

Data-driven growth in Gippsland

Dairy farmer: Tom Kent

Region: Gippsland, Victoria

Topic: Herd testing

Tom Kent is sure of a few things when it comes to dairy farming.

One is that he wants to milk more cows, but he does not want to milk “bad cows”. Another is the importance of data in making informed management decisions.

For the 24-year-old, the two are intrinsically linked thanks to herd testing.

“It gives me something to target because I can actually see what I did last year,” he said of herd testing.

“I think as far as culling and joining goes, it takes the guesswork out of it. We know who our best cows are.

“Some of those will get joined to sexed semen. Then we know which ones our bad cows are and understanding this ensures we don’t keep heifers from the bottom portion of the herd.”

Tom manages his family’s 340-cow split-calving herd at Lang Lang East in Gippsland, Victoria.

He returned to the farm two years ago, after working as a diesel mechanic, and instigated herd recording, something his parents Stephen and Anne stopped 20 years earlier.

At the time, the cost of herd testing every second month was difficult to justify during a tight year.

“It took me a while to come around to it, but I’d read a few articles which stated when times were tough and you keep herd testing it is going to save you money,” he said.

“I think I get that now, because every time I sell a cow, I sell the right cow. Every time I sell five chopper cows, I



Tom Kent says herd testing takes the guesswork out of decisions about mastitis treatment, culling and joining.



know they are the worst five cows, so the herd gets better every time I sell some and that's a good feeling too."

In a poor season, this makes even more financial sense, according to Tom.

"If you have to buy in feed, for example, you are going to get an economic response if you have good cows to utilize that feed," he said.

The Kents' herd – and its meticulous records – is part of DataGene's Ginfo project, the industry's national reference database of genomic information.

For Tom, genomic (DNA) testing would provide a deeper herd dataset and a way to determine an animal's expected performance before it even enters the milking herd.

Herd recording not only plays a vital role in culling and joining selections, Tom also uses it at dry-off to selectively treat cows.

Any cow with a somatic cell count (SCC) of less than 150,000 cells/mL at the herd recording three-to-four weeks before drying-off doesn't receive dry-cow treatment.

Those with a SCC more than 150,000 cells/mL receive a dry-cow treatment.

This practice not only saves money, it has also limited antibiotic use.

The Kents' average SCC sits at about 180,000 cells/mL.

At joining, herd test data also helps Tom select the top 10% of the herd to breed to sexed semen. The bottom 10% is joined to Angus semen.

Those joined to beef include carry-over cows or those with a low production index (PI).

Herd recording has also been used to track whole-farm progress as the performance per hectare and per day gets recorded and compared to previous years.

Tom wants to expand the business to 500 cows and become a sharefarmer.



"Every time I sell a cow, I sell the right cow. Every time I sell five chopper cows, I know they are the worst five cows, so the herd gets better every time I sell some and that's a good feeling too."

Tom Kent, Lang Lang East,
Gippsland

Increasing cow numbers without decreasing quality will be central to achieving this goal.

He is aiming to breed a "strong" 500 kg Friesian with good fertility and milk solid production.

Tom uses the DataGene Good Bulls App to select sires as he said it provides a level playing field to compare local and international bulls.

The Kent's current average herd production is 475 kg of milk solids from a diet including: pasture plus 1 tonne/cow of pasture silage, 1.3 t/cow of grain and 250-300 kg/cow of summer crops – either turnips or rape.

Tom wants to lift milk solids production to a minimum of body weight. Ideally up to 120% with good fertility, he said.

"I find it really exciting where it is all going," he said of herd improvement. "Every time a heifer comes in from a bull I chose last year, I know it's an elite bull and it is probably a good cow, it is exciting times. Every time you get another heifer in the shed it feels like another step forward."

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



Disclaimer: DataGene is an independent and industry-owned organisation responsible for driving genetic gain and herd improvement in the Australian dairy industry and is an initiative of Dairy Australia and industry. This report is published for your information only. It is published with due care and attention to accuracy, but DataGene accepts no liability, if, for any reason, the information is inaccurate, incomplete or out of date whether negligent or otherwise. Copyright © DataGene Ltd. All Rights Reserved.