



March The Month of Decision

Why? Because our decisions and actions in March in many ways determines a ceiling on performance of both farms and cows, with a 'cause/effect' impact on profit.

Starting with the farm scenario first, pasture density will determine available feed for the remainder of 2009 (assuming no other constraints). March, by a long history of observation, is the only time for sowing new pasture plants. Annuals consistently out perform when sown in March, particularly when drilled into existing pasture. April tends to produce far slower establishment and often leaves new plants at the one leaf stage till spring provides the warmth to provoke further leaf growth and tillering.

I am regularly scalded by those who have anecdotal evidence contrary to proven principles of good agronomic and animal science. My response is always the same: there will always be 'fringe successes', but this never negates the big bold arrow pointing to majority rule. In the economic climate we are going to be functioning in this year, testing the fringe rule is perilous. Dairying economics in 2009 are not conducive to novelty.

The second issue in farm productivity is fertilizer. Assuming from above we have good plant density, then feeding them to enable genetic potential for dry matter production would seem obvious, yet this is one of those costs that so frequently suffers down grading when milk price declines.

I'm especially concerned this year with reduction in fertilizer as the silage samples I've had tested to date, with some exceptions (and they are tractable to management factors), show a large nutrient decline, especially in crude protein. Long 'shut-up times' due to a cool spring has caused higher lignification (lower digestibility) of silage, but I suspect reduced fertilizer application has impacted most on crude protein. This has lowered milk production due to imbalance against energy resulting in cows gaining weight at a greater rate than desirable. Low ration protein not just affects partitioning of energy away from milk production to BCS, but also dampens appetite, further reducing milk production through lower feed intakes.

I suspect many farms have reduced fertility last year as a legacy of high fertilizer prices. Reducing farm production potential at any time carries enormous risk in scenarios like this, when further erosion in profitability occurs the following season.

The cows. March heralds dry-off and entry to calving season across much of Australia's dairying regions.

Few dairy farmers today have not experienced for themselves the obvious benefits in reduced metabolic disease at calving derived from a good lead feed programs. The less obvious, or less visible benefits in higher performance of cows who have passed through calving without mishap needs little qualification as any dairyperson knows from the opposite experience how severely handicapped is the lactation performance of a cow that goes down at, or soon after calving.

There are some promising research results beginning to appear on 'far-off' dry cow management, but clear protocols have yet to emerge; possibly next year we'll have more to say on this phase of dairy cow husbandry.

The scientifically initiated, but now well tried, tested and proven in practical Australian dairying environments, rules for dry cow/springer cow management are relatively simple, yet profound in their impact on performance and profit.

Essentially the list runs something like the following, and I'll address each in more detail next month as the subject well warrants column space in view of the magnitude of its impact on full lactation profitability.

The last 100 days of lactation are for preparing our cow for next lactation. Body fat rich in trace minerals needs to be deposited gradually over this time. Deposition of calcium and magnesium back into skeletal frame in readiness for re-absorption in early lactation likewise is only effective in slow and gradual increments.

Drying off we all love except the administration of Dry Cow therapy. Mastitis in early lactation is well understood in terms of lost production, but recent research has uncovered a nasty correlation between this and reduced fertility. BCS at dry off is also well understood in regard to post calving body reserves for meeting nutrient needs in excess of intake for optimum milk production, however, variations in body weight during the dry cow phase is an area we all need to focus more on due to its impact at calving and immediately after.

Lead feeding needs little qualification as to its major contribution to problem free calving, but again, its impact on whole of lactation has yet to be fully grasped. Lead feeding should be as intensively monitored as the calving of our 'best' cow. Its impact on farm profit is far more reaching than a smooth calving of our high PI cow.

Having got our herd this far, the challenge to provide an adequate ration to not just enable it to meet the herd's genetic potential for production, but also to avoid crashes in health from ketosis and post calving milk fever, both of which will precipitate mastitis, and as above, jeopardise the cow's reproductive performance and probably longevity as a profit contributor in the herd.

In a depressed dairying economic climate, performance will separate profit from survival, and survival from death of the farm business. Do what is proven to support profit, not cut costs without qualification of their impact.