

## Staying at the forefront of farming nations

By Mark Ross

As an agricultural nation, our proud history with production farming traces back to when the early European settlers arrived on our shores in the late 1840s. When establishing a farm, these settlers often found out the hard way that our country's terrain and climate can be harsh at the best of times.

Given this, many settlers persevered and worked hard to become self-sufficient. Large sheep farms were mainly farmed by single men who could survive the elements, with the majority of farms focused on producing wool from sheep and fresh milk from dairy cattle for the local community.

It wasn't until the advent of refrigerated ships at the end of the nineteenth century that our farmers started selling meat and dairy products (like butter) to overseas markets. This resulted in an exponential growth in sheep and cattle numbers, thus establishing agriculture as the economic backbone for our economy.

Fast forward to the modern day farm, where the New Zealand agribusiness sector is focused on professionalism and innovation. From a global perspective, it's apparent how different and advanced our agricultural structures are to those in the rest of the world. This is partly due to the large part farming plays in our economic success, but a lot of it comes down to the focus our farmers place in areas such as animal health, environmental stewardship and innovation within our farming systems.

The removal of government subsidies in the early and mid-1980s also drove farmers to reduce costs and focus on producing higher value products, where these were shown to be profitable.

Take for example dairying. Our early ancestors could never imagine that in the future cows could be milked robotically and that smartphone apps could be used to manage a farm. Yet this is where we are heading. The reality is that traditional farm roles like milking are taking a much smaller role in the day-to-day management of farms. This in turn frees up farm staff to concentrate on other farm and business management activities, such as monitoring the performance of individual stock and the whole farming system.

Dairying has embraced innovation and technological advancements. On the animal health front, there have been rapid improvements in understanding the nutrient requirements of dairy cows at various stages of lactation. Then combining various feed ingredients and remedies to meet those needs in a cost-effective manner. There are many dynamic factors that influence the health of dairy cows, including the application of the most effective remedy at the right time and nutrient availability from feeds.

Animal health manufacturers are continuously researching new products to assist in maintaining healthy and high performing livestock. As a result the animal health remedy industry in New Zealand is world class, with many of our competitors envious of our high performance.

As farming becomes more innovative and attuned to consumers' demands, New Zealand will remain at the forefront of the world. Our country has entered into a new era of farming with greater use of technology, a change in what we produce, and more scrutiny on our animal

health. If the global world of farming could follow New Zealand's example, then maybe, between us all, we will be able to produce enough extra food to meet the forecasted demands of a growing global population.

- Mark Ross is chief executive of Agcarm, the industry association for crop protection and animal health.