

Māori Dairying: Our Place. Our People. Our Future.

The economic contribution of Māori to the economy of Aotearoa New Zealand nearly doubled from \$17 billion in 2018 to \$32 billion in the five years to 2023, with Māori dairy farming contributing \$4.4 billion (about 14%).

In the Kurahaupō rohe, which includes Wairarapa, 87% of assets held by Māori collectives were in the food and fibre sector. Data noted here comes from Te Ōhanga Māori 2023, a report on the Māori economy released in March this year. It analyses census data about assets owned by Māori collectives and managed on behalf of Māori, hapu and iwi.

Award-winning Wairarapa Moana Incorporation

Wairarapa Moana Incorporation (WMI) is one example of Māori collective dairy farming that shines. WMI won the Ahuwhenua Trophy last year, described by Anaru Smiler, Group General Manager as “a major highlight and milestone for WMI.”

More than anything, it validated that “the leadership and huge efforts of our people in nurturing our whenua and building an industry-leading business mean we continue to head in the right direction. We’ll be able to hand over something to future generations they can be proud of.”

Anaru says WMI is optimistic that the (currently high) milk price will remain strong for the foreseeable future, but

“takes a conservative view to managing its budgets.”

WMI applies a long-term average of the milk price when setting its budgets and forecasts, enabling it to successfully manage its financial performance through the peaks and troughs over the longer-term milk price cycle.

Describing WMI

The primary base for the WMI farming operations is over 10,000 hectares of land at Mangakino in the South Waikato, on which 12 dairy farms, two dairy support farms and 6,000 hectares of forestry are managed.

This, combined with a 370 hectare dairy support unit at Kaharoa near Rotorua, comprise the WMI farming enterprise. WMI milks 10,500 cows and its dairy support units rear 2,200 heifers.

The WMI journey to the South Waikato lands started in 1916 when the Crown handed over 10,695 hectares of the land at Pouākani as compensation for its failure to provide lands in the Wairarapa as part of the Wairarapa Moana Exchange. The subsequent journey took many twists and turns and lasted for decades until, in 2002, WMI was born.

WMI’s key success factor: building on kaitiakitanga

Kaitiakitanga (guardianship, protection) is the foundation principle upon which WMI delivers outcomes and undertakes activities upon its land resources. The business has a responsibility, as kaitiaki, to be a great steward of the land and actively protect natural resources for present and future generations.

Anaru says, “We have developed robust processes and farming systems that enable us to continue nurturing



our whenua and environment while providing sustainable cash surpluses for the whānau.

“An example of this is our high-care high efficiency farming model, which has essentially enabled us to reduce our farming inputs and emissions (nitrogen application) while also producing our highest levels of profit. Having researched and trialled this system on one of our farms over a number of seasons, we are now progressively rolling it out across our other 11 farms.”

WMI also researches and applies a range of different farming technologies within its business. These help to create further efficiencies, support staff to make their jobs easier, and provide better access to information and data to support decision making. The most recent technology WMI is researching relates to cow collars which, Anaru says, WMI has been using on one of its farms for the last three seasons.

Strong dairy performance into the future

“We measure our performance through the application of our Mauri Compass outcomes framework - mixing our mātāuranga (Māori knowledge) with modern science to monitor the health and well being of whenua and the wider environment,” Anaru says.

“Our most recent testing indicates that our biodiversity and water health at MWI remain strong and at excellent standards of quality.”

WMI is clear that strong dairy performance in the medium and longer-terms will require managing on-farm emissions and introducing novel on-farm technologies.

“We have been active leaders for many years in researching and investing in ways to ensure we are looking after our whenua and the wider environment, while also growing strong business performance. Our high-care high-efficiency farming model is a great example. In addition, we continue to plant shelter-belts and other non-effective areas of the dairy platform to create biodiversity hubs and corridors.”

WMI has planted over 65,000 native plants across the dairy platform in the last two seasons alone, and that is over and above the 6000 hectares of forestry and native bush it has within its landholdings. As well, its riparian belts have set-backs ranging from 50 to over 500 metres, allowing it to maintain excellent water quality standards.

Looking ahead

Continuing to nurture the environment and sustain strong business performance will continue to be WMI’s focus into the future.

Anaru says, “Having been active leaders in this space for many years gives us the confidence that we can continue being successful dairy farmers into the future by maintaining this ethos.”

WMI also places a lot of value on researching and trying new things. Recently, for example, the research led WMI to explore alternative land uses, and now has five hectares of truffles planted, with 1,200 oak trees all inoculated with truffles - a decades-long play.

“It’s exciting to create confidence, diversify, make change where it makes sense, and to think about what that future might look like.”



From the Farmgate to Global Markets



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