

Simple sire selection helps put ‘fun’ back into breeding

Dairy farmer: Andrew Cavill

Region: South Australia

Topic: Data-driven decisions

Sitting in the dairy office, Andrew Cavill took a sip of his coffee and made a decision that changed the course of his business. It was the morning after pregnancy testing and less than 50% of his Holstein herd was in-calf.

He called the local meatworks and booked in the 180 empty cows.

“It was a bold decision – some said it was a stupid decision – but I knew carryover cows were costing me

money, not making me money,” the South Australian sharefarmer said.

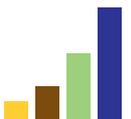
“We were lucky. Cows were selling well and chopper prices were good. We replaced 180 empty cows not giving much milk with 205 that were ready to calve and it never cost a cent.”

The return was instant and gave Andrew and his wife Kay the confidence to do the same with the rest of their herd after they calved. That season, four years ago, they had a “decent milk cheque” because they milked a total of 520 newly purchased heifers.

They also sold young stock from the original herd and bought another 200 heifers to provide replacements.



Andrew Cavill has lifted his herd's average genetic merit by using sexed semen across 60-70% of the herd to ensure he has enough replacements. He genomic tests heifers to identify the high BPI ones to keep as replacements and sell the lower BPI ones.



This injection of youth delivered fertility, health and profitability gains.

The year after their huge herd cleanout, Andrew and Kay milked 480 second calvers and 200 heifers.

Maintaining these gains were critical, so Andrew started targeting young bulls that rank highly for both Balanced Performance Index (BPI) and fertility.

They now milk 700 Holsteins, split calving across 605 ha at Bool Lagoon near Naracoorte in South Australia, and maintain a young herd.

“Since the introduction of DataGene and BPI it has become exciting to use young sires; you can use them with confidence because they have high reliability,” he said.

“I used to spend hours in front of catalogues trying to work out what I would use and trying to solve every problem the herd ever had – in one foul-swoop – with the bulls I was choosing. Now it is just so simple. I look at the BPI and I say I want the 10 best bulls in the country, the 10 highest BPI bulls I can get my hands on. Then you are covered in terms of fertility, production, likeability and longevity.”

Andrew trusts the science behind the BPI system so much that he takes the “bucket of genetics” approach to improving his herd.

“I now go into the tank and if it is Monday morning, I use whatever is in lock six (of the semen tank) or whatever is going to get used and it’s used until it is gone,” he said.

“Then in two days’ time, I’ll use 200 doses of (bull) XYZ, then onto 200 doses of (bull) ABC.

“Management-wise, it is simple. I chuck all the semen into one bucket and throw it at the herd. I still get those genetics into the herd. I’m not interested in cows individually.”

Andrews believes breeding dairy cows is more exciting now, than when he worked in the artificial breeding and herd improvement industry 33 years ago.

Genomics – DNA testing – drives this enthusiasm. The new technology provides a tangible way to measure breeding progress and it also helps him keep a lid on costs.

“With breeding, there’s a massive return on investment,” he said.

“I just got a bill the other day for \$11,500 for genomic testing this year’s heifers. You say to yourself ‘how do I justify that?’ but the genomic tests gave me 15 absolute no-brainer heifer culls,” he said.

“I’ve spent about \$700 on those heifer culls already and they are 250 kg. If I export them, I will get \$1800 right now.

“If I keep them to milk, you can be guaranteed that 10 or dozen will have a heifer and I will rear it. Then that 10 or a dozen useless cows become 20 useless cows. It also means I can sell those before I spend the next \$1700 getting them to the dairy, as we see the cost of getting a heifer to the dairy is between \$2000 and \$2300.”

Culling the bottom of the herd has helped lift the average genetic merit, according to Andrew.

Introducing sexed semen into the breeding program has provided the Cavills with lots of replacements.

Between 60 and 70% of their herd is joined to high BPI sexed bulls, the balance to high BPI conventional dairy semen.

Conventional semen is used for cows that calved later, had a “harder calving” or were not in the ideal condition when joining.

Polled genetics has also been introduced into the herd in recent years, with Andrew combining high BPI with polled genetics where possible.

“My approach is ‘why wouldn’t I pick the highest genomic bulls from a BPI perspective?’” he said. “When you look at all the other measurements that are done these days, the top bulls are the top bulls in all of them, the bottom bulls are the bottom bulls. With the BPI, someone else has done all that work for me, I just have to ring up and say bring it to me.

“I still have problems in herd to solve, lots of them. But it is exciting because now I can sit down and confidently say, if I am going to use this bull it is going to get me to this place.

“It is sort of fun again. I’ve even thought at some point I may go back to the genetics industry when I get too old to do this and my son kicks me out.”

CONTACT US

ABN: 78 613 579 614

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



email: enquiries@datagene.com.au



www.datagene.com.au



T (03) 9032 7191



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