THERE AND BACK AGAIN: A GRAZIER'S TALE

September 2010 Georgia Cattleman
Dennis Hancock, Forage Extension Specialist
The University of Georgia

I recently returned from a week-long trip in New Zealand. For most Americans, New Zealand is known for its scenic vistas, rolling hills and mountains, and mild climate. For others, the mention of New Zealand conjures up a vision of the scenic backdrop for the epic "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy that was filmed there. Yet for those of us who focus on grazing management, New Zealand is a country that is renowned for its emphasis on turning grass into milk, meat, and wool.

In this month's article, I briefly recount my trip to New Zealand and share with you my reconnaissance. Though I usually tend to focus my monthly articles on data, facts, and new recommendations, I hope you will indulge me this once as I tell you my tale of a simple grazier who went on an adventure.

An Unexpected Adventure

My trip to New Zealand was quite unexpected. Ironically, it was not unlike the adventures that J.R.R. Tolkien described for Bilbo Baggins in his book "The Hobbit." Like Mr. Baggins, I was caught off guard when I was approached to go off on this "adventure." After all, I am a "plain quiet" person with "no use for adventures." But, when I was approached by New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (an economic development organization in New Zealand that is similar to our U.S. Department of Commerce), I could not turn down this opportunity for a free trip to New Zealand. Their goal was to seek advice on how to expand trade to and from the US. My goal was to help with this mutually beneficial economic development and learn as much as I could about their grazing management systems so that I could share that with you.

There were several others from the US who were with me on this trip. Our party included Joe Horner, Extension Livestock Economist from the University of Missouri; Walt Cooley, Senior Editor for the Progressive Dairyman magazine; and Rodney Ervin, Dairy Farmers of America's Area Manager for the Gulf South region. For a time, we also met up with a delegation from Missouri, which included their state's Senate Agricultural Appropriations Committee Chairman, officials from the Missouri Department of Agriculture, several dairy farmers from SW Missouri, and others.

Now, I should say, I wasn't involved in any high-level trade discussions. That's well above my pay grade. But, we did have an opportunity to discuss the bright future for pasture-based livestock industries in the US and, in particular, the Southeast. Frankly, I was quite proud to represent Georgia and the Southeast. Our New Zealand friends have spotted what I have been saying for years: there are few other places in the world that have the opportunity to grow as much grass, graze as many days, and provide meat and milk for as many people as we do here in the Southeastern US.

Over Hill and All Around It

We arrived in Auckland, NZ at 6 a.m. local time after a 12-hour flight from Los Angeles, CA. We wasted no time. Within minutes, we were traveling south on NZ Hwy 1 and watching the sun emerge from behind the grassy hills of the Waikato region (the central part of the North Island). I must admit that it was truly breathtaking when we first crested the hill that overlooked the Waikato River valley below. Emerald-green pastures flowed over and around the rolling hills as far as the eye could see. Calling some of those slopes a "hill" was bit of an understatement, though, as even a north Georgia cattleman would be likely to call them a mountain. I was surprised to see how steep some of those pastures were and how those cattle were able to keep from rolling down the hill. But, what surprised me most was that even those steep slopes were efficiently grazed.

Rolling beef cattle pastures near Pukehoke, NZ in the northern part of the Waikato Region in the North Island. The crest of the hill upon which the picture was taken is ~400 ft above the valley below. Because of the terrain, fertilizer and seed are frequently applied by helicopter.

Beef cattle grazing in a paddock with perennial ryegrass baled silage along the fencerow. Excess pasture is round-baled and individually wrapped by custom hiring a contractor. Baleage is frequently sold to the surrounding dairies. Feeding of stored forage to beef cattle is minimal.

Inside Information

Pasture-based agriculture accounts for nearly 60% of NZ's agricultural economy and over 30% of their exports. There are 34.1 million sheep, 5.6 million dairy cattle, and 4.1 million beef cattle but only 4.3 million people in New Zealand. Needless to say, animal agriculture is the bedrock of their economy. This is especially true for the part of NZ that I visited. The Waikato region, which is about the size of the Atlanta metropolitan area, boasts a full third of NZ's beef, sheep, and dairy production. There is one word that can summarize their grazing management: efficient.

As a result of the importance of pasture in their economy, leaders in NZ place a major emphasis on developing and supporting markets for these industries. It is interesting, however, that their government provides virtually no subsidies. Much of the research and development, Extension training of producers, and producer aid programs is funded by industry initiatives (similar to Check-Off funds in the US). Though the costs of these programs are borne ultimately by the producer, it would appear that they have gotten their money's worth.

