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How Now Gippy Cow

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Your Levy at Work

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Dairying - What's the Point?

By John Mulvany omj@dcsi.net.au

What's the current mood in the dairying community? From recent talks it seems the "dairying motivation" rating is about 2 out of 10. Farmers generally are feeling less than enthusiastic, even pessimistic about their chosen career. That's also true for some of the people who support dairy businesses.

In this environment it's easy to slip into the attitude of "What's the point? Is there any future in dairying?"

Time for a reality check. It's not great now for three very good reasons: milk price, confidence with and trust in milk processors plus it has been incredibly demanding physically since October 2015 (yes 2015!) when some of you started feeding silage.

Pastures in most areas did not start growing until June 2016 and then it was a wet tough winter (especially on grey soil farms); even though the spring was extended it was a long and expensive spring (due to the amount of fodder conserved). At the time of writing this article there has been some rain which may be the break but that has increased the pressure to get all the pasture renovation done with the underlying associated worries about black beetle and cockchafers. The mental and physical pressure has been severe. Add in talk about dropping prices at global dairy auctions, protectionist policies and a possible El Nino and it's easy to get despondent.

But this situation is not really new and doesn't really explain the current "mood". Your price will be cyclical and driven by world price, the seasons will always vary - that has not changed. What has changed are the following:

- The quality and availability of information. Now we can check the global dairy trade movement daily and stress over the fluctuations. This has always occurred but we were not as aware and only heard about large movements. For what it's worth, if the trading price reported in mid-March was converted to a Victorian farm gate price it would be about $6.00-$6.30, but as you know it depends on the skill and efficiency of your processor. It is very important to understand that the price a processor receives is NOT necessarily what the GDT indicates but the signs are positive.

  Social media is another "source of information and communication" that we did not have 15 years ago. At times it can be almost a "frenzy" of inaccurate negative rants about the dairy industry which show a lack of understanding about various issues such as milk price. It can erode confidence. This means that everyone definitely needs to "filter" information even more than before. Ask yourself, "Is the information actually coming from someone whose opinion and knowledge you respect?"

- The trust and confidence in several milk processors has been shattered and it will take time to re-build. Even in 2016/2017, we have seen two major Gippsland processors introduce growth bonuses plus January to June milk price increases, both of which were not announced at the start of the season. These changes to milk price structure **after** a season has started are not equitable and do not take into account the inability of some farmers to respond. It would appear that some processors still do not understand that what they perceive as a small change can undermine the confidence built up over years. It indicates both a lack of understanding and respect.

- We live in a more commercially nervous and litigious environment. Processors are understandably more wary about making milk price predictions; we have seen the impact of overzealous predictions and subsequent price drops.

- In regard to seasonal conditions there are some farms in lower rainfall areas that seem to be having a greater number of tough years. That is putting pressure on farm profit, viability and, importantly, people.

So, these extra factors mean that the current black mood amongst

farmers is to some extent justifiable, but, to keep things in perspective it's interesting to note a comment from one bank: "...

The mood and confidence is not reflected in our clients' current financial position - it's tight but the mood and level of confidence is definitely worse than the financial position suggests".

It has been a draining and intense period, particularly the period since April 2016. By the end of the financial year, some farms in Gippsland will have both positive cash and profit, and on other farms both will be negative - for a whole range of reasons.

But, for a skilled dairy farmer who manages to achieve a profit more often than not (yes there are a considerable number that do) the fundamentals of dairying are still sound. They are prepared for the usual fluctuating milk prices and variable seasons. They know some milk processors will continue to try and get them to produce milk when they want them to rather than when they should, and will not be tempted to change systems. They are wary of those processors promising the world but remain confident that there is money to be made in dairying. They will sensibly "file away" predictions of El Nino but the actions they take will just be normal common sense management when and if it occurs.

Possibly those skilled farmers are also spending less time checking their phones for the latest information and spending even less time on social media texting and listening to negative, confidence sapping, uninformed rants.

To end on a positive note, in late March OMJ Agricultural Consulting contacted six of the major exporting milk processors in Victoria and asked: "Can you provide a GUIDE to the closing price in 2016/2017, opening 2017/2018, and closing 2017/2018 for your typical supply pattern?"

Remembering that they talk in terms of an average milk price, not necessarily yours, all indicated $4.85 - $5.20/kgMS finishing 2016/2017.

One could not provide a guide for opening 2017/2018 and the other five indicated $5.00-$5.40/kgMS opening, were hesitant about closing but perhaps another $0.40/kgMS.

