OBITUARY

Geoffrey Blair Nicoll

B.Agr.Sc, M.Agr.Sc.(Hons 1) (Massey), Ph.D (National University of Ireland)

Dr Geoff Nicoll spent over 40 years in what he always claimed to be the best job in the world. As head firstly of the Genetics Unit in Landcorp Farming Ltd, and then Focus Genetics Ltd, he ran the sire-breeding programmes for Landcorp’s considerable animal resources and provided improved genetics to service over 500,000 breeding ewes, 60,000 beef cows, 20,000 hinds and 2,000 Boer does. He was recognised internationally for his work developing composite breeds of sheep and cattle to meet specific performance criteria.

Geoff knew from an early age he wanted to have a career in agriculture. He completed his undergraduate and then Masterate degrees in Agricultural Science at Massey University in 1975. He was employed by the New Zealand Lands and Survey Department to work with their animal breeding programmes, and then as an Agriculture Ministry scientist studying beef cow nutrition. Future study beaconed, and Geoff left New Zealand with wife Lynne to undertake his Ph.D at the National University of Ireland in Grange.

Geoff and his growing family returned to New Zealand in 1981 and worked as a scientist at Whatawahata Hill Country Research Station and then Ruakura Agricultural Centre. He suggested to the Lands and Survey Department that their animal breeding programmes should be co-ordinated, and in 1982 he ended up with the job. Geoff continued as Head of the Genetics and Nutrition Unit for the newly formed Landcorp Farming Ltd in 1987 and stayed until after the merger of Landcorp’s Genetics operation with Rissington Breedline to form the joint venture company Focus Genetics. Geoff worked hard to implement leading edge technology into the Landcorp and Focus breeding programmes, having major roles in application of many new technologies throughout his long career.

Geoff recognised the value that technology, and in particular computers, offered for improving livestock genetics. He was one of the first people to use a ‘portable’ computer on farm to record data in the field. The computer fitted neatly into two large travel cases and could be taken apart, moved from farm to farm and reassembled into a working unit. It was an important step forward in ensuring data integrity for the breeding programme and in streamlining the flow of data into an animal performance recording database.

A logical development for Landcorp given their scale was the development of composite breeds tailored specifically to their requirements. Geoff developed two new sheep composites, namely “Lamb Supreme” and “Landmark”, by screening animals from the huge terminal sire and maternal animal resources, respectively. The nucleus flocks were then closed and animals were selected solely on the basis of performance. Both composites have performed admirably in industry progeny test, which is a testament to Geoff’s work in developing the composites.

Other highlights included the establishment InnerVision CT facility with AgResearch in 1996, importation and evaluation of the Carwell sheep muscling mutation, and implementation of a venison genetic improvement programme in red deer and Wapiti.

Geoff’s long involvement with the New Zealand Society of Animal Production was recognised with an Honorary Life Membership in 2013. The Society has been one of Geoff’s main professional associations and he served on the Management Committee as Secretary from 1983 to 1985, and again from 1993 to 1996 in the roles of Vice President, President and Past President. He was awarded the Society’s 1999 McMeekan Memorial Award for his work as head of Landcorp’s Genetic and Nutrition Unit, where he was responsible for scientific and technical integrity of Landcorps’s sire breeding programmes. He authored or co-authored 22 scientific papers that were presented at Society Conferences. He was also instrumental in Landcorp Farming taking on sponsorship of what is now the Landcorp Farming Limited Lecture from 2004 (previously the LIC Lecture).

Geoff retired in 2013, but continued working on the Focus breeding programmes two days a week for another year. On his off days, fly fishing, gardening, reading and his love for his family occupied his time.

Many young scientists were directly or indirectly mentored by Geoff and he collaborated widely. The ever-present sparkle in his eye and smile on his face made him a delight to work with. He made an outstanding contribution to animal production in New Zealand. To work with him on some of these programmes was indeed a privilege.

Neville Jopson and John McEwan