

# It costs not to herd test

IMPROVING  
HERDS

Guy and Leanne Gallatly,  
Gippsland  
Victoria



## Herd Test Case Study

*Gippsland dairy farmers Guy and Leanne Gallatly have a clear goal with herd testing – they want information on their cows so they can make better management decisions.*

“Herd testing is a tool I need,” Guy Gallatly said. “It helps me identify animals to cull for mastitis or production, and lets me assess the performance of our younger stock and refine our breeding program by making it easy to monitor the improvements in our Production Index with each new group of young cows coming into the herd.

“It does involve a cost but there is cost in having cows with subclinical mastitis, or feeding cows in the bail that aren’t producing.

“You can think you know what your cows are doing, but you don’t really know unless you have their herd test results.”

### ImProving Herds Focus Farm

The Gallatlys were one of seven ImProving Herds Herd Testing Focus Farms in the 2015/16 season.

The ImProving Herds project set out to demonstrate how herd test data could be used for improved farm decision making by following how each farm used their herd test information.

### Farm stats (March 2018)

#### HERD SIZE

Up to 310 cows

#### BREED

Mainly Holstein, some Jersey and cross bred

#### FARM SIZE

102 ha main farm plus two other blocks (16 ha 2/3 spring, 1/3 autumn)

#### DAIRY

44-unit rotary

#### STAFF

1 full-time worker, 2 casual milkers and half a labour unit

#### FEEDING SYSTEM

4 kg year round in dairy



Jo DeMoel, Hico (left) with Guy and Leanne Gallatly.

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– Guy Gallatly

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Guy said their experience with herd testing clearly showed that you couldn’t judge a cow’s production or cell counts by just observing the animal in the dairy.

“It certainly showed up some of the higher producing animals weren’t the ones that I thought they’d be – it’s the same with milk quality,” he said.

“The figures don’t lie, but if you don’t have the figures you don’t really know.”

The Gallatly family have used herd testing ever since they started dairy farming, and became involved because they wanted to have figures on every cow in the herd.

“We’ve moved farms a couple of times – and have had milked herds ranging from 170 to 340 cows,” Guy said.

“We were originally share farming when we started herd testing so we knew what the cows were doing.

“When we decided to buy a buy a small farm where we could milk 170-180 cows, we sold off a number of cows and decided which cows to sell, based primarily on calving dates as well as herd tests figures.

“Unfortunately, the move to our own farm coincided with a fall in the milk price so we dropped out of herd testing because we needed to reduce our costs and after four years we sold the small farm and moved onto the 102 ha farm we currently lease.”

The current farm has a 44-unit rotary and is on the Macalister River allowing for 100% irrigated pastures under sprays, a centre pivot and flood irrigation.

The farm is home to 310 milkers and is supplemented by two other blocks the Gallatlys own – a 16 ha fodder block and a 54 ha block that is used for fodder production and growing out young stock.

“Our rule of thumb is that we need three bales of silage per cow so we aim to produce around 1,000 bales of silage a year,” Guy said.

“We also feed 4 kg of grain in the dairy all year round, which is a no-fuss system and it takes 45 minutes to milk 230 cows at the moment.

“The move to the current farm five years ago meant we needed to increase our herd size and we did this by leasing an extra 30 cows and not culling as heavily.

“It created a few challenges with reintroducing herd testing because we weren’t in the position to cull cows, but we were keen to restart herd testing once our we reached our



target herd size. Becoming an ImProving Herds Focus Farm was perfect timing.”

Each ImProving Herds Focus Farm was given six free herd tests as well as support in interpreting the results.

### Herd testing

Normal milking on the rotary involves two staff – with Guy working at cups on and another staff member at cups off.

On herd testing days, the herd test technician stands just along from Guy, which means they are not in the way but can readily talk to Guy if they have any questions.

The Gallatlys use freeze branding for individual cow identification. The brands are clearly identifiable when the cows are in the dairy and are used for the herd test recording.

One of the drawbacks of herd testing is the time taken to set up dairy before milking and then dismantle after milking, according to Guy.

“Setting up can be a bit of a pain because it’s another job you have to do. It takes about an hour to set everything up on the rotary before milking and then about 20 minutes to dismantle everything after the automatic wash cycle,” he said.

## Benefits of data

At the end of the ImProving Herds project, six of seven herd test case study farmers valued the benefits of herd testing enough to invest the time and money to continue the service.

The one farmer who stopped herd testing did so as they were changing their herd to supply A2 milk. After several months, they went back to herd testing as they missed the level of data they had been getting.

The following partial budget highlights how small benefits can cover the entire year’s cost of herd testing.

