying the swales and the low points and paddocks. It is a really good tool. It helps that whole planning process and mitigating as much risk as you can.

Sarah Thorne: Because you are one of the case study farms for the understanding our landscape, weren't you Andrew?

Andrew Miller: Yeah, that's right. A huge amount of [00:10:00] information come out of it and it was really cool. One pleasing thing I think we got out of it was there's a lot of risk areas that, we already knew were there and were doing the right thing about, but it's great to be able to back it up with the data and show that we are doing the right thing. Which is quite cool.

Sarah Thorne: So when you're looking at tweaking your wintering system or adopting something new, is there key stop go points for your farm? Like key bits you get to and you say, this is gonna work for me, or, no, this isn't gonna work for me.

Simon Topham: I suppose our key stop go is just trying to manage that soil loss and then not having a crop or a sort of intensity of feeding that's gonna cause a negative outcome, both on stock welfare and also the paddocks.

So we've got a stop go that I've already mentioned around fodder beat. I had a bad experience. I know it works for a lot of people, but for me that's a stop. So that chat means that we have to use other tools to get a good amount of feed into the stock and get the outcomes we want.

Yeah, that's probably for me, [00:11:00] and I hate baleage wrap left in paddocks. So it's how can we plan ahead so that we can potentially get in there and open all the bales at the runoff, like once a week, so there's no risk of, bale wrap, getting left in paddocks. Cause I have a good relationship with my contractor and I wanna keep it. So yeah, it's just little things like that.

Sarah Thorne: That's a fantastic point, Simon. Andrew, have you anything you'd like to add to that?

Andrew Miller: Yeah, probably much the same as Simon. A big stop go point for us, which we, we run across in our first year of wintering cows, is that the traditional way in our system of wintering cows, it was a stop go point for us. If we couldn't come up with a better way that had less damage to the environment we weren't gonna do wintering of cows. So, that was a big one. That's what was the main driver to try and change the way we were doing things to find a better way.

And also much the same as Simon as well with the baleage wrap. It's a pet hate seeing rubbish around everywhere in a paddock. So [00:12:00] making plans and having systems and finding a better way to do it.

Sarah Thorne: I think the thing that amazes me about you guys is you're so good at going off farm and talking to other people and going to field days, and learning and picking up new ideas. I know that many farmers do that as well, but I love the way you bring it back and you incorporate it into your businesses, I think that's fantastic.

Simon Topham: I suppose that's just been slightly younger and the energy's infectious. So when you come back energized, you energize the people around you. And then I don't know it happens and some of that stuff doesn't take a heap of time or effort it just sort of naturally falls into place once you've got everyone on a clear path rather than just running around like headless chickens. Bit of planning and a time you've got it in autumn can make winter so much easier and people see that.

Andrew Miller: Yeah, definitely. It's very easy just to get stuck down in the weeds in the day to day, and I don't have time to do anything other than just

work when half a day or a day off farm can completely [00:13:00] change and open your eyes to easier, better ways of doing things.

So it is worthwhile getting out there and seeing how other people do it as well.

Sarah Thorne: And how do you share it with your farm teams when you get back? Do you have like regular team meetings? Do you have WhatsApp Messenger groups?

Simon Topham: We're both, yeah. Um, team meetings and we've got a full Filipino team here, so we just give them some of the handouts and show them videos. They love videos, and it just seems to work.

Andrew Miller: We're much the same. Yeah. Weekly meetings and talking about different things like that.

Sarah Thorne: I guess that brings me to my final question for our podcast today. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Simon Topham: I suppose just whenever you're thinking about your system, don't just focus on what's easiest to graze the paddock, focus on what's at best for the cows and easiest for your team. I think it's a change of perspective. So a bit of planning and putting the people who are out there every day doing it first and the cows who have to live in it first as well equal, and then just putting that effort in at the [00:14:00] start to make that simpler. It's one of those things. I grew up in Southland. I can walk across mud like a Pukeko or whatever my wife says. So, I never thought about going and starting the paddock at the back and coming towards the front. And then my wife who's from Canterbury and never walked in mud, came out, she's like, this is stupid.

So it's about just making it easier for people 'cause then they'll go out there and go the extra mile and let them know that that's why we do it. You put this effort in now 'cause it makes it easier for them in winter. And they appreciate that they're being thought about.

Sarah Thorne: That's amazing, Simon. Thank you for sharing that.

Andrew Miller: I'll just say that a bit of forward planning and thought into your winter grazing plans at this time of the year is invaluable when it comes to winter. 'cause when it starts raining and things get wet and you have cattle or sheep for that matter on crop, a little bit of foresight and planning makes a huge difference when you're in the day-to-day doing it. It may seem like a lot of pre-

work and setting [00:15:00] up and getting things organized, but when it comes to the wintertime, like Simon said, no one likes walking around in mud more than you have to or making more mud than you need to.

So yeah, fore planning and having a wee think about things makes a huge difference.

Sarah Thorne: They sound very wise words.

Thank you so much for joining me today and giving us such a great insight into how you farm and looking after your land and water. Please keep doing what you're doing to help look after our wonderful part of the world.

And that's a wrap for another episode of Catchment Convos, brought to you by Thriving Southland. A big thanks to our guests for being part of the conversation on today's episode, and to you guys for tuning in. We appreciate your support. Don't forget to like, subscribe, and follow us wherever you get your podcast from so you can stay up to date with all the latest episodes as they're released. For more information on this episode, check out the show notes or head to the Thriving Southland website where you can also learn more about the awesome work happening across the Catchment [00:16:00] Groups here in Southland. And if you've got a project or an idea you want to share, don't be shy. Reach out. So until next time, keep up the good work out there on the land and as always, stay connected and keep driving those changes for a thriving Southland.