We know that milk price varies by $0.40 and $0.80/kgMS between farms depending upon which processor you supply, and the use of an average price is dangerous. However, based on this guide information next season there is likely to be a 5-year average milk price - not fantastic but certainly better than $4.50/kgMS which is where some of you started last season. So, current predictions are a move up in your individual price by 10% - a bit of positive news to focus on.

Getting the feed wedge edge

High pasture consumption is integral to profitable dairy farming and is a key profit driver. Two low cost tactics to assist in reducing feed costs are managing ryegrass and establishing a feed wedge. If implemented well these management techniques can increase the amount of pasture grown, ultimately reducing the farm supplementary feeding costs. Managing feeding during a slow pasture growth period is challenging. It requires a compromise between increasing cash flow in the short term by grazing pasture before the optimum growth has been achieved (thus reducing supplementary feeding cost), and achieving highest long term profit by allowing optimum pasture growth to take place but needing to use more supplement in the shorter term. This fact sheet covers the issues around establishing a feed wedge. Managing ryegrass pastures is a further fact sheet that can be found on the Tactics for Tight Times website

What is a feed wedge? The term 'feed wedge' is used to describe the situation that occurs when a good grazing rotation is established. The paddocks close to grazing have more pasture available per hectare and represent the 'fat' end of the pasture wedge. These pastures will be at 3 leaf stage and/ or canopy closure (approximately 2500kgDM/ha in winter). Paddocks that have just been grazed represent the thin edge of the wedge and could be described as pastures with 4 – 6cm residual (approximately 1400- 1600kgDM/ha). All other paddocks, spread evenly in between, are at different stages of regrowth and make up the middle of the wedge. The following figure depicts a feed wedge with an ideal range of pasture cover over all paddocks of the farm. (see Figure 1)

To create a visual depiction of a feed wedge, the average pasture cover/ dry matter/height of paddocks should be determined and noted down. When these paddocks are ranked in order of pasture cover a visual of a feed wedge is created. This provides the following benefits.

- Quantifying average pasture cover over the farm
- Have targets for both pre and post grazing residuals
- Helps identify surplus and deficits early
- Reduce stress with pasture management decisions
- Improve the timeliness of pasture management decisions
- Pasture allocation to herd is known making supplementary feeding consistent.
- Provide cows with a consistent feed mix of pasture and supplements.
- Improved ryegrass management – See Winter ryegrass management fact sheet.

Building a feed wedge In practice, a feed wedge is built when the grazing rotation is correct. Optimum pasture growth occurs when ryegrass is managed so that grazing occurs at the 2 - 3 leaf stage (at canopy closure) and paddocks are grazed to leave a 4 – 6 cm residual between clumps. In the short term, as a feed wedge is built there is less pasture to offer the herd each day and a larger feed gap is created requiring extra feed inputs. The payback from this is the production of more pasture and overall reduced feed costs in the medium term. The extra feed inputs required may come from › using nitrogen to increase growth rates on paddocks with improved species, moisture and no pasture pests or weeds. Further information can be found on the Winter nitrogen fact sheet on the Dairy Australia website. › introducing existing and newly sown annual crops into the rotation. › feeding out existing fodder supplies › purchasing extra fodder or grain/ concentrates to fill the feed gap. Don't gamble with feed quality fact sheet provides information on costing feeds based on dry matter, energy or crude protein › sourcing agistment for dry and young stock Reducing the feed demand is another tactic to increase the feed available. Culling under-performing animals is an option but keep in mind how this may impact on the business later. When introducing supplementary feeds some tactics to protect the long term productivity of existing pastures could include › feeding cows on a feed pad before they go to the paddock, › giving access to the paddock for a day or night feed only (only offering pasture once per day), › fully feeding on sacrifice paddocks with no access or access to only a small area of pastures. › On-off grazing where the cows are only allowed into the paddock for a short period before being removed and fed on another sacrifice area until the next milking. Example of building a feed wedge In practice it is hard to establish the rotation after the break. All paddocks will be at around the same leaf stage, so you can't wait until all paddocks are at the 3 leaf stage, as very quickly after this, paddocks in the later part of the rotation will be at fourth leaf stage with net growth reducing. A practical compromise (in the autumn only) is to allow the pastures to grow to at least the 2nd leaf stage before starting the rotation. The 2nd and 3rd leaf stage is the "zoom" stage when pasture growth increases substantially. Start grazing with a slow rotation (40-50 days) in place so that pasture cover is building. While establishing the rotation you will need to use a sacrifice or run off area to feed cows enough supplement to meet their needs while you wait until some paddocks are at the 2 leaf stage and start a rotation of 30 – 40 days when you reach this stage. A variable rotation length should be used for the first rotation. In the first phase you will be offering little pasture as the paddocks won't have reached their full growth potential. As you move across the farm (the feed wedge) there will be more pasture available each grazing, and the rotation length can be extended as long as you are still on top of pasture quality. If you move across the farm grazing area too slowly you risk building up pasture that is beyond the 3 leaf stage (and past canopy closure) which can lead to pasture waste. After the first rotation you will have developed a feed wedge, and the rotation length can be adjusted to ensure that the paddock at the top of the wedge is at the ideal grazing stage.

