



It's More About Art Than Science

This title by no means underrates the major impact of understanding the science of animal or plant production. However, farming on science alone can go very awry. There is no replacement for the eye, tempered by years of curious and questioning observation, of an astute farmer.

Ruminant nutrition enjoys a great deal of consensus worldwide, unfortunately, due to climate/soil types and other compounding factors, the science of agronomy needs constant modification from farm to farm, from season to season, to optimise pasture production, cow health and productivity from animals grazing this pasture.

There are wide variations in productivity on dairy farms due to degrees of skill in observing both pasture and cows, and in responding to those signals. Variations in tonnages harvested per hectare as silage over the last two months will testify to my opinion on this.

In my September article, "Silage is a Profit Driver", my goal was to enlighten to the potential to increase dry matter harvested per hectare very significantly through aggressive pasture management, both with cows grazing and machine harvesting during the brief few weeks of spring. Not in my wildest dreams did I think we would see the potential for increasing dry matter harvested this spring as has happened.

I am very fortunate to be associated with, in my opinion, probably some of the best observers of cows and pasture in SW Vic and watch them ensile enormous volumes of silage this season while still fully feeding their cows on high nutrient pasture with record milk production. They knew their science, but it was their skill in observing and reading the signals, responding with both cutting and fertilizer, that yielded record tonnages of quality silage and maintained actively growing, 'leafy' pasture well into November while other farms around them had pasture gone to head.

While moisture was available they fed the pasture plants, and controlled 'heading points' by cutting or grazing to keep pasture vegetative. The differences in energy/protein and digestible fibre produced per hectare are massive, and obviously milk derived from these increased amounts nutrients is also massive by comparison.

Optimising what ultimately becomes milk harvested, through science, management, but mostly observation and response to signals, truly makes silage season an opportunity to increase farm profits very significantly. This spring has revealed wide variations.

Tonnes of dry matter harvested per hectare is major, but equally too is the good “cow person”. Cows send out signals all day; the astute dairy-person is reading these signals and interpreting them into actions to optimise cow health and productivity.

I have a client/friend who notices a cow is ‘not right’ and drafts her for veterinary attention. The vet completes an examination and concludes there is nothing wrong with the cow, to the frustration of my friend. The vet is not wrong; there are no clinical signs of illness. My friend has a sharp eye for behaviour changes in his cows which may or may not develop into clinical disease, but he wants answers.

My friend and I are currently working through an issue I have suspected for sometime is influencing our cows’ health and productivity – lactating ration DCAD. Most dairy farmers are now aware of Dietary Cation Anion Difference in regard to lead feeding springing cows to the goal of preventing milk fever, ketosis and other metabolic disease at calving, but there have been no studies that I’m aware of on the impact of high DCAD in lactating cows. I will write on the subject when we have some conclusions.

The intent of this article is not to be a lecture in all ‘cow signals’, but to draw attention to the fact that cows will tell us many things about the farm if we incline ourselves to observe – the difficulty of seeing the forest for the trees!

As farms increase in size, so too do workloads, the need for detailed knowledge and delegation, it is easy to lose sight of the cows, but dairy farming is about cows. Our goal is to prevent disease, improve cow health and production, so how can I tell a couple of days before a cow becomes sick that something is already wrong?

There are three questions we need constantly to be asking ourselves: What do I see? How did this happen? What does this mean? The challenge is to pick up signs before they claim victims. Notice symptoms before they become disease; to avoid ‘farm blindness’. Observing and looking are not the same – observing is art and our craft!

Those who are well experienced in dairy farming must take up the challenge also to teach. Again, as farms increase in size there is a tendency due to pressures of larger operations to overlook the master/apprentice culture of passing on the knowledge and the art of observation. If we want good employees, and our industry to continue and prosper, we need to commit to fostering this art in the young.

Discontented employees are disconnected employees. Motivation comes from ownership; ownership comes from ‘buying into’ the fascination of cows and pasture through awakening to the manifold signals cows give us about themselves and what they are eating.