

Discipline and work reward faith-based community

Gloriavale and Glenhopeful
Lake Haupiri, West Coast

A reclusive religious group which moved to the West Coast bush from North Canterbury 20 years ago has carved out an impressive dairying enterprise to support its self-contained community of 450, **Anne Lee** reports

Tucked away from the rest of the world – the Gloriavale Christian Community on the banks of Lake Haupiri on the South Island's West Coast.



Owners: Gloriavale Christian Community

Gloriavale: 1200 cows mainly Jersey, 430ha

Glenhopeful: 500 cows, 250ha

50:50 sharemilking job: 450 cows

Lower-order sharemilking job: 680 cows

Farm working expenses (FWE): \$2.75 (excluding labour)

Production: 295-300kg milksolids (MS)/cow

Milking interval: 16-hourly



They may shun the trappings of the modern world, but the Gloriavale Christian Community tucked away deep in the heart of the West Coast are smart business operators, especially when it comes to their extensive dairy farming operation.

Gloriavale is no small, backwater group. After a visitor negotiates the densely bush-clad drive along winding gravel roads, there's sprawling farmland dotted with substantial buildings on the banks of Lake Haupiri.

At around 450, the population rivals many New Zealand small rural towns and its numerous, sizeable enterprises have become important to the West Coast regional economy.

Here the women and girls dress similarly in blue, long, modest dresses with headscarves drawing back their long hair. The men are clad in blue as well, with buttoned-up tieless shirts and dark blue trousers.

It would be easy to assume from their appearance and the traditionalist, gender-based segmentation of jobs in the community that the tightly bound, deeply religious group would be naive to the ways of the business world and lean heavily on practices of old. On the contrary, they have embraced technology across all aspects of their lives and are keenly focused on costs and profit.

Dairy farm working expenses (FWE) sit at \$2.75/kg milksolids (MS) excluding labour, with profits from the community's enterprises shared evenly among all members. Every individual's needs are met and no one person or group is favoured above another.

The communal living enables bulk purchasing for food and other items, their

uniform dress cuts clothing costs, and frugal management of expenses for their simple, non-materialistic driven lifestyle means living costs take just \$32/person/week.

But despite their economical running costs, operating and managing strong income-generating businesses is essential for the remote group, given they don't believe in debt.

All capital works, developments or purchases are carried out strictly by cash or barter. There's no gains to be made from investing profits either, as the community doesn't accept interest on deposits.

Their more than 2000-cow, extensive, dairying operation includes multiple farms and operating structures and sits at the heart of an even more extensive enterprise run by the Gloriavale group.

It includes a deer farming, deer velvet and guided game-hunting business, a sphagnum moss export business with its own distribution warehouse in Ohio, a significant meat and offal rendering business that also exports the resulting meal to the US and Europe and, somewhat surprisingly, an air charter and aircraft servicing business.

The home dairy farm now encompasses around 430ha of the total 1700ha run by the Gloriavale community and has grown significantly since its conversion from sheep and beef in 1991, when the then much smaller, community moved from Springbank near Christchurch to the West Coast.

Westland supply

Founding leader of the group, Hopeful Christian, said that in the early years the families lived in sheds while any available money was poured into developing the dairy farm to bring in income for



Family is all important – Joshua Disciple with wife Patience, left, daughter Trusty with baby son Reliable and son Upright. Daughters Simplicity and Submissive and son Abel are in front.



One of Gloriavale's herd managers, Fervent Ben-Canaan checks the predominantly Jersey herd.

Gloriavale's Jersey herd includes the Canaan stud with around 600 registered animals.



Joshua, left, and his brother Hopeful load data into MindaPro via their palm pilot.

the growing group. The conversion was the first in the area and meant the group had to commit to producing a minimum volume of milk before the local cooperative, Westland Milk Products would send tankers in.

The 40-bail Rotoflo rotary dairy was a high-tech innovation for the time and was built with the community's menfolk hand-mixing and pouring all the concrete, doing the pipework, laying out laneways, waterlines and fencing.

Highly skilled

Almost every trade is represented among the highly skilled community with youngsters able to train to a trade certificate level in a number of areas. All of the substantial buildings, engineering, plumbing and electrical work can be carried out by their own people.

From just 120 cows, the home dairy farm has grown at around 10 percent/year until it now milks 1200 Jerseys and some crossbreds. A new 54-bail rotary dairy, complete with Protrack and Milfos milk meters was finished earlier this season and is sited close to the original dairy. A new yard and 100-day, two-stage, effluent system has been installed as well.

One of the dairy farm managers, Joshua Disciple, said the additional dairy and ongoing development should allow an increase in cow numbers to 1500 on the once-a-day (OAD) regime currently used.

Cows are split so that half come in during the morning and half later in the afternoon, meaning that while there are still two milkings a day, each has just half the herd, shortening milking times and freeing up the men involved in the farm so they can spend more time back with their families.

Family time

Family time is a high priority for the group with children's hours at the community's own school set so they start earlier and finish at lunchtime, allowing the boys to help their fathers, uncles and brothers and grandfathers out in the various businesses.

The girls help their mothers, aunts and other family members in domestic duties such as food preparation and caring for younger children.

As well as the home farm, the community also owns the 250ha Glenhopeful nearby, across the Haupiri River. There they milk 500 cows following the same low-cost, pasture-focused



The community's extensive buildings.