An example of using a variable rotation to extend the rotation length and build a feed wedge on a 120 hectare farm is shown in Figure 2. Using this process over 30 days, the area allocated has been systematically reduced, but the pasture allocation to the herd has remained consistent (as long as pasture growth is occurring). Aim to have the rotation extended to 50 days by early mid/June. If you can hold a 50 day round it will get you to the end of July, a 30-35 day round from late July will get you to early September from which point clear improvement in pasture growth rates may be seen. An aim is to have the rotation set up by the beginning of the 2nd rotation. This does not always happen and based on the leaf stage in the paddock about to be grazed, you can tell if you are too early or late getting back to the first paddock. If the "next paddock" to be grazed is not at the 3 leaf stage the rotation may need to be extended again to account for this. By winter the ideal rotation length will be between 45 and 75 days dependent on leaf emergence rates (15 – 25 days) for your region. Balance your grazing rotation with seasonal conditions and your calving pattern. If you dry off all or most cows and destock the farm for a period in winter, you may be able to adopt a more aggressive grazing strategy now. If you milk cows through winter make sure to plan for the feed demand from pasture in winter. Monitor your rotation by 1. Checking the leaf stage of the "next" paddock that cows are going into. 2. Checking pasture residuals. 3. Prevent back grazing if the herd is in a paddock for more than 2 – 3 days.

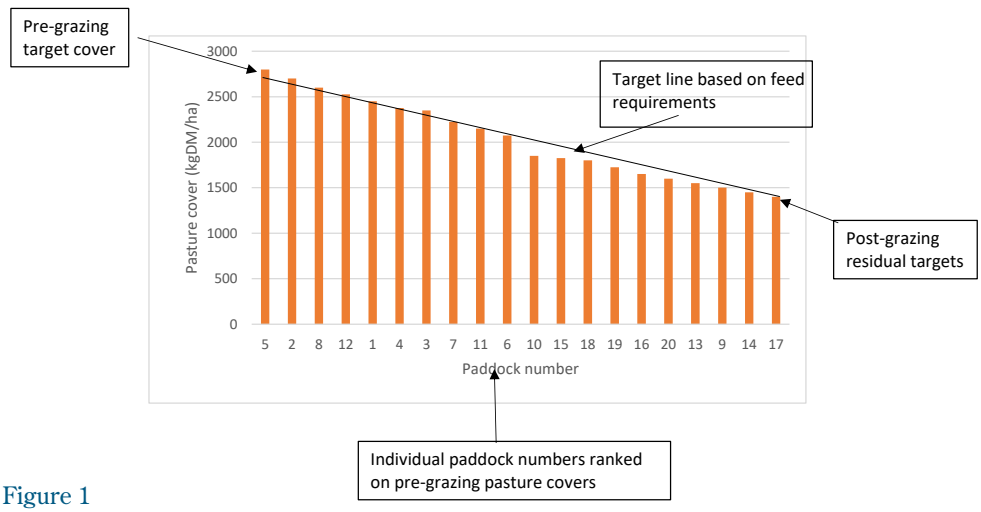


Figure 1

Summary Although extending the rotation length will create some short term demand for feed and this will provide a challenge where feed reserves are low and cash flow is tight, every attempt should be made to lengthen the rotation. Practically this minimises the fluctuation in pasture allocated on a day to day basis so that supplements can be consistent and ultimately reduces feed costs as pasture growth rates are optimised.

Feeding Pastures For Profit – are you missing out?

