

# Tool for managing tight times

IMPROVING  
HERDS

Josh Balcombe,  
Western Victoria



## Herd Test Case Study

When Josh Balcombe signed up as a participant in the ImProving Herds project in 2015, he didn't know that he would be arming himself with a valuable tool for tackling a season with some very real challenges.

Josh and his parents, Fiona and Mick, milk up to 350 cows in a split-calving herd, supplying Fonterra. They began dairying in April 2014, buying cows from a variety of sources.

Josh was invited to be one of seven ImProving Herds Focus Farms to explore how herd test data makes a difference to farm management decisions. None of the farms were herd testing before and most received six months of free herd testing, and support in interpreting the reports. The ImProving Herds team tracked the Focus Farmers' experiences and monitored changes to decision making and the financial impact of using herd test data.

Josh said he is glad he jumped at the opportunity to herd record.

"Our farm relies heavily on bought-in feed so we were interested in being able to monitor each individual cow's performance and make sure she is paying her way in terms of milk response to supplementary feed," Josh said.

"Then we had a drought and milk price drop so we had to make decisions about culling cows mid-season. Without herd testing data, we would have just been guessing which cows to cull. One of the things I've learnt from herd testing is that a cow may look like a superstar but only be doing 10 or 15 litres a day," he said.

As the dry season persisted, Josh identified cows to cull mid-lactation based on production levels and cell count.

### Farm stats (June 2016)

#### HERD SIZE

300

#### BREED

Holstein, Jersey and crossbred

#### FARM SIZE

225 ha

#### CALVING PATTERN

Split

#### DAIRY

40-unit rotary

#### STAFF

3 full-time

#### FEEDING SYSTEM

Pasture with optional feedpad,  
6.3 kg concentrate

#### HERD TESTING HISTORY

No previous experience



*"Our farm relies heavily on bought in feed so we were interested in being able to monitor each individual cow's performance."*

– Josh Balcombe, pictured with James Beasley from Hico (left)

“When Fonterra announced the lower milk price, I went straight to the herd test results and identified about 23 cows to cull; mainly empty cows that weren’t performing. I also dried off a few cows early; low production cows that are due to calve in September.”

When each set of results arrived, Josh looked at both herd and individual cow records.

“I am always interested to see how the top and bottom 10% of the herd are performing.”

He also found herd test results valuable for improving mastitis management. Although the herd’s bulk milk cell count (BMCC) is consistently under 100,000, Josh has been able to identify individual cows for treatment. “Most of them responded well, but a few didn’t come good so we culled them. Herd testing is the only concrete way you can do this.”

The Balcombes herd test every second month in the evenings, using electronic milk meters.

“The herd test milking session is pretty smooth. It takes about half an hour longer than usual but it’s no extra stress because James from Hico is in the dairy taking the samples.”

Josh admits getting set up for herd testing in the first place took considerable effort, which was made easier by having the support from Hico.

“Because our cows originated in a variety of herds, their ear tag numbers were all over the place. We removed them all and started again and we freeze branded them as well.”

Setting up cow records in Mistro Farm 5 was also quite an undertaking. “Hico staff came out during a milking and entered the basic information on the cows as they came through the dairy. Most of the cows we bought came with little or no records, so we had to guess their ages and some of the other details.”

These days, Josh maintains the herd’s records on Mistro and says herd testing has made him more motivated to keep them up to date, to ensure he gets the most value out of the reports. “It’s definitely been worth the effort,” Josh said.

## ImProving Herds pays dividends

IMPROVING  
HERDS

*ImProving Herds was a three-year project that studied the contribution of herd improvement to Australian dairy businesses.*

*At the heart of the project were 34 inspiring Focus Farmers who agreed to put their farm, herd and financial records under the spotlight. Seven were Herd Test Focus Farmers and 27 were Genetics Focus Farmers. This is one of a series of case studies about their experiences as ImProving Herds Focus Farmers.*

*ImProving Herds has shown that:*

- *The daughters of High Balanced Performance Index (BPI) bulls perform better under Australian conditions, across dairying regions and feeding systems.*
- *Cows in the top 25% for BPI in a herd outperform cows in the bottom 25% for production, fertility, longevity and contributed on average an extra \$300 income over feed and herd costs.*
- *The benefits of using genomic breeding values to guide heifer selection decisions were demonstrated on the Focus Farms, where the performance of genotyped heifers aligned with their genomic breeding values.*
- *Information from herd testing gave Focus Farmers confidence to make data-driven decisions for routine management and to respond to high pressure events.*

*Funded by the Gardiner Dairy Foundation, the project was a collaboration of Dairy Australia, Agriculture Victoria, DataGene, Holstein Australia and the National Herd Improvement Association of Australia (NHIA).*

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