



In celebration of intellect-intensive agriculture



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UPTON AT LARGE

I RECENTLY attended a field day in Southland. It was on a farm. But it wasn't a farm field day. It was an "integrated value chain field day". That didn't stop a large number of mud-splattered farmers filling a marquee on a bright chilly morning.

The owners of the property were recently named Marks & Spencer lamb suppliers of the year. Their prize was a trip to Britain to view their marketplace, and the field day was an opportunity for them to share their knowledge with fellow suppliers. It was also an opportunity for Silver Fern Farms to promote its new supply agreements.

It is part of a quiet revolution which owes a great deal to the vision of an animal genetics company called Rissington Breedline.

Rissington pioneered a supply agreement with M&S for farmers using its sheep genetics. The attention to detail and performance that lay at the heart of a genetics company lent itself naturally to the sort of attention to detail that a top-end retailer demanded on behalf of its customers.

Farmers who supply M&S can walk through its stores in search of lamb cuts that bear their name and farm address. But it's not just a cute piece of marketing. Behind

their name lies a vast amount of carefully recorded detail about every aspect of the supply chain – from the paddock to the plate as Silver Fern Farms likes to put it.

I take considerable pleasure in that slogan.

When I set up AgResearch 18 years ago, we talked about integrating our research efforts from the DNA to the dinner plate. It has become a commercial reality. Rissington has sold its genetics to British suppliers as well so that identical product can be supplied year round from New Zealand and British suppliers.

Consistency of quality and supply is what intellect-intensive agriculture is all about.

Silver Fern has taken over the distribution function that Rissington pioneered so that it can concentrate on its core business as a producer of elite genetics. Their research continues to explore the ways in which it is possible to breed animals so that carcass attributes match customer requirements. Silver Fern Farms is busily setting out to generate new supply contracts with other European retailers.

The single most powerful impression I took away from the "field" day (which never left the

tent with its PowerPoint presentations) was the consumer-facing mindset of the participants. Farmers are being treated like adults. There was no heroic talk about farmers being the backbone of the country on a noble mission to feed the world. Suppliers are being informed simply and clearly what it is retailers are interested in and where they will need to focus their attention if they want to remain profitable.

M&S's "Plan A" requires suppliers to provide information on everything from their greenhouse gas emissions to animal welfare. Barrie and Julie were asked by one farmer "whether M&S believes in that stuff?". "Yes," was the simple answer. There were no diatribes about regulation and bureaucracy. These people are getting on with being able to make very exacting claims about the quality and embodied attributes of the premium product they are growing.

How different it all seemed from the image of producers conveyed by Federated Farmers. Imagine how M&S would respond to suppliers who actively urged their government to follow Canada in renegeing on Kyoto commitments; or opposed controls on nutrient flows



from farms into Lake Taupo when point-source polluters have been regulated for decades?

The Feds went feral during Charlie Pedersen's term in office. He labelled environmentalists "arrogant, fear-mongering religious zealots waging war against the human race". They don't seem to have recovered. Their press statements reveal a chip-on-shoulder, them-and-us antagonism towards life beyond the farm gate.

After this season's slump in the milk price, their dairy chairman seemed to take malicious delight in

telling his fellow countrymen that: "If you live in the city and think you're immune from this, think again." Similarly, changes to rules by Waikato Regional Council were broadcast as "giving Mighty River Power priority to heat the towel rails up in Auckland".

In opposing the emissions trading scheme, current president Don Nicholson noted that: "While self-important people tell us what is supposedly good for us, farmers get up each morning and go to work to bring money into the New Zealand economy."

That's what's so refreshing about the Rissington/Silver Fern Farms mindset. Rather than lecture the world about its self-importance, it takes the requirements of an increasingly discriminating market as a given. Meeting standards is non-negotiable.

In fairness to Federated Farmers, local bodies could also spend some time finding out how their often-insane regulations could support leading-edge food producers. Because people with towel rails in Europe, North America – and China – may yet have the last word.