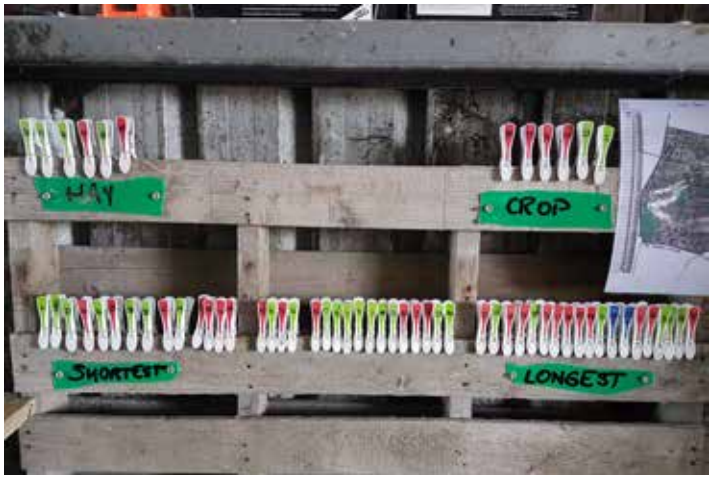
For over 15 years the Feeding Pastures For Profit (FPFP) program has been helping dairy farmers understand what it takes to feed cows profitably. FPFP de-mystifies feeding, and provides robust, science based concepts and practical tools that can be applied immediately to any farm. It provides the confidence required to get feeding right on a day-to-day basis.

The program commences in autumn and runs over a full growing season. It starts with the fundamentals of profitable grazing based feeding. The program uses the latest proven research to clearly describe how plants need to be managed to achieve the most profitable balance between feed quantity, quality and persistence. The participants learn that at different times of the year the 'rules' for grazing need to change. At times ideal grazing will be based on the leaf stage (2-3 leaf), and at other times canopy closure will be the guide. While the program has a heavy focus on managing ryegrass based pastures, management of other pasture types and crops are discussed if the participants need that information. The program is tailored to the needs of the participants.

With a sound knowledge of the aims of good grazing, the program then introduces and provides a Rotation Right tool for each farm, and shows how this simple but effective tool can quickly put you in control of pasture quality and quality. The Rotation Right tool provides a grazing plan that is very easy to follow. It simplifies the daily decision of 'how much feed to allocate the herd today?' by splitting the farm into 'feeds per paddock'. Depending on the required rotation length (shorter in spring, longer in winter), the Rotation Right tool provides a plan that makes sure the right amount of pasture is allocated.

Achieving the right post grazing residual is one of the most challenging jobs on a dairy farm. The residual is affected by many factors and the FPFP program helps the participants understand and manage these. One major influence on the residual is the ability to offer the herd a consistent amount of total feed each grazing. The Rotation Right tool 'does the work' here. Participants are shown how a combination of good farm layout and an understanding of paddock ratings can deliver a 'close to consistent' amount of grazed feed on a fed to fed basis. This flows on to build confidence in supplement use as the response to changes in supplement are much more consistent and easier to measure. If pasture allocation isn't consistent milk production often 'bounces' up and down as the daily allocation of pasture changes.

The FPFP program has a strong focus on the important role that supplements play in achieving the profitable balance between good pasture management and efficient milk production. When there isn't enough pasture, supplements can be used stop overgrazing, and at the same time keep the cows producing efficiently. The program introduces the 'body of evidence' which is a practical process to access if more (or less) supplement would generate more (or less) profit. The body of evidence is based on measurement of the response to changes in supplement use.



Dairy farmer Peter Letcher said 'the FPFP program is very practical'. With two farms and labour to manage Peter has found the FPFP program provides a consistency in the way he manages pasture and uses supplements across farms. 'Any team member can go to either of the farms and they know where the rotation is at and where the cows are going' he said. 'Through the program we have increased our confidence to test another kilogram of supplement. The information needed to make the decision is all based on simple visual signs that we can watch each day. We monitor pasture residual, any waste of other supplements being used, and cow behaviour. The signs are pretty clear, and if we think the herd is being fed too much we just take a bit out. We get the results in the vat, and depending on the milk and feed price we can measure if the decision was right'.

The combination of the Rotation Right tool and pegs (a system where each farm paddock is represented by a peg – see photo) provides an easy way to get the rotation length right. 'Since doing the program we have seen an increase in both pasture harvest and milk production per hectare' Peter said. Peter highly recommends the program to any other farmer – even if they think they are already pretty good at grazing management. 'There's a lot of useful information and practical tools'.

The two day programs will be in West Gippsland on Thursday 27 April/Thursday 4 May; South Gippsland on Friday 28 April/Friday 5 May; Macalister Irrigation District on Wednesday 3 May/Wednesday 10 May. All days will run from 10.15am to 2.30pm with venues to be announced.

If you want to know more about the FPFP program or how you can get involved in an upcoming program contact Karen Romano at GippsDairy on 5624 3900 or karen@gippsdairy.com.au

Dairy skills – skills for life

Rural Skills Connect, an initiative funded through the State Government's Dairy Assistance Program, has been rolled out in the Gippsland region with the recent appointment of Karen Baum to the role of Gippsland Program Manager.

