

Macalister Demonstration Farm

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NEWSLETTER 93

October 2014



Your Levy at Work



Macalister Demonstration Farm is supported
by Genetics Australia, HICO and GippsDairy.



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MACALISTER DEMONSTRATION FARM ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Macalister Demonstration Farm Annual General Meeting will be held on TUESDAY 21st OCTOBER 2014. For this year, the Annual General Meeting will be held during the day at the farm. Keynote speaker will be John Versteden former chair of GippsDairy. John will be speaking about the Future of the dairy industry: people - development and training and farm ownership. The winner of the RF (Bob) Pitman award will be announced. MDF Learning and Travel Scholarship awardee, Jon Ryan who will present his final report on his scholarship project.

WHEN: TUESDAY 21st OCTOBER 2014

WHERE: Macalister Demonstration Farm
285 Boggy Creek Road, Riverslea

TIME: 10.30 am to 2.00 pm

FREE LUNCH -- Please RSVP attendance to Sandie on 0488 175 366 or by email at mdf@wideband.net.au

Yellow Rag Bit

Maria Rose, Dairy Extension Officer, DEPI Maffra

Tightening up your dairy herd's calving pattern

The best way to tighten up your calving pattern is by paying appropriate attention to the non-cycling animals in your dairy herd in order to greatly reduce, or even avoid the use of calving induction, a practice which is increasingly under the animal welfare microscope. I recently asked veterinarian Trystan Keylock for guidelines on how best to do this as part of an overall reproductive management program.

What constitutes a tight seasonal calving pattern and what benefits could we expect?

The goal of a tight calving pattern is for most of the herd to have calved near the start of calving with the tail end of the herd following soon after. Essentially animals that don't calve in the first six to nine weeks have a very low chance of getting back into calf to maintain a tight seasonal calving pattern. This goal can be achieved through getting the cows pregnant early or making the late calving cows calve early (i.e. the use of inductions). For welfare and profitability reasons, the greater the emphasis we can place on getting cows pregnant early, the better.

A key benefit from having a tight calving pattern is that through maximizing the time between calving and subsequent mating, cows are more likely to get in calf early the following season. Many farms' cow profitability increases with the number of peak lactations per lifetime, as the more frequently a cow calves, the more peaks in lactation it will have over a lifetime. Being able to make better use of the spring flush through having more of the herd calved earlier will likely result in better quality pasture being utilised and subsequently higher milk production. Additionally, the time period for labour associated with calving down a herd and rearing calves won't be dragged out

Which groups in the herd should be focused on and how best are they brought into line?

One of the critical groups to focus on are those cows not cycling at the start of mating. These are the cows that have not returned to normal patterns of coming on heat since calving and, if left unattended, they will not be mated early and so will not calve early.

Logically, if we want non-cycling cows mated at the beginning of the mating period, they must be identified and treated before the mating period begins. If the herd is monitored for heat in the month prior to mating, then the non-cycling cows can be identified and treated in the week before mating starts. In contrast, another common method of identifying non-cyclers is to mate for three weeks and anything not yet mated is treated as a non-cycler. The problem with this alternative is that the non-cycling group do not get an opportunity to have their first mating until well into their second.

To further assist in tightening the calving pattern of your herd, heifers also need to be treated as a critical management group. Joining heifers at least two weeks earlier than the first cow, is usually enough time to ensure that around two thirds of them are calved before the cows start calving in earnest. Synchronising heifers will most likely assist in increasing this ratio. An additional benefit for heifers if they start to calve at least two weeks ahead of the bulk of the herd is less competition for feed in the critical time of their transition into first - time milkers.

What is the best way of detecting non-cycling cows and heifers?

The best way to detect non-cycling cows and heifers is through the use of tail paint 30 days prior to your planned starting date of mating (remembering that this date for heifers is likely to be least two weeks earlier than the main herd). Using colour-coded tail paint can be as simple as treating any cow or heifer still with the original coloured tail paint in the week before planned mating start date as non-cycling. Or in addition to just observing, you may choose to actually write down identification numbers of all heifers and cows on heat and then one week before mating going through the list. Then, the ones that haven't been documented as coming on heat are your non-cyclers. Whichever of the two approaches you use, it is important that you touch up tail paint every two or three days to avoid false heats.

Once you determine non-cycling cows, what do you do with them?

The treatment of non-cycling cows and heifers once detected is complicated because we are trying to kick start the co-ordination of hormonal events in both the brain and ovaries so that they not only start cycling but keep cycling. The best treatment regime may vary from farm to farm because of differences in labour availability, facilities and management expectations as well as previous experiences. It is therefore important to talk with your local trusted veterinarian to discuss the options of what to do with non-cyclers in the context of your farm management style.

What is the alternative to tightening up your seasonal calving pattern?

An alternative to tightening a seasonal calving pattern is to merely mate the herd for a short period and have the relatively large number of non-pregnant cows mated to calve in a different season (split calving). The consequence of this practice is longer lactations for those animals, which suits some management systems. Once again it is worthwhile talking to a local veterinarian. Also it might be helpful to talk to your local DEPI dairy extension officer and or dairy factory field officer for assistance in doing the relevant farm business management sums.

What's been going on at the MDF?

How hard do you chase for additional silage?

One of the questions being asked by some at this point in time on dairy farms across Gippsland is "how hard do you chase for additional silage?". There is no one simple answer to this question- if there was, it would be a boring world! But there is a set of questions that many people look at to help make that snap decision throughout spring. I will list some of these questions and variables, and explain what is panning out at the MDF.

