

## Data helps deal with drought

**Dairy farmer: Cliff family**

**Region: East Gippsland**

**Topic: Ginfo**

Data has helped the Cliff family from East Gippsland better negotiate drought.

Anthony, Prue and Poppy Cliff farm with Anthony's parents Barry and Suzanne, at Stratford on 445 hectares, including leased land, with 202ha of private irrigation.

With sky-rocketing feed costs, the Cliffs can't afford to be milking 'passengers'.

Herd numbers are down to 600-620 from 750 last season.

They've turned to data to ensure they cull cows without affecting the long-term viability of their business or set back their breeding program.

This data includes herd records, herd test and pregnancy test results, backed-up by genomic information from their

involvement in DataGene's Ginfo program, Australia's genetic information reference herd.

In particular, the Cliffs refer to a cow's production index (PI), which is a measure of a cow's actual production compared to the herd average.

This was the first season in the family's 74 years at the property that has had a winter crop fail. Harvest was also disappointing – the volume of hay cut was down 86% on last year and the soil's "dry down to six feet". Following a 44-degree day in late January, pasture quality and quantity reduced.

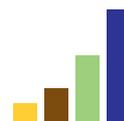
Data was used to determine which autumn-calving portion of the herd – up to 20% of the herd calves at this time of year – would be dried-off.

"We used it to determine which of the cows were doing the best as some had fallen (in milk production) and were close to having to be dried-off early," Anthony said.

"We decided those with a higher PI, for example the top 20% of the autumn calvers, would be given a little-bit more



*Farmhand Reuben Ellis, farm owners Barry, Anthony and Suzanne Cliff, and farmhands Gemma Mowbray and Matthew Byrne.*





Barry Cliff in the dairy.

of a holiday, kept and dried-off earlier.”

Anthony said that without data they “would be flying blind” when it came to culling.

Using data for decisions, they don’t have any ‘fringe dwellers’. Bail feeding has been reduced to less than 1 tonne of concentrate per cow/lactation.

“It (data) is helping the overall farm profitability because we are saving money,” Anthony said.

“We are putting the slim amount of pasture we have into the cows, so that they are making us some margin.

“If they are not in-calf and they are not putting milk in the vat, the only way to determine that, is with herd test and pregnancy test data.”

Data has always played a pivotal role in the management of the farm business; during dry times the purpose of this data had changed.

## Join Ginfo

DataGene is looking for more herds with excellent records to join Ginfo. As well as contributing to improvements to the industry’s genetic evaluation system, participating herds have 2-year-old heifers genotyped and classified for free and the option to have young calves genotyped at a discounted price. They also receive a year’s free subscription to the HerdData App and early access to DataGene reports and tools.

To be join, herds need to be regularly herd testing and recording the following in software such as HerdData, Mistro, EasyDairy or at the herd test centre: calvings, matings, sires and dams, pregnancy test results, clinical cases of mastitis, health events and workability.

For more information, contact Erika Oakes at DataGene on 0427 995 248 or [eoakes@datagene.com.au](mailto:eoakes@datagene.com.au)

The Cliff family started herd testing in 1975, 10 years after they began using artificial insemination (AI).

They still herd test seven times a year.

Describing data as providing ‘more tools in the bag’ for managing the business, Anthony said the strong history of data was the catalyst for becoming involved in the dairy industry Ginfo project.

Their Holsteins were genotyped and then matched against the herd-book records as part of the project, which started six years ago.

The Ginfo reports, supplied by DataGene, are also a source for the Cliffs to cross-check their calving book and ensure all breeding details remain accurate.

The Cliffs will genotype their spring calving Holstein heifers in coming months and following pregnancy testing, they will determine which ones would be sold for export.

Looking into the future, Anthony believes data will play an even larger role in dairy farming, but its collection and analysis will be easier.

“There will be more, and better data and you won’t have to sit in the office to manipulate that data,” Anthony said.

## CONTACT US

ABN: 78 613 579 614

DataGene Limited, AgriBio, 5 Ring Road,  
La Trobe University, Bundoora Victoria 3083



email: [enquiries@datagene.com.au](mailto:enquiries@datagene.com.au)



[www.datagene.com.au](http://www.datagene.com.au)



T (03) 9032 7191



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