Karen who has 20 years' experience working to support dairy farmers and grow the local industry is now available to assist individuals who may need to find a new job, supplement farm income or explore new opportunities through training.

Through a confidential conversation and on-going guidance Rural Skills Connect (RSC) will support individuals with a range of activities including skills audits, facilitating connections into appropriate training providers and help to have existing skills recognised. RSC can also assist by matching suitably trained, qualified and job-ready candidates with existing local vacancies.

"Supporting the dairy industry to access support like the Back to Work scheme or identifying individual training needs have been some of the initial activities I have been able to assist employers and dairy businesses with in the early stages of the project". Karen sasid

"I'm very happy to sit with individuals and facilitate the most appropriate connection for the individual".

For further information or a confidential conversation contact Karen on 0427 175 189 or karen.baum@rdv.vic.gov.au

Karen Baum from Rural Skills Connect with Middle Tarwin farmers Phil and Julia Allen at the recent Autumn Tactics event at Fish Creek.

contact us

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Counting the cost of facial eczema

Michael Shipton measures the cost of facial eczema in three ways – the crippling financial blow, the stress that it put him and his family under and the suffering it inflicted on his cows.

The Bega farmer, who formerly share-farmed at Nar Nar Goon in West Gippsland, is still recovering financially and emotionally after a facial eczema outbreak in March 2016.

Out of his 300 cows, 12 died and 40 were immediately culled – and the problems didn't end there.

"With significant loss of cow numbers and the stage of production that our cows were in (the majority were freshly calved and ready to start a full lactation) combined with significant loss in milk production in our herd, as well as the extra fodder used to feed the herd in the crisis period, we estimate this has cost a conservative $150,000 plus," Michael said.

"There were also a lot of genetics that we brought with us from our previous property which we were counting on to breed with, so financially it cut us off at the knees. Even (a year later) it is still affecting us because we don't have those cows to cull."

With his cows on a fast 18 day grazing rotation on irrigated ryegrass and kikuya pastures, the farm experienced high humidity, warm overnight temperatures and occasional rainstorms which provided ideal conditions for growth of the fungal spores that cause facial eczema.

Initial signs of scouring and loss of appetite rapidly escalated into a full-blown outbreak.

"After a couple of days of this, we had about 15 cows with significantly reduced milk, who were also highly agitated in the dairy – kicking, urinated constantly, laying down, and generally irritable and unable to be handled," he said.

"At this point we suspected facial eczema, but were unsure as we believed that it wasn't a problem in the Bega area. The following afternoon we had drafted another 40 cows from the milking herd with the same symptoms, and a further 25 cows were affected in the following week."

By the time the disease was identified, it was too late to stop it. Zinc oxide is the only preventative measure available, with no treatments available once animals are affected.

"It was heart breaking to see what the cows went through," he said.

"Added to this, the emotional stress and extra work involved in managing this crisis was phenomenal."

Michael now urges farmers – even those in districts without a history of facial eczema – to be proactive when it comes to dealing with the disease.

"We highly recommend taking preventative steps to ensure no one else is affected to this extent. We are now taking spore counts to monitor facial eczema during danger periods, so farmers can make informed decisions on grazing management and preventative measures."

The prevention message is shared by Maffra vet and facial eczema expert Dr Jakob Malmo.

"There's no use waiting until the disease has broken out and you have sunburned cows everywhere, the damage is already done," he said.

"You need to get in there early, either by protecting them with zinc or keeping off the high spore count paddocks. If you see the signs, the damage is done ten days ago."

GippsDairy and Dairy Australia have established the Facial Eczema Spore Monitoring Website which allows farmers to keep up-to-date on spore levels in their district.

Go to www.dairyaustralia.com.au to access the spore monitoring page. To watch the video of Michael Shipton's experience, go to YouTube and search GippsDairy Channel.

What is facial eczema?

Facial eczema is a potentially fatal liver disease caused by a fungal toxin that affects perennial ryegrass and kikuya pastures.

Given the right seasonal conditions, the fungus multiplies and produces a toxin (called sporedesmin) that is ingested by grazing animals. The toxin causes a dramatic fall in milk production, metabolic disturbances and photosensitization of exposed skin, with severe pain.

Animals that survive facial eczema often suffer permanent liver damage, never fully recover and may require culling.

Euthanase livestock workshops

Gippsland dairy farmers are encouraged to consider attending one of the Humane Euthanasia of Livestock courses being held in Gippsland next month.

GippsDairy regional extension co-ordinator Tony Platt said the courses were a must for any farmer who wants to improve technique and decision making when euthanasing sick and injured animals.

"The course equips farmers with the latest knowledge and techniques to ensure animals with poor prognosis from injury or sickness are successfully euthanased in a safe and humane way to prevent undue suffering," he said.