Photo: Lakeview Image Library

management system adopted on the home farm.

The group also has a 50:50 sharemilking contract on a property further up the valley, milking 450 cows, and another lower-order sharemilking job milking 680

cows nearby. The community's dairymen attend local discussion groups and have also ventured across the alps to Lincoln University Dairy Farm (LUDF) focus days.

A number of them have or are completing Agriculture ITO training.

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... the women give themselves to more traditional roles, preparing more than 1200 meals/day and caring for and educating the 200 children and babies in the group.

Daily pasture and milking data is analysed closely by those running the properties, using MindaPro in conjunction with Protrack. They take up roles on the farm to oversee specific aspects such as pastures, fertiliser, stock or machinery. Although there are five permanent young men on the home farm, additional people can be called in at any time to help during busy periods.

Disciplined pasture management helps maximise quality, and paddocks are plated when cows go in or out. The farm is walked every week so that a feed wedge can be produced on spreadsheets to help allocate paddocks over the coming week and anticipate surpluses or deficits.

Production is consistently around 295-300kg MS/cow from the OAD herd with around 250kg dry matter (DM)/cow fed as supplement through the season. Top cows are producing up to 420kg MS/year.

Joshua said supplements fed include palm kernel and silage with some crushed barley used in previous years. Both the palm kernel and barley are fed through the farm dairy. Concreted standoff pads also mean high utilisation of silage during wet periods.

Protrack and milk metering allows specific feeding allocations to be set according to production with three levels set depending on whether cows are classed as low, medium or high producers as well as their milking speeds, Joshua said. He has developed an aerating system that blows air into the storage silos to inflate tractor inner tubes which help push feed through so that it flows more readily.

Canaan stud

Gloriavale's Jersey herd includes the Canaan stud with around 600 registered animals. Bulls from Canaan blood lines



Blessing Helpful rotates home-made low-fat cheeses. The community consumes about 650 litres/day of milk for yoghurt, butter, ice cream, drinking milk and cheese.

have enjoyed good success. One bull, Canaan Jazz Gabriel, with a breeding worth of 242, is included in the 2010 Jersey Gene team. Two heifers, Canaan Man Hope and Canaan Stanza Imp are among 36 included in Jersey New Zealand's 2010 Jersey Genes group.

Embryo flushing and transfers have been used in the stud animals, something that keeps good interest for the boys involved in the dairy farms, Joshua said.

The community uses both LIC and CRV AmBreed bulls, with some nominated matings.

"We're looking for good udders and we're pushing the protein," he said.

Mating is for 10 weeks with six weeks of artificial insemination (AI). All the cows are synchronised with the aim

of maximising days in milk. Calving is therefore condensed with 11 days to midpoint from planned start of calving on August 1 for the main herd.

Since shifting to OAD three seasons ago, the empty rate has dropped to just four percent.

Extra heifers have been reared every year as the community has rapidly built its dairying business, adding between 350-400 in recent times. Cows have been wintered on the property using swedes and triticale silage, but the community has recently purchased a 210ha runoff nearby and will winter cows there on 50ha of swedes and triticale silage grown both on the runoff and on the home farm.

Cows are allocated 6kg/day of swedes and 5kg/day of silage.

The triticale follows the winter crop in the cropping rotation, giving two sprays before paddocks are regrassed or developed. *Poa Annu* is the biggest enemy and this year the farm selectively target-sprayed for it.

Joshua said the triticale, sown in autumn, yields around 12t/ha and suits the West Coast conditions better than barley. It requires no pesticide sprays but needs around 270 units of nitrogen (N) after establishment.

Rainfall can be up to 4m/year as the community farm is tucked up against the ranges, but it's not unusual to get four seasons in one day creating the potential for boom-to-bust pasture growth rates. Perennial diploid Maverick Gold and annual diploid Feast II have shown good persistence in the harsh climate providing they are grazed well.

The additional runoff land will allow the farm to increase cow numbers to around 1400, ultimately expected to go to 1500. Around 10ha of summer turnips is grown on the home farm and grazed in late January/early February to help extend the round.

But what of the women in this community?

Rather than rearing calves, the women give themselves to more traditional roles, preparing more than 1200 meals/day and caring for and educating the 200 children and babies in the group.

"These are our first priority" said Patience Disciple, who with Joshua has six children.

"There isn't time to be out on the farm. We love to be keepers at home, making it a place of joy and happiness for our men to come home to after work."

Big families

With no contraception, families commonly include more than 10 children. A baby is born on average every two weeks mostly at home within the community. Young men and women often marry early, even as young as 16, being brought together after prayer, and taking guidance from parents and elders. They consider bloodlines and others' needs first, having come to a mutual agreement to stay together for life.

Daily chores are arranged so young single women work in the huge commercial kitchen in the afternoon, preparing the communal evening meal to reduce stress on mothers and enable them to spend the afternoons with their children.

The women have become expert dairy processors in their own right, turning some of the 650 litres of milk/day the community consumes from its dairy farm into cheese, ice cream, yoghurt and butter.

"Dairy is at the heart of our life here," Hopeful said.

"Milk is a wonderful, nutritious, natural whole food that we drink at every meal. It provides us with food and income to sustain our lives."

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