

LAND & LIVESTOCK



Avalon Organic— Combining Organics and Holistic Management

by John King

Allan and Sonia Richardson are using a combination of organics and Holistic Management to move from a farming focus to an agribusiness focus. In the next four years, they hope to reduce their running expenses from 55 percent of income down towards 35 percent. “This will happen from a number of changes,” says Allan, “including an increase in production of around 20 percent, and reductions in fertilizer, seed, weed control, supplementary feeding, and machinery expenses.” Allan acknowledges that Holistic Management has helped cut costs, increase production, and systemize their farming operation.

Renovating Pasture

The Richardsons own and operate 3,250 acres (1,300 ha) of non-brittle rolling hill country at Heriot, West Otago, New Zealand. They run two operations, Avalon Organic, which covers 766 acres (310 ha) of their 1,235-acre (500-ha) home block, with the rest farmed conventionally under the name Bonnieview. Their property is aptly named as it reaches 1,350 feet (450 metres) above sea level creating great views of central and west Otago, eastern and southern Southland, and Stewart Island some 90 miles (150 km) southwest. The average rainfall is around 34 inches (850mm) and the brittleness is below five.

The Richardsons became involved with Holistic Management after Allan was asked to open the 2001 conference in Christchurch. They did a course to learn more about the concept. Both were struck by the common sense it used and that it worked with nature. What made their learning easier was that it involved many concepts they had used to farm organically.

Initially they thought Holistic Management wouldn't work in their climate. “I thought it was only for farmers who didn't get rain,” says Sonia. They tried the holistic planned grazing with their organic unit. “We have

seen great results in just 12 months,” says Allan. “We are seeing more clover in the pasture and timothy is returning.” It proved so successful that they will use it across 1,250 acres (500 ha) this season.

Allan has observed that thistles are becoming less of a problem as the recovery times paddocks get allow the grass to out compete the weeds. Any patches of thistles are bruised with tractor and leveller and grazed two days later at 121 stock units (su)/acre (300su/ha). Although still renovating pastures, the Richardsons believe there will be less need for additional

renovation work in the future because of the benefits of holistic planned grazing. They are planting low levels of ryegrass and high amounts of white and red clover, timothy, plantain, chicory, yarrow, and phylaris.

The holistic planned grazing associated with the weak link testing guideline has helped them understand the role of animals in developing the landscape. As a result, they have invested in fencing at their 1,235-acre (500-ha) home block to reduce the average paddock size down from 25 acres (10 ha) to 17.3 acres (7 ha) in 18 months. They aim to have an average paddock size between 10-15 acres (4-6 ha) in the next two years.

With smaller paddock sizes they can maintain higher stock densities and achieve greater evenness in grazing pressure.

Smaller paddocks are part of a strategy to reduce gorse on their organic property. They plan to cut down the gorse first, then apply burnt lime to alter soil fertility and oversow with clovers. By raising the pH, they expect

the soil to become bacterial dominant and that will stimulate grass growth to help out compete any re-emerging gorse seedlings.

On-Farm Research

Holistic Management has built on Allan's interest in on-farm research. The cause and effect testing question has helped him research problems and try various options. For example, they no longer vaccinate for scabby



The Richardsons are pleased with how they the land has responded to holistic planned grazing. They have seen an increase in clover and a return of timothy to their pasture and want to increase their ability to graze pastures more consistently to continue to reduce thistle and gorse populations.

mouth in lambs because they apply zinc to their pastures. “It costs 22 cents/su for the vaccination and that doesn’t include the labor,” says Allan. “The zinc is less than 3 cents/su, and we don’t have to apply it every year.”

Growing lambs on an organic unit is challenging. What made the initial move into organics easier was Allan’s interest in worm resistance. As drenching options are limited with organic meat production, the Richardsons have looked hard at the causes of the many ailments and diseases to which lambs are susceptible.

They have found that selecting for worm resistance has resulted in sheep that are more tolerant to facial eczema and grass staggers, and possibly footrot as well. The facial eczema and staggers connection was confirmed in their Perendale stud using the Ramguard FE test.

Allan believes that as his animals become more in tune with their mineral status, they will balance their own diets and not overeat to compensate. Animals have the capacity to overeat by 40 percent to correct a mineral imbalance meaning a lower carrying capacity and greater stress on growing animals. The Richardsons currently run 30 su/acre (12 su/ha) on their organic land, the same as on their conventional area.

Observing the grazing behavior of animals is key to understanding animal welfare. Animals that are lying down chewing their cud are more likely to be content than those marching up and down the paddock, or continually gorging themselves without a rest. Because of their efforts, the Richardsons’ organic lambs reached an average carcass weight of 325 pounds (148 kgs), a kilo less than their conventional farmed lambs at 35 pounds (15.9 kgs) in the 2002/03 season.


The overall animal performance of their organic property is influenced more by the weather than stock health. Poor springs and dry autumns have seen their lambing percentage jump from 130 percent two years ago down to 112 percent last year to an expected 120 percent this year. As they get on top of their production issues, they plan to invest in strategic shelterbelts to help reduce the effects of the weather. However, at around NZ\$90/lamb

(US\$56) and all the reduced expenses, the organic unit certainly pulls its weight. (See sidebar below).

Making the Transition

It’s not just on the farm where they have seen results. Both Allan and Sonia feel that Holistic Management has helped ease Sonia into the farming operation. “It has certainly helped with understanding more about agriculture and getting involved with the farm,” says Sonia. The Richardsons have been married five years and now have Grace (3) and James (1). Sonia’s background of city living and nursing has meant farming is a completely new lifestyle. “Holistic Management is similar to the concept of nursing,” says Sonia. “Its helps us identify causes of problems while addressing the symptoms.”

Their holistic training has enhanced their understanding that many of the business and lifestyle decisions they make have an influence beyond the farm boundary and their own family. As Sonia observes, “Allan is looking beyond the farm to benefit the wider community. Researching and experimenting for worm resistance wasn’t just to benefit Bonnieview.” Both Allan and Sonia act as if educating farmers and consumers about the link between human health and healthy land is as every bit as important as deciding which paddock the ewes should be in today.

The Richardsons realize what it means to have an agribusiness focus rather than just concentrating on their own farm. They are excited that balancing time, family, and new marketing challenges is becoming easier as they develop greater confidence with their practice of Holistic Management. With their quiet, steady approach, they are building on their reputation, both nationally and locally, for their contributions to the farming industry and their community. 

*John King is a Certified Educator in Nelson, New Zealand.
He can be reached at: succession@clear.net.nz.*