"Dairy farmers have a well-earned reputation for looking after the welfare of their animals, so this course is another way to maintain those high standards and improve the way we look after sick or injured stock."

The accredited one-day workshops will be held at:

- Maffra on 16 May
- West Gippsland on 17 May
- South Gippsland on 18 May

Each day will run from 9.30am to 2.30pm. Venues will be announced closer to dates. To register contact Tony Platt at tony@gippsdairy.com.au or phone 0477 440 339.

Mind your business

Gippsland dairy farmers wanting to develop a better understanding of their farm business should consider two training opportunities offered by GippsDairy.

Getting into Farm Business Management is a three day program that equips farmers with the tools to implement farm financial practices and processes in their farm business.

The programs will be available at the following times and places:
Time
9.30am – 2.30pm (all days)
Maffra
Day 1: Monday 24th April
Day 2: Monday 1st May
Day 3: Monday 8th May
Warragul
Day 1: Friday, 28 April
Day 2: 5th May
Day 3: 12th May

Getting into DairyBase is a two day program that provides participants with the skills and knowledge to understand the principles of farm business analysis using DairyBase.

It brings together the necessary physical and financial information from various sources to start analysing their farm business.

The programs will be available at the following times and places:
Time
9.30am– 2.30pm (all days)
Maffra
Day 1: Monday 29th May
Day 2: Monday 5th June
Warragul
Day 1: Friday 2nd June
Day 2: Friday 9th June

RSVP for either program to GippsDairy on 5624 3900 or info@gippsdairy.com.au

For more information on these programs, contact Tony Platt on 0477 440 339 or tony@gippsdairy.com.au

Focus Farm breeds debate

By Matt Harms ONFARM Consulting

The March meeting at the Won Wron Focus Farm saw some challenging and interesting discussion around the merits or otherwise of a split calving system. One of the challenges so far for Paul, Lisa and the Support Group has been coming to terms with all the issues that surround a split calving system in a challenging local environment that experiences wide variation in seasonal conditions.

Whilst this sounds quite a strange thing to be questioning (on face value it is quite simple), it is actually very complex and it starts to really get people thinking about their farming system and the strengths and weaknesses of it.

Take for instance the issues raised in the group discussion held in March. In-calf rate was raised, and it was found that 30% were not-in-calf from the spring joining, a figure Paul, Lisa and the Support Group were not at all happy about.

The length of the AI period was eight weeks, and no bulls were used. This has created a large number of empty cows, many of which will be carried through and joined either for autumn 2018, deliberately held over to calve spring 2018, or sold. This then creates a larger number of autumn calvers in 2018, something the Focus Farmers and Support Group have been conscious to reduce.

The Support Group has strongly questioned the number of autumn calvers on this farm. One lure has been FMI payments by Murray Goulburn and the significant increase in milk price and therefore milk income it delivers. This year, the FMI payment option was selected and is looking like delivering a significant increase in milk price for the farm. However income is only one side of the ledger, and the Group has always raised their concerns regarding the increase in costs the split calving delivers as well.

For this farm, this is mainly in the form of increased fodder requirements and the pressure on grass supply heading into winter and early spring. With a high proportion of autumn calvers, cow numbers are at their peak in late April and through May, and do not reduce again until late July calvers start to dry off. This means that when the farm should be slowing round length heading into winter, feed demands are at their highest. Throw into this mix a reduced milking area with nearly 30% of the milking area under a renovation program, and things are tight.

There are four clear outcomes: graze too quickly by allocating too much pasture and cause problems heading into winter; buy the fodder/feed in to make up for any shortfall; grow more fodder for this period of the year; underfeed the herd, reducing production and body condition. Some of these are not palatable options for Paul and Lisa.

The Focus Farmers have been throwing these issues around in their heads since the start of this project. In previous years maize was grown to fill the feed gap over winter, but with a very tight budget position and the high cost of growing and harvesting maize, the group steered them away from it this year.

They have a large non-milking area on the farm, but much of this is unable to be harvested for fodder as it is lower-production hill country, largely unable to be harvested for fodder. Sourcing a turnout block is under consideration, as it would allow for the harvesting of fodder and the grazing of dry cows to support the higher winter demands of a split calving system. But this also puts pressure on cash reserves, and the associated costs of fertiliser, harvesting and freight that need to be paid.

Does the farm go away from split calving, resulting in a lower milk price, but reducing or removing the issues raised above? This has been discussed and considered strongly, and while Paul and Lisa see this as a serious option, it would mean some significant changes to the business.

