

Article from:

O'Briens' dairy success

Emma Field | July 11, 2012

THE outgoing managers of an experimental farm in Gippsland have made a big impact during their five-year tenure.

And they owe it all to keeping it simple and fine-tuning the basics.

AT A GLANCE

- Who: Mike and Sarah O'Brien
- What: dairy
- Why: moving on
- Where: Tinamba

Mike and Sarah O'Brien have managed the Macalister Demonstration Farm, near Tinamba, since 2007.

The commercially run, community-owned dairy farm runs trials, demonstrations and activities to assist local farmers with their own management.

Since the couple joined the MDF the 96ha farm has dramatically lowered its herd's mastitis cell count, increased the fertility rate and improved pastures.

For Mike, taking the manager's role was an opportunity to step up from pasture management at Numurkah, but for Sarah, a former youth worker, it was much more.

"I'd never milked a cow before in my life, but now I love it," Sarah said.

And Mike said the operation only worked with the support of his wife.

"If I am the face of the farm, it's only because I have great support from Sarah. She has been phenomenal."

The couple will soon move to nearby Nambrok with their three children Zoe, 7, Katelyn, 4, and Joshua, 1, to take up share farming.

That will be the next step to their end goal of herd ownership.

"We've bought our own machinery and that's part of putting our own herd together," Mike said.

Managing the MDF has also meant dealing with the various research projects running on the farm and working with farm consultant Frank Tyndal and a board of directors.

Frank said the couple had been an asset to the farm and their mantra of keeping production simple was effective.

"They are very focused on achieving results and are very collaborative about deciding what to do on the farm," Frank said. "One of their philosophies was to do the basics properly and that means doing things at the right time and at the right rate," Frank said.

When the O'Brien's took over the farm, the herd's high mastitis cell count was an issue, but Mike said they lowered it by following Dairy Australia's Countdown Downunder guidelines.

In the 2006-07 financial year 67 per cent of cows in the herd had an individual cell count of more than 250,000 cells/ml. By 2008-09 this had improved to just 25 percent.

The couple also reduced the number of heifers with mastitis from 26 per cent to 3 per cent over the same period.

Last year the farm received a milk quality award from Dairy Australia which recognised farms with the lowest annual average bulk milk cell count.

"We farm very basically, we haven't done anything fancy since we have been here," Mike said.

"There is a lot of information out there and we have tried to implement it on the farm.

"We try and do everything on time and well and look after the little things."

They have also kicked goals with herd fertility. Last year their six week in-calf rate had risen to 63 per cent, up from 56 per cent in 2008-09.

Mike said they tried to make the artificial insemination process less stressful for the cows by spending more time monitoring them in the paddock.

"We are the first on (Genetics Australia's artificial insemination) run so the cows don't have to wait, they are back down the paddock in a couple of hours.

"I get out in the paddock and watch the cows. We make sure we get every cow on heat."

Mike's real passion in dairy farming is in pasture production and he quickly implemented the industry's Feeding Pastures For Profit system.

"We are always trying to lift grass production." Mike said. "We have been using the pasture for profit system for five years, always trying to refine it and do it better.

"We try to get the right rotation to get to the three leaf stage and we monitor our grass really closely for growth and grazing residue.

"We always concentrate on pasture base first and then add feed supplements, making little adjustments every day."

Frank said the system had helped get more consistent feed into the cows over the long run.

Milk solids production was now always above 500 kilograms a cow per year with a stocking rate of four cows a hectare and pasture consumption above 12 tonnes dry matter/ha.

Another significant change Mike made to the farm was reducing the 30-a-side dairy to a 20-a-side shed, to reduce the labour required for milking.

The farm employs one other full time equivalent staff member, but the O'Brien's said finding good staff has been another of their challenges.

The couple are proud of their achievements at the farm and praised the support they had received from Frank and the board's chairman Mark Humphris.



Leaving: Mike and Sarah O'Brien with their children Joshua, 1, Zoe, 7, and Katelyn, 4.