

Regenerative farmers: Linda and Boyd Matson

Linda and Boyd Matson's home block rests on the gentle slopes of Whatitiri, an extinct volcano west of Whangarei. There is a new kiwifruit block there to compliment another 14 canopy hectares nearby on the mountain. While the new kiwifruit enterprise demands a lot of attention, Linda prefers working with animals. The Matson's have a 240-hectare, (120-130 ha effective) beef block carrying 300-350 head of mainly angus and beef cross cattle. The beef property also has some pine stands and has a fair amount of native bush with several wetland areas. Linda and Boyd previously ran a leased family dairy farm biologically for over 20 years after getting inspired at an organic field day in the Waikato. The small dairy operation was quite successful and was producing extremely well (at over 500kgMS per cow and over 1000 kgMS/ha) considering the low inputs used. It also provided most of the cattle for their beef enterprise.

Linda and Boyd farm biologically and are working toward adopting regenerative practices over the whole property. They only use agri-chemicals very occasionally on the beef unit, typically just for gorse and blackberry. No animal drenches have been used for over eighteen months at the time of writing and animal health is excellent. For them, the biological approach feels right about how they treat the land and the animals. Linda also stresses the importance of the role of social media and the Internet in supporting her learning and connecting with like-minded people. The new kiwifruit development is registered organic with Biogro.

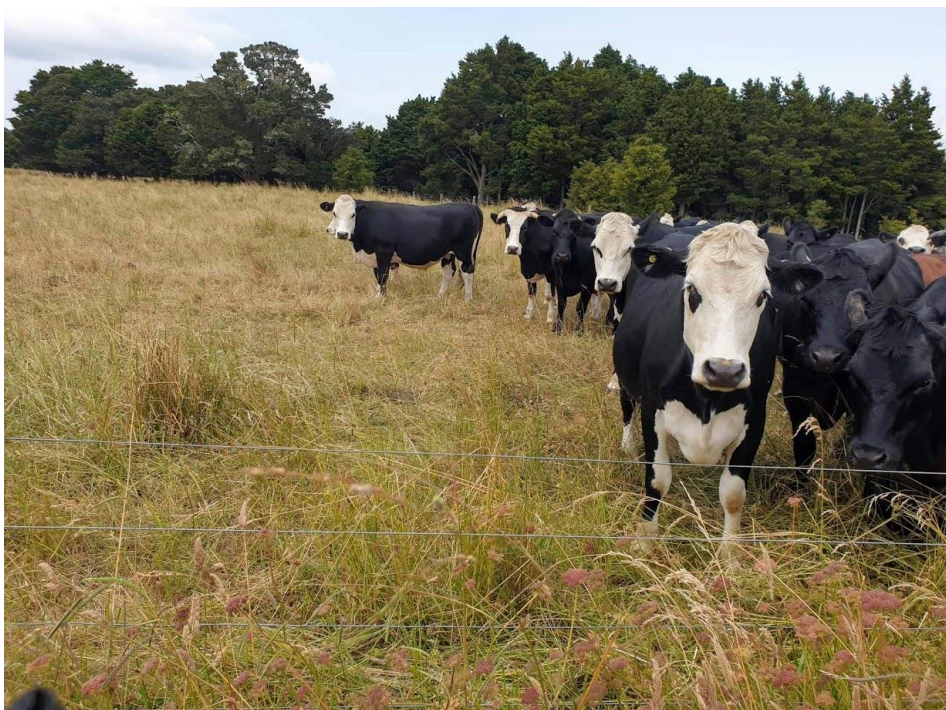


Linda and Dr Jones with Linda's son Rhett in the background

Pasture and soil

Roughly 50% of their land is volcanic, free draining, but inclined to dry quickly in summer. The rest is clay hill country and some alluvial soils. The pasture on the beef block varies seasonally but is diverse and can be impressive. I visited there with world renown soil scientist Dr Christine Jones in 2018. There was one paddock that Linda was particularly proud of, having regenerated a very poor

pasture with a diverse seed mix in the previous season. When Christine examined the soil, she found the structure was excellent and commented that there was not much evidence of clover root nodulation, indicating that the rich soil biome was doing the job of accessing the massive reservoir of nitrogen in the air.



Linda's pasture ready for grazing (top) and post-grazing with 2 year old heifers.

Linda has achieved good plant diversity with a variety of clovers, ryes, plantain, chicory and dock. She was concerned about the carrot weed, but Christine assured her it was useful – its taproot brings up minerals from the subsoil and early in its cycle, the stock find it palatable.

