John Lyne's
DAIRYTECH
Dairy Production Specialists
Performance Products - Nutrition Services
ABN 62 656 293 974

P.O. Box 26,
Timboon Victoria 3268
0438 170 949

Feeding Fresh Cows
July 05

I have deliberately entitled this month's article with a date, July 05. This year's ration is radically different from feeding cows last July. Last July cows had the benefit of good pasture growth rates and most farms were not short of paddock feed.

Good rain in mid June this year has fired up pasture, however, with the legacy of cooler soil temperatures. Mid July to mid September traditionally presents a challenge in feeding cows with its inherent pasture shortages. I fear that this year this period will be far worse than normal due to such a late start to the growing season.

None of the above is news; however it is the scenario we now face. After such a long dry spell hay reserves are all but exhausted, and grain has begun rising in price. We are left with only one choice, pasture, or more correctly doing all we can to increase pasture production.

The old saying 'Need is the Mother of Invention', or at least a time for sharp learning curves, or letting go of traditionally held understandings, usually is fulfilled in situations like this. It certainly has been for me. Often under these circumstances we are forced out of our thinking comfort zones and are more willing to try new methods. I recall learning to feed grain and improve cow productivity and performance immediately after Ash Wednesday in early 1983 with grain feeding, as it was the only feed source that was readily available, mixed with a little hay from WA and straw. 1983 was our highest production year to that time.

Although the circumstances are different, we are faced with a similar feed scenario.
The attributes of feeding grain are now well understood, and should be currently used to their greatest advantage.

What we now need is a revolution, at least on farm, in pasture production. Now is the time for another productivity leap as we did in the past through grain, not just for this current year, but for the sake of ongoing productivity gains to enable our dairy industry to keep pace with the "in real terms" decline in milk prices and farm profitability.

The average dry matter harvested per Ha in Western Victoria is around 4 tonnes. Despite this, there are farms harvesting (grazing and silage) near double this figure. Essentially, the impact is having double your current acreage with the same number of cows to feed. The question that begs answering is how do they do it?

Like most things in life, there are no silver bullets, rather, a combination of good management practices produce this dramatic increase in pasture harvested. All the following practices are part of a complete strategy; individually they will not achieve the same result. Synergy is the key to accelerated increase, when two or more factors combine to produce a result far in excess of their individual sum.

The first step is to maintain pasture quality. That is, keeping pasture from maturing by relatively short rotations, 24 to 28 days. This has a twofold affect of supplying cows with the best opportunity to convert grass to milk through low fibre (intake), high energy and protein, and secondly, stimulates grass growth.

Obviously to match this vigour produced by keeping pasture short and aggressive, fertilizer to meet genetic growth potential of pasture plants is essential. The fertilizer regime I have witnessed to achieve this pasture vitality is the application of urea/3in1, 50/50 at 50 kgs/Ha every 3 weeks. Ideally, to follow cows around in rotation applying this mix weekly to all paddocks grazed over the last week is best.

The third component to this program is pasture density. Although it is now too late to address this issue by direct drilling annuals the fertilizer regime above can be reduced to match pasture plant density and still have proportionate impact. Now is a good time to plan for direct drilling annuals while plant density is very visible. Mid March is the ideal time to be drilling annuals. In paddocks, which have clumpy ryegrass crowns, it pays to power harrow with a seed box applying seed and a roller behind. Old ryegrass crowns respond vigorously when split by power harrows. Combine this with annual seed and you will lift plant density considerably and hence pasture quantity next season.

Pasture is extremely difficult to replace in a ration, obviously at its best quality stage it is perfect feed for the cow designed to eat it. Grain plays an important roll in managing pasture for quality and enables higher stocking rates, which in turn is a valuable pasture quality management tool. Grain's low NDF (fibre) also allows us to maintain intake when pasture NDF rises.

In summary, provoke and stimulate pasture by keeping it well grazed and apply the above fertilizer regime to maximise growth potential, our only variable forage component from now till spring. Underfeeding cows is by far the greatest restriction to milk production in Australian dairy farming.