



New Year Resolutions

January is a good time to review current lactation and business performance and plan for an improvement for next season.

I have a client from whom I get great inspiration. His father took up the current family farm as a scrub block some 60 years ago. The family motto has, and most strongly still is, to improve every year on the previous year. Needless to say, the current generation, now involving the third generation, operate a state of the art dairy farm, both in productivity and in presentation. It is a joy for me to work with dairy farmers with such an attitude.

Most farms are currently standing in a very strong position, good silage/hay reserves, a buoyant milk price and falling grain prices. In my 30 years in dairy farming I don't think I have ever seen us in such good shape. Over these years I have certainly seen the opposite scenario, the late 80's for example, we faced low milk prices, high feed prices and most devastating, crippling interest rates. If ever there was a year to "make hay while the sun shines" its 2006. Hopefully it will run another year into 2007, but let's focus on the opportunity stands before us now.

The first challenge is to maximise productivity; that is, milk income over feed cost. The second is, how to best invest good profits for future security and prosperity. The temptation many of us will face is spending in non-return luxury areas. Deregulation of the dairy industry has made volatility a fact of dairy business life. From my own experience, and folly, I can only see two areas of wise investment; debt reduction, and investment in sustainable productivity improvement. Both will sustain you in future downturns.

The second challenge, wise investment, needs to be viewed on an individual farm/family business basis and cannot be covered in this column. However, the first challenge, to maximise productivity and profit, is the essence of my work with farmers.

January, with harvest, calf rearing and joining out of the way, and most herds at mid to late lactation, is the perfect time to formulate plans to optimise next lactation. How we manage cows from now to dry off will determine the ceiling to next lactation's potential.

Dry off BCS (Body Condition Score) is the first step. A BCS of 5 is ideal. Over a 5 score will predispose cows to fatty liver syndrome resulting in ketosis, and reduced dry matter intake

post calving when we need her eating every gram of feed we can get into her. A BCS of 4 will reduce lactation potential by up to 1500 litres due to no reserves of body fat to supplement energy requirement in the first 100 days of lactation. (1 BCS equates to 42 kgs live weight in a Holstein). Milk fever, ketosis, metritis and mastitis are all highly probable at calving too. Maintaining stable BCS during the dry period is also essential to a trouble free calving. Either increase or decrease in weight while dry will make our cow susceptible to calving problems and the above four metabolic disorders, and impact on lactation persistence.

Step 2 is a good transition program (lead feeding). For those who have not led fed their cows before, this is the year to try it. Those who have done so in the past will testify to its advantages and profit potential.

The third step, fully feeding the fresh cow, enabling her to achieve her genetic potential, which in turn will decide her remaining lactation potential. Fully feeding includes balancing rations for fibre to optimise intake, and ensuring adequate energy and protein density to meet the demands of high milk production. The cows we milk today are radically different in genetic potential than those of 30 years ago, and unless they are supplied with a diet to match these genetics for production we face major health problems. My favourite analogy, putting standard grade petrol into a 2006 high octane car engine will not just produce poor performance, but will destroy the engine.

The above steps require planning to implement. Having an abundance of quality pasture soon after the break also involves planning. Pasture renovation programs must be pursued in earnest, direct drilling other areas with annuals to improve plant density, and finally, aggressive fertilizer regimes will pay dividends any year, let alone the potential we have in the next 12 months. Observing paddocks during the drying off period is a good time to select paddocks for summer fodder crops for next December onward.

I will address the above steps more fully over the next few months in timely order to achieve our goal of improvement over this closing season. 2006 offers a wonderful opportunity to make considerable progress in our dairy farming businesses through improved productivity and prudent investment of the inherent profit increases.