

Decisions made easier thanks to data

Dairy farmer: Tanya and Glen Rand

Region: Gippsland

Topic: Data-driven decisions

When it comes to selecting bulls for joining to their dairy herd, Tanya and Glen Rand know exactly what they want and, more importantly, what their “girls” need.

Relying on pedigree, physical assessment and performance data to guide every cow mating, their decisions are objective.

Tanya and her husband Glen milk about 400 cows at Kilmany in the Macalister Irrigation District.

Herd recording information underpins their on-farm data, with health records, classification and pedigree histories combining to provide an overall picture of their mostly Holstein herd.

Every six weeks the Rands herd test and Tanya said the accuracy of this information was vital, as it determined which cows would be sold.

This information also feeds into DataGene’s national database which helps improve the accuracy of Australian Breeding Values (ABVs).

Admitting she doesn’t like selling cows, Tanya ensures she makes informed decisions by combining the results from the regular herd test with each cow’s lactation data.

“We herd test to set a benchmark, what we expect the cows should be doing based on the overall average of the herd,” she said. “I’d like to hope it is helping us make money, the ideal would be that every cow here is paying her way, every cow is actually a profit to the business. That is the main aim and continually improving our breeding.”

Analysing their herd test data, Tanya and Glen first look at each cow’s production index (PI) and then a section of



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the report which shows how much money she's making each day.

"We use the data differently each month according to what the herd is averaging that month, and where the herd is sitting," Tanya said.

The AI-bred Holstein herd calves for six weeks in autumn and nine weeks in spring. The Rands aim to produce a kilo of milk solids for every kilogram of liveweight, with their cows weighing an average 550-600 kg.

Irrigation ensures there's pasture year-round for the milkers, while heifers run on out-blocks which are also cut for silage.

The milking herd is fed an average of 6kg of gain a cow per day in the bail.

The Rands bought their herd from Tanya's parents, Bruce and Rosalee Kennedy, and the herd has been AI bred and closed for the past 45 years.

Building on the genetic base, Tanya and Glen use a breeding consultant for joining and she analyses all their data to make individual cow mating decisions.

Tanya said incorporating data into the breeding decisions has made it less time consuming to develop their herd. Without, data she said they'd be "flying blind".

"We find it easier to develop the breeding characteristics we want in the herd and that suit our farm," Tanya said.

"It is now easier to make decisions and its less time consuming. The computer does it for us and Amy (the breeding consultant) makes life very easy as well."

Using data to benchmark their herd prior to joining, the Rands can selectively mate cows.

"For example, I might like a bull, its everything I want and a great bull, but he might throw short teats," Tanya said. "It's fine, I can still use him, but I will put him over heifers we know that have long teats because he's not going to shorten them, he just won't elongate them."

Herd recording data has also been used to help Tanya and Glen determine which heifers to retain as replacements.

Progeny of the higher production and high fertility cows stay-on farm, while others are sold-off for additional income.



Glen and Tanya Rand use a combination of herd test reports, health records, classification and pedigree histories get an overall picture of their herd.

The couple use sexed semen over all the maiden heifers and a small amount over selected cows to breed more than enough replacements.

Data – again – has played a pivotal role in ensuring these young animals improve their business.

"We've had high replacements coming in, so we have been very lucky to be able to go through herd testing data and set our benchmark (for herd retention) a lot higher than we normally would," Tanya 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



www.datagene.com.au



T (03) 9032 7191



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