

GUEST EDITORIAL

Golden Bay farmers' one-stop co-op shop

by Kathy Reilly

Chairman, Golden Bay Veterinary Club Inc.

The Rural Service Centre is the trading name for the Golden Bay Veterinary Club Inc. Based in Takaka, the vet club has been operating as a cooperative for 55 years, having been estab-



lished by farmers to provide infrastructure and facilities to ensure a reliable veterinary service in the isolated rural area. From the days when virtually every rural veterinary practice was a farmer-owned cooperative, it is one of only 24 vet clubs left.

The 120 members are mainly dairy, with sheep and beef farmers, spread throughout Golden Bay from the foot of the Takaka Hill to the base of Farewell Spit and down the West Coast to the Anatori River. In this large area one of the main member benefits is free mileage on all vet visits.

Golden Bay's isolation, dictated by the imposing only route in or out, Takaka Hill, drove the farmer board to establish and maintain the business as a cooperative. With dairy comprising most of the large animal work, farmers simply cannot economically access emergency veterinary services from "over the hill". By providing the infrastructure, both physical and ancillary staff, we have been able to attract high-calibre vets to the area, at the same time controlling what the service costs us.

In 1994, the Golden Bay Vet Club expanded to encompass further services for our members that related to the management and welfare of their livestock. The Rural Service Centre was born of a vision to create the one stop shop that could



deliver many farming solutions.

The milking machine department and farm shop were purchased from the then Tasman Milk Products Dairy Co., the region's local cooperative.

The club also employed the Dairy Company's Production Officer as farm advisor to work in the business at the hub of enquiries from members. The vet club had sufficient critical mass to ensure that these assets could be retained by the large

number of mutual members of both cooperatives.

Today, the co-op employs five vets, three clinic support staff, two milking machine technicians, four shop staff and three in administration. This team works closely together to share information specific to their expertise for members' benefit. The milking machine department, which holds the agency for Milphos Milking Machines, is an area of essential service needed to supply 24hr callout for breakdowns in the cowshed.

The Board of seven farmers have a clear vision of what the business is there to deliver. Control of our own destiny in terms of animal health and farm management issues specific to the Bay are important. Our focus is on animal health and related rural trading and servicing activities, which ensure the long term economic well being and quality of life for members.

Although the vet clinic has no competition in Golden Bay, the other divisions do. Member loyalty is strong, but never taken for granted. The co-



op is run with a strong commercial focus and an emphasis on long term sustainability. An important function for our cooperative is keeping the competition honest, with our members being the beneficiaries of good, sharp pricing and choice of business culture here in Golden Bay.

The clinic has some of the lowest cost vet visit fees in the country, with management undertaking regular fee comparisons with other practices. One advantage of our isolation is the willingness with which other businesses share information. A recent *Dairy Exporter* article showed that farmer-owned vet clubs and contract practices are usually cheaper than private practices for animal health remedies.

In an era when big is considered to be better, and mergers and takeovers are reducing competition, the ability to sustain our small, agile, focused cooperative is all important. The Rural Service Centre has the strength and flexibility to respond to the changing needs of the agricultural sector in our community. ●

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The Golden Bay
Veterinary Club t/as The
Rural Service Centre

PHOTO: TONY REILLY

The Rural Service Centre,
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