Some of the questions that need to be considered are as follows:

- Stocking rate and residuals in the paddock;
- Feed rate in the bail and the impact on residuals in the pasture post-grazing;
- Pasture quality in front of cows;
- Are there just high residuals being left everywhere, or are paddocks being dropped out for silage? Ensuring that silage is chased into a corner and not scattered all over the farm!
- Cost of conservation- make your own or contractor?
- Availability of contractors;

- Use for the feed- are you going to need it?
- Cost of alternative feed sources.

All the above issues need to be carefully considered on your farm, with heavy consideration through October and then beyond into November being given to the quality of the silage being harvested, the pasture quality in front of the cows and the cost of the alternative feed sources being major issues.

A quick look at the cost of feed as the prices sit right now (not necessarily at the time the feed is being used) shows the following:

Feed type	\$/t as fed	\$/t dry matter	Average energy value (MJ ME/kg DM)	Protein %	NDF %	c/MJ ME
wheat	\$310	\$344	13	12	12	2.65
Wheat 6kg plus 18c additive	\$340	\$378	13	12	12	2.91
Typical grain mix	\$370	\$411	12.5	14	14	3.29
Barley	\$270	\$300	12	12	15	2.5
High quality pellets	\$385	\$428	12.5	12	15	3.34
Lucerne hay	\$295	\$347	10	20	45	3.47
Vetch hay	\$280	\$329	10.5	24	40	3.13
Home grown pasture hay	\$45/bale	\$157	8	14	55	1.96
Own-made good silage*	\$52/bale	\$208	10	18	50	2.08
Contractor made late silage**	\$70/bale	\$280	9.5	15	50	2.95

*assumes true surplus so grass cost is \$70/tDM

**assumes a contractor cost of \$35/bale on a standard size bale and grass cost including irrigation water of \$140/tDM

The above table is a guide only and may not represent actual prices that merchants will be selling feed for right at this point in time.

What this shows is that if the cost of contractors and the true cost of irrigated pasture is included (water, fertiliser, nitrogen, renovation etc), then making late silage in this manner may in some cases be false economy. However, it also shows that if it is being used as a means to keep pasture quality in front of cows, or to replace purchased fodder later in the season that may be a lot more expensive than the prices above, then it may be a good decision and worth making at the time.

At the MDF, there is a small additional surplus developing in front of the cows that may be able to be harvested in the coming weeks. This has been due to a slightly higher feed rate in the bale than many in the Focus Farm support group are comfortable with and some paddocks of dubious quality that may be better to get off and be fed to cows in late lactation than at peak lactation. This silage will replace purchased hay in late lactation, arguably at a higher price than what the table above shows.

So the decision has been not one of “chase silage at the expense of feeding it to cows”, but rather harvest a true surplus and push to get as much as possible through aggressive nitrogen use (1kgN/ha/day), high bale feed rates (6kg as fed) and is a means of keeping quality pasture in front of cows. I am happy for the MDF cows to be fed in late lactation silage made at 2.95c/MJ than purchased fodder possibly at greater than 3.47c/MJ!

Matt Harms, ONFARM Consulting, ph: 0408 311 118 email: matt@onfarmconsulting.com.au

Macalister Demonstration Farm Travel and Learning Scholarship

The application of new technology to manage pastures in the Macalister Irrigation District (MID)

Jon Ryan, 2013 Recipient

Summary

In February of 2014 I travelled to Tasmania and New Zealand with the purpose of investigating the use of pasture meters on dairy farms. I wanted to meet with other farmers and see if there was a real opportunity to be gained by regularly monitoring pasture growth.

I discovered that farmers who measure don't all use the information in the same way and I also found that the New Zealand farmers use the data to a higher degree than we do in Australia. I observed that, generally, farmers who measure grew more grass. Topics discussed with these farmers centred around getting post grazing residual down to between 1500 to 1700 kg/DM/ha at each grazing, how fast their grass was growing, what surplus or deficit they had and what the cost of their grass.

Some farms used rising plate meters post grazing as a way of making sure residuals were attained, others used pasture measuring probes and walked the farm on a weekly basis to track average pasture cover for weekly grazing allocation management whilst other farmers did weekly walks and had a good eye for assessing pasture cover and simply wrote each paddocks cover down on a piece of paper. The more recent development of Rapid Pasture Meters that are towed behind an ATV are becoming more widely used due to the speed in which the data can be collected.

Generally it was observed that a good pasture manager is competent with or without the use of the available measuring technology but the real opportunity was observed on the farms that collected the information regularly and up loaded the data to a software program that can, over time, generate reports on individual paddock performance, and identify underperforming paddocks to facilitate specific management choices for differing land classes across your farm. In many cases this may mean an increase in production in areas of higher productivity, whilst reducing inputs on areas of lower productivity thereby optimising the economic potential of the land resource.

Pasture measuring has often been a time consuming process with little visual benefit but with the technology available today the data can be collected with an ATV in a matter of hours and then uploaded to programs such as Pasture Plus and FarmKeeper. These programs clearly display the status of each paddock's pasture cover and, by entering feed demand of your herd, you can soon generate Average Pasture Cover (APC) targets, rotation length and daily available pasture. From here you can calculate supplement requirements or pasture surplus for conservation. Over time these programs allow you to view performance of each paddock which can then be used to formulate management strategies to increase economic return.

I will be making a more detailed presentation at the Macalister Demonstration Farm AGM.

POSTAGE
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AUSTRALIA

SENDER:



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