Case Study

DataGene
Solutions for Herd Development

Breeding progress on track in Tasmania

Dairy farmer: Mark Kerr

Region: Tasmania

Topic: Ginfo

Accurate record keeping and data collection has always been at the heart of Mark Kerr's operation. Now, the dairy farmer from Winnaleah in north-east Tasmania has refocused his business to make the most of this information.

A huge increase in fertility – resulting in a tighter-natural seasonal calving pattern – has just been one of the benefits.

"Since I took over from Dad, we have introduced mating programs into the herd, focused on fertility with our breeding and now we have more replacements and we had no inductions this calving season," Mark said.

"It has taken four-five years to get there, but now, when I look at our Genetic Progress Report all the arrows are heading the right way."

Mark tracks the progress of his 445-head herd comprising both Holsteins and Holstein-Jersey crosses against the national average using DataGene's Genetic Progress Report.

Mastitis resistance, protein and milkfat have been his biggest breeding gains, despite a focus on fertility, reflecting how he selects his bulls.

"I sit down with the local AI representative in the lead-up to mating season and go through some bulls, they are

Mark Kerr: "When I look at our Genetic Progress Report all the arrows are heading the right way."

predominantly Australian from the *Good Bulls Guide*," he said.

"Fertility is a non-negotiable; bulls have to be between 104-110, and I like them to be ranked as high as possible on the BPI [Balanced Performance Index]."

Mark said the BPI suited his grass-based system, which includes fodder crops throughout the summer and 4kg of grain/cow/day in the bail.

"The BPI covers everything that is important to my business."

The BPI is an economic index, including a blend of productivity, type and health traits to maximise profit – in-line with farmer preferences.

Apart from fertility, Mark has focused on maintaining a medium-frame cow – about 500kg liveweight – with good feet, as one part of the farm requires an 8km round-trip to the dairy.

Looking to the future with genomics

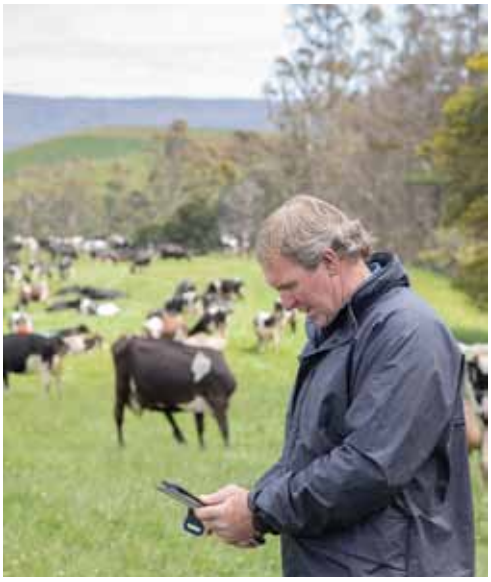
The herd's excellent records meant his business was the perfect fit for Ginfo, the dairy industry's national reference database for genetic information. One of the benefits is that participating herds have their first lactation heifers classified and genomic (DNA) tested.

New to Ginfo, Mark is looking forward to having his next crop of replacement heifers tested and then will test the calves.

"Last season I had 60 surplus calves," he said. "The dilemma I had was, 'which 60 do I sell?' I look at the mother of all those calves, go off the herd test. She might be a good cow, but if you have more information on those calves you make better decisions. I'm worried, that I could have been selling calves that could have ended-up being good cows."

After success using sexed semen for mating his maiden heifers, Mark had 220 heifer calves this year and only requires 120. This year's retention decisions will be based on genomics.

Five years into taking over from his farther Darryn, Mark is "looking forward to getting to know the genetics of the herd".



Mark is looking forward to having his next crop of replacement heifers tested.

"I herd test, so I have got information on those cows, and herd testing comes in handy for mating, but to know that a certain cows is 'such-and-such' BPI and 'good for this and good for that' will make mating decisions even better," Mark said.

As well as helping with breeding decisions, Mark expects genomics to add long-term value to his business.

"I'd like to think, one day down the track, that I'd have the whole herd genomically tested and if I wanted to retire and sell the herd, I'd like to think my cows would be worth a lot more money," he said.

"Also, if I had excess, I could sell to export or another dairy farmer. If they want to buy 60 heifer calves, they should be worth more with more information. I can show them a report which will say 'this cow is this BPI and the bull was this BPI', it has got to make my cattle worth more.

"I know if I was buying cattle, the more information the better. Into the future, selling to export, there might be a premium for calves that are genetically tested."

As a fourth-generation dairy farmer, Mark said his father – the third generation – has been surprised by the technological advances in the industry.

"He said, 'whoever thought you could DNA test a calf? I didn't ever think we'd be able to."

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