

Irwin Hunter & Co.

Western Australia's Leading Seed Distributor

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Irwin Hunter & Co Irrigation Mix.

Supports high stocking rates at Scott River.

Scott River share farmers, Mark O'Neil and Leanne Richards, acknowledge that the move from New Zealand to WA, 12 months ago, has involved a steep learning curve.

Rainfall in New Zealand was 1400mm which fell year-round and there was no need to irrigate, whereas at Scott River, 1100mm falls between June and October.

Mark was growing clover and ryegrass pastures on volcanic ash in New Zealand, but here he says farming the coastal sands is like hydroponics.

The couple currently milk 700 cows in a 60-bale rotary dairy on the Scott River property, Lactanz 1 with 200ha of irrigated country and a further 450ha of dryland pasture.

Milking numbers peaked at 1100 cows last year with some lease cows.

The entire 200ha irrigated area was sown to Irrigation Mix at 25kg/ha in January 2003, which raised some eyebrows, locally.

"But we had to set ourselves up for the year," Mark explains.

"It has taken us a while to work out water and nutrient needs on the sand.

"We had some irrigation break downs, and are not within cooee of the pasture's full potential as yet."

Hay has been important in topping up feed this year and Mark would ultimately like to reduce the amount of grain that is fed.

Grazing rotations are currently about 23 days, but the long term aim is to reduce this to 15-18 days, grazing pasture at the two leaf stage.

Mark said in New Zealand, he would not fertilise paddocks to the same extent as he does at Scott River, where he fertilises the irrigated pasture after each grazing.

"In New Zealand, we applied N,P,K and S in spring and autumn and used 2-3t/ha of urea to make up for the shortfall," he said.

"The irrigated pasture here is like hydroponics – the top 20cm must be kept wet and topped up with nutrients, to avoid leaching. "It is a time consuming process."

Mark and Leanne run the property with three full time staff.

Mark expects the irrigated pasture to produce 80 -100kg/ha of dry matter daily in spring and summer when the watering and fertiliser has been fine-tuned, with production dropping to 35kg/ha in the winter.

A further 40ha dryland area may be set up for centre-pivot irrigation and sown to pasture this year, but Mark is still undecided about the time of year and pasture mix.

He will then be looking to milk 1000 cows.

"In New Zealand, I grew ryegrass and clover pastures, but I have not yet decided to what extent we can substitute clover for grain," he said.

"We are still looking at how clover performs in the heat and how it responds to watering."

Having survived deregulation in New Zealand nearly 20 years ago, Mark is confident of the future here, but he says it is important to have a clear focus. "Deregulation is not all bad," he said. "It allows expansion, without intervention. "If I doubted that, we wouldn't be here."