The comments made often at Support Group meetings have been the ease of rearing autumn born Jersey calves compared to the spring born calves; it spreads workload more evenly for Paul and Lisa, but also for Aaron/Dubba the paid employees; it is a better time of the year for calving cows than winter and early spring; it prevents the loss of empty cows from the herd by

Paul and Lisa Mumford

carrying them over and giving them another chance (I hear some cringe with that comment, but it is reality for many farms!); it allows for the rearing of more replacement stock, that then gives options for the farm to either retain more young stock as replacements or sell a surplus as exports, or milking animals to boost cash flow.

The Mumford farm has adopted this strategy for the past few years, especially whilst numbers were being built for the stocking of the second farm.

This month, the group listened to these arguments, but also challenged Paul and Lisa to consider the real costs this system places on their business. The issues raised against the significant size of the autumn herd were as follows:

- The rearing of surplus stock is great for equity growth and giving the farm options, but when the costs of rearing and running the animals through to a saleable age is considered, the exercise is break-even at best
- There really isn't any need to rear more than 25% replacement numbers unless herd size is growing
- Young stock may have the best genetic potential, but actual production into the vat will be higher from slightly older animals
- The rearing of excess calves removes saleable milk from the vat, or requires purchase of milk replacer, paid for from cashflow
- Feeding young stock well is necessary for a good result, and farm fodder reserves are often inadequate, meaning more fodder needs to be bought than would otherwise be the case
- Carrying cows over to a subsequent joining is breeding poorer fertility into the herd- look at what the cause of the lower spring joining is and deal with the cause, not the result
- Make decisions for the farm based on what calving pattern suits the farm, and don't make calving pattern decisions based on milk payment systems

Robust debate is healthy, and is allowing Paul and Lisa to challenge their thinking and their system so that the business is more resilient going forward. The answers to the above issues and the ultimate outcomes are not yet decided, and they will be hotly debated over the next 6-12 months, however the group made the following suggestions as a starting point:

- Autumn joining to be four weeks only, with a heat sync program put in place
- Spring joining to be eight weeks to AI then at least four weeks to the bull
- Review the number of stock on the farm and aim to only keep required heifers and bulls and re-assess this as you go
- Look strongly at empty cows and give them every opportunity to get back in calf, but avoid carrying them through and "breeding" the problem into the herd.

Reminders MAY

Feed Planning
- Having a plan to feed all the stock on your farm, with fodder that's feed tested which is likely to get you better grown and conditioned stock and more profitable milk production.
- This is very important for young stock that seem to be commonly underfed during autumn and winter.
- Check your volumes of hay and silage against the planned feeding, if you need to change the plan as volumes are low you will know in advance.

Establishing a wedge of pasture after the autumn break
- Balance your grazing rotation with seasonal conditions and your calving pattern. If you dry off all or most cows and destock the farm for a period in winter, you may be able adopt a more aggressive grazing strategy now. If you milk cows through winter make sure to plan for the feed demand from pasture in winter.
- Plan your grazing rotation without areas of renovated or oversown pasture as these areas may take some time to become available if rainfall comes late in autumn.
- Have a plan for wet soil conditions should they occur, stand-off paddocks and suitable feed sources may be required this winter.
- Use nitrogen fertiliser to boost pasture growth if required. For more information see http://fertsmart.dairyingfortomorrow.com.au/dairy-soils-and-fertiliser-manual/chapter-12-nitrogen-and-nitrogen-fertilisers/
- If cold conditions occur and you are eating pasture faster than its growing consider the use of Gibberellic acid to increase pasture growth rates.

Establishing and managing new pastures
- Check new pastures for pests such as Red Legged Earth Mite and Lucerne Flea, if found they will need to be controlled as soon as possible to reduce damage to the seedlings.
- Do the 'pluck test' to check new sown pastures are ready for grazing, the plants need to be well anchored in the ground so they will not pull out, sometimes just waiting until a wet soil has dried out is enough for the plants to stay in the ground during grazing.

Pastures/forages

Ryegrass leaf appearance rate	10 to 15 days per leaf (depending on soil moisture).
Area of farm to graze today	1/30th to 1/45th of grazing area in 24 hours.
Recommended post grazing decision	Aim for grazing pressure that leaves residuals of 4 to 6 cm between the pasture clumps. This ensures faster growing ryegrass plants in autumn.
Average daily pasture growth rate	15 to 30 KGDM/ha/day following autumn rainfall or irrigation.
Estimated daily evaporation	4 to 6 mm per day.
Seasonal management tasks	Spray broad leaved weeds when plants are 3 to 5cm for best results, ensure all weeds have struck before spraying.