Usefulness of Examining Other Systems

One of the most intriguing things I learned about NZ farmers is that a substantial number of them frequently travel to other countries and study other farming systems. Certainly, looking abroad to study what does and doesn't work in other situations can teach one a lot about what will or won't work on one's own farm. While I was in NZ, I learned why and how they have become so efficient at utilizing their pasture resources. Certainly, not everything that is done in NZ is applicable to Georgia conditions. But, on the long plane ride back and in the days since, I think I have figured out many new ways that we here in Georgia can be more efficient at utilizing our pasture resource. This will be a very good year for you to attend our Georgia Grazing School!

It is not possible to fully summarize the differences and similarities between New Zealand and Georgia in this article. Nonetheless, I have tried to give you a summary of some key points with the information in Table 1. I hope you will catch me at one of our upcoming meetings to ask me more about my trip and what I learned.

For more information on how you can more efficiently manage your pastures, make plans to attend the 2010 Georgia Grazing School on September 21 and 22 in Perry. You can also find more in-depth information on grazing management on our website at www.georgiaforages.com or by contacting your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office (call 1-800-ASK-UGA1).

Table 1. Basic information about New Zealand's pasture-based agricultural industries.

General Topic	Description	Unexpected Findings
Climate and Soils	Mild climate. Rarely even close to freezing or hotter than 80°F. Rainfall ranges from 40-55" per yr. Soils are volcanic parent material with 4-12+" of top soil.	Freezing is rare. Similar rainfall to GA. When wet, soils get really boggy and pastures get damaged. Typical soil pH (5.8 - 6.0) was similar to that of pastures in GA.
Primary Forage/ Pasture Crops	Perennial ryegrass, white clover, chicory, and some brassicas (turnips, canola, etc.)	Most dairies there feed 10-40% of the diet as corn silage. Primary supplemental feed: palm kernel.
Land Costs and Ownership	$10-25,000 per acre. Primarily owned by producers. Some land (<~15%) would be rented.	Many of the farms operated by managers farming on shares, most commonly 50:50 arrangements.
Average Age of Producers	58 years old.	This is similar to the average age in the U.S. (57.1 in 2007).
Equipment and Machinery	In general, their equipment is very similar to that in the US. Most farmers do not own more than one tractor, one or two utility implements, a mower, and an ATV or motorcycle.	Nearly all of the tasks requiring equipment were done through custom hire arrangements with professional contractors.
Fertilizer and Energy Costs	Fertilizer costs were similar to or slightly higher than in the US. Electricity (mainly hydro-electric) is similar to or slightly higher than in the U.S. Fuel prices (approx.): Gas = $4.75/gal; Diesel = $3.25/gal.	Though most vehicles in NZ are smaller and more fuel-efficient than in the US, there were a surprising number of SUVs and light trucks. Most farmers drove small SUVs or a light truck. I don't recall seeing anything larger than a ¾ ton pickup on the farms.
Labor Costs and Availability	Quite high labor costs. Most farm managers made the equivalent of $40-50,000/yr plus benefits. General laborers would earn $12-15/hour. Relative to the US, there is not a major shortage of skilled labor in the beef, sheep, or dairy industries.	Holiday/Vacation time and pay are mandated. These labor costs are high because of the share-arrangements and the strength of the career-path and training programs for those interested in getting into farming. Immigration into NZ is tightly controlled.
Marketing of Beef Cattle	Similar to US livestock markets. More emphasis on on-farm sales directly to order buyers. Farmer does not normally transport animals.	Marketing of meat animals in NZ, like in the US, is primarily as a commodity. Strategies to capture more value in the marketing chain are less successful there than in US.
National Animal Identification	NAIS will become mandatory in NZ in November 2011.	NZ farmers don't like the idea of NAIS (any more than US producers). Export market demand is the driving force behind NAIS becoming mandatory.
Large Animal Veterinary Services	Most communities have numerous vets. No difficulty in getting prompt service.	Large animal veterinarians earn an income that is competitive with other segments of veterinary service in NZ.
Rural Economy	Vibrant and strong, despite the current worldwide economic recession. Vast majority of businesses are small, family operations.	Very few large chain stores. Every small town and rural community has thriving businesses. Very few storefronts were vacant.