

FUTURE FARMING

Farming in New Zealand is on the move: more technology, more production and more of a corporate structure for the family business. Fonterra chairman Sir Henry van der Heyden says sustainability is the next big challenge.

Story by Dawn Tuffery

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Aaron Sami

Being in charge of the world's biggest dairy exporter might be overwhelming for some but Sir Henry van der Heyden seems rather relaxed. "What drives me is being a dairy farmer," he says.

In June, the Fonterra chairman received an honorary fellowship from the Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec) for his contribution to agriculture. Quick to share the credit, van der Heyden says he's carrying the banner for the industry. "It's recognising the importance of dairying to Waikato and the New Zealand economy."

Van der Heyden began his career share-milking in the Waikato and is a founding director of Fonterra, serving as chairman since 2002. Annual visits to Fieldays see him swarmed by farmers wanting to chat. This often means he moves just metres in an hour but he does enjoy the chance to reconnect, he says.

His role requires him to consider issues such as branding from a global perspective – "95 per cent of our milk is exported into the global market" – as well as maintain a core focus on producers. "We've got a cooperative structure and that's one of the strengths of Fonterra," he says. "Farmers in control of their own destiny."

He remains enthusiastic about his home region and believes it's often underestimated. "We've got a lot to be proud of. You've got over 25 per cent of New Zealand's milk production coming out of the Waikato and many farming leaders. This is where the heart of the production is and all the infrastructure that goes around it. So it goes Waikato, national, global. It's just one seamless transition."

Has an increase in scale to meet demand seen a move away from the traditional family farm? Not necessarily, he says. "The family is the absolute heart of Fonterra. But it's evolving, to what I call a family corporate and they've got to put business disciplines around the farm. It's still a family business and I don't think that's going to change."

The main issue for the future of the dairy industry,

he says, is sustainability in its widest context – carbon footprints, food safety, animal welfare, bio-security and the Emissions Trading Scheme. But he believes farmers are stepping up. "This is driven from what our customers expect – they want to know their food is produced in a good, healthy environment. It's a challenge but there's opportunities too."

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Van der Heyden influences a varied array of industry sectors via his involvement in Auckland International Airport and Rabobank's Food Agribusiness Advisory Board of Australia, among others. The common thread to his interests is the direct link with New Zealand's future prosperity, and that's what "pumps his tyres up".

"I want my grandchildren to live here, so I've got a responsibility to actually create something for them in the future," he says.

As a key to success, he advises people to sit down and clearly define where they're going. "You don't have to write it down, just have two or three objectives clear in your mind. It's just so powerful because people can achieve anything if they get focused on it." At 53, he still applies this to his own career.

"I think in five-year time periods and directionally I know where I want to be. I absolutely enjoy what I'm doing. Governance roles, setting strategy, setting direction for organisations that are linked to what's important to New Zealand – that's what gets me out of bed every morning." ☺



Fonterra chairman Sir Henry van der Heyden has a range of other roles, including director of Auckland International Airport.



Sir Henry van der Heyden, the Waikato's most well-known farming son, says the family farm won't be dying out any time soon.