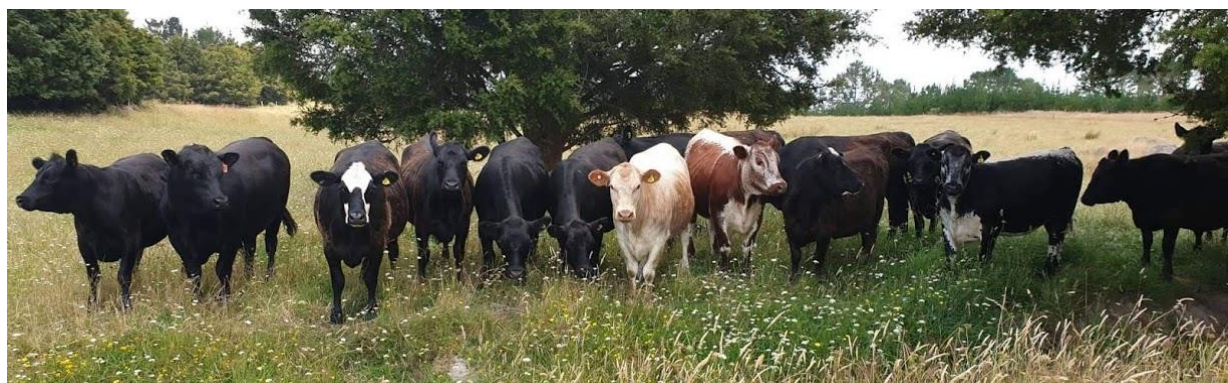
Linda was a little apprehensive about the need to add minerals, but Christine assured her she was on the right track. It was an education for me too, as my horticultural training taught me that any minerals taken off the property in produce needed to be replaced. Christine emphasised that what we remove is a tiny fraction of what is available to be accessed from earth and sky.

Linda's advice from Christine and more recently her involvement in 2019 in the Red Meat Profit Partnership Kaipara Regenerative group exposed her to more thinking. Group guest presenter, Ian Mitchell-Innes advocates using zero to low inputs, grazing stock in much larger mobs and moving them more frequently. Adapting ideas developed for dryland environments to the Northland environment is a challenge, but Linda keeps experimenting and observing and expects transitioning to a fully regenerative system to suit Northland's variable climatic conditions, will continue to be trial and error for a few years to come.

Linda and Boyd have also been guided by [Neil Kinsey's](#) approach to soil fertility and are getting good results with improved fertility balances and ratios, although Linda credits pasture diversity to be a more significant key to improving overall soil and biological function. They use biological fertilisers and find that they have been able to reduce inputs over time while improving fertility.

Animal health

The Matsons spend very little on animal health. They currently use a seaweed-based animal tonic in troughs, periodically use a probiotic product and can successfully use homeopathic remedies from time to time. A vet visit is a very rare event with only one antibiotic treatment (for a recently purchased bull) being the only vet treatment in over twelve months. Parasitic drenches have not been used in over 18 months now as Linda trials ways to maintain natural animal health using grazing management and occasional probiotic powder.



The Market

Currently there are no ready solutions for Northland regenerative dry stock farmers looking to differentiate their meat in the marketplace. The Matsons currently supply Silver Fern Farms through their Dargaville works, but they may consider working with [Grandad's Beef](#) based in Raglan, or possibly join a local initiative, if there were to be one.

Building the network

Linda is a contact person for the Kaipara Red Meat Profit Partnership group. She learns, and she also is enthusiastic about building the region's network of regenerative farmers. One of the "lock-ins" that keep people farming conventionally is debt. As a qualified accountant and with more than thirty years practical experience in the agriculture industry, Linda has a strong understanding of the

economics of agriculture and would like to see pathways to regenerative farming more clearly developed for those conventional farmers who may feel difficulties changing from high-cost, high-input and high-debt systems.

2020 and beyond

For Linda and Boyd, regenerative agriculture is one portal towards a more healthy, peaceful and prosperous world. One of their sons is currently involved in their beef and kiwifruit operation and it is hoped that, in time, their other children may also engage in further land-based opportunities for growing regenerative, healthy food in the future. They believe that the whole paradigm of good, sustainable planetary health begins with a healthy soil. Healthy soil has healthy microbes, which help grow healthy plants, for healthy animals and humans. Well-functioning, biologically-active soils can also retain more carbon, minerals and water, which will also serve to improve water quality, carbon sequestration, and drought and flood resilience. By eliminating some conventional practices that damage soil structure and microbiology, regenerative practices provide solutions to many of our environmental, health and social concerns – it all starts here!