- When grazing newly sown pasture for the first time, if possible use a large mob of animals that are light weight (young stock) for short periods of time to lightly graze new pastures to a 4-6cm residual.
- Follow the first grazing with broad leaf weed spray if it's required to allow the pasture tiller and thrive.
- Consider the use of nitrogen to strengthen the plants and grow more dry matter after the first grazing.

Stock
- Drying off offers the opportunity to prevent mastitis using dry cow treatments, cows that have had mastitis may need to be treated differently to cows that have a low BMCC and have had no mastitis.
- Ensure dry cows have enough feed, dry cows require between 70 and 90mj/cow/day and 13 to 14% crude protein when dry. Check the quality of the feed they are being offered if pasture is limiting, local Gippsland hay is often very low quality and should be feed tested if it is offered as the only feed source to dry or transition cows.
- Cows within 21 days of calving (transition cows) should be fed carefully to prevent milk fever and other difficulties, talk to your advisor about this or see the Dairy Australia we site www.dairyaustralia.com.au and search for check list for transition cow management.
- If autumn calving:
- Prepare for autumn cow joining, make sure you have the necessary bull power. Aim for 6 bulls per 100 cows, if not using AI and 3 bulls per 100 cows with AI. Rest the herd bulls regularly, InCalf recommend alternating bull teams at least weekly.
- Consider checking bull fertility, checking for pestivirus (especially if a new bull enters the property) and vaccinating to prevent sexually transmitted diseases such as vibriosis.

Young Stock
- Investing in feeding young stock well provides a return to your business in more than one way.
  - o Get back in calf more easily as 1st calvers in the herd.
  - o Produce more milk than undergrown heifers.
  - o Contribute to a more predictable calving pattern as they are calved down at 24 months old rather than 30 months old.
- Prepare your calf rearing facilities, consider disease and ease of operating as priorities. For more information see http://www.dairyaustralia.com.au/Animal-management/Animal-welfare/Calves.aspx

Water Issues
- Make a note in your diary of irrigation trouble spots that need maintenance. Farm channel maintenance, irrigation stop maintenance and pump maintenance need to be planned ready for the next irrigation season.
- Assess your current water supply needs and capacities, if upgrades or maintenance of them is required make plans for development and plans to manage the system as it is for the period before development.

Business
- Once complete take the time to check your planned cash flow against your GST for the 3rd quarter.
- Plan your tax with your accountant or make the appointment to do so.
- Prepare to plan next financial year's budgets, take into account the current milk price and input costs and consider the things you want to do on the farm in the next 12 months.

ComingUp

See the GippsDairy events calendar for more information
www.gippsdairy.com.au/eventscalendar.aspx

Feeding Pastures for Profit (FPFP)

FPFP develops dairy farmer skills and decision making in growing and optimising pasture consumption.

The program involves two days 'up-front' classroom style delivery plus five on-farm group days over the next 10-12 months. Each participant is entitled to a one off farm visit to support pasture rotation decisions.

Places are limited, to register contact Karen Romano on 0417 524 916 or karen@gippsdairy.com.au

Date: 27 April and 4 May
Time: 9.45am – 3pm
Location: West Gippsland (venue tba)
RSVP: Karen Romano on 0417 524 916 or karen@gippsdairy.com.au

Date: 28 April and 5 May
Time: 9.45am – 3pm
Location: South Gippsland (venue tba)
RSVP: Karen Romano on 0417 524 916 or karen@gippsdairy.com.au

Date: 3 May and 10 May
Time: 9.45am – 3pm
Location: MID (venue tba)
RSVP: Karen Romano on 0417 524 916 or karen@gippsdairy.com.au

Getting into Farm Financials

A three day course that aims to provide participants with the skills and knowledge to implement farm financial practices and processes in their farm business. GippsDairy is offering courses in Warragul and the MID during April and May.

Date: 28 April, 5 May, 12 May
Location: Warragul (venue to be announced)
RSVP: GippsDairy 5624 3900 or info@gippsdairy.com.au

Date: 24 April, 1 May, 8 May
Location: MID (venue to be announced)
RSVP: GippsDairy 5624 3900 or info@gippsdairy.com.au

Euthanase Livestock

This course trains farmers in the humane euthanasia of sick, injured and unsaleable animals. The one day program gives farmers skills in using a captive bolt device and an understanding of the relevant welfare laws.

Date: 16 May
Location: MID (venue to be announced)
RSVP: GippsDairy 5624 3900 or info@gippsdairy.com.au

Date: 17 May
Location: West Gippsland (venue to be announced)
RSVP: GippsDairy 5624 3900 or info@gippsdairy.com.au