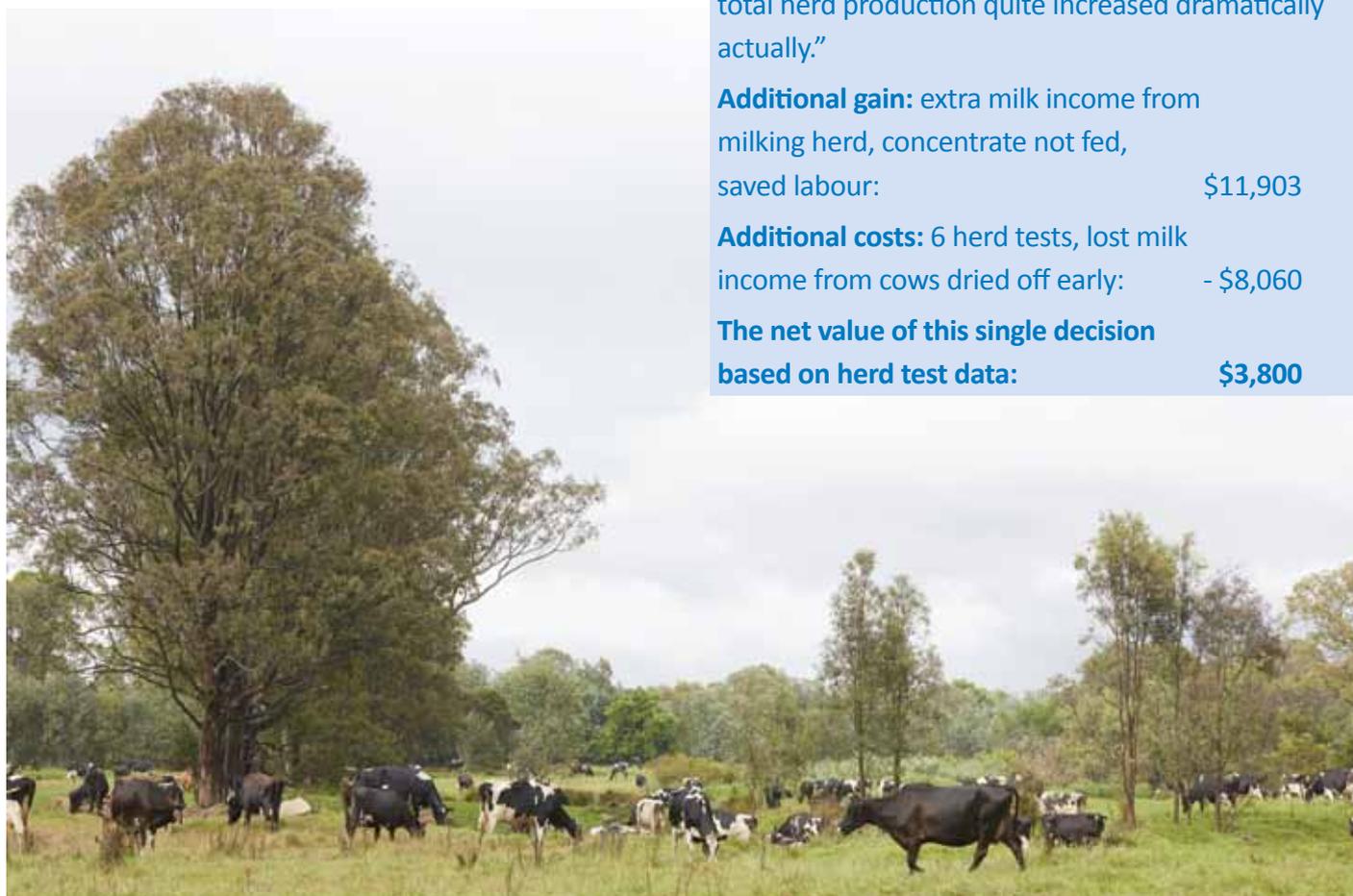
When one case study farmer saw a feed shortage looming, he used herd test records to identify 67 low-producing cows that were in calf and dried them off early.

“That brought the herd back down to about 350 (cows), which meant more grass for less mouths and actually increased the total milk yield, the total herd production quite increased dramatically actually.”

**Additional gain:** extra milk income from milking herd, concentrate not fed,  
saved labour: \$11,903

**Additional costs:** 6 herd tests, lost milk income from cows dried off early: - \$8,060

**The net value of this single decision based on herd test data: \$3,800**



“The younger cows will often balk at the meters when they are going onto to the rotary so, if I can, I will get someone to stand in the yard to encourage the younger cows to walk on.

“It’s not essential but it does help.”

The Gallatlys use Mistro as their farm management program in the farm office and also use the HerdData app on their smart phones to record data when they are out on the farm.

The herd testing is carried out by Hico and the results are available on Mistro in the home office the following day. A hard copy of the results is also sent in the post.

### Analysing results

The three key areas that Guy looks at once he has the herd test results are each cow’s cell count, litres and Production Index.

Having the results ranked from highest to lowest makes it easy to identify cows that need closer scrutiny.

“Sometimes I’m interested in looking for cows to chopper (cull), or I just want to see how the younger cows are performing,” Guy said.

“Herd testing really makes you aware of the subclinical mastitis in the herd. After each herd test I put together a list of the cows with the highest cell counts and have a closer look at them at the next milking.

“When we were building up our herd we couldn’t cull as heavily as we would have liked, but now we have surplus cows so we can cull heavily on the cell count results we get from herd testing.”

Herd test figures on total litres per cow are also a useful tool in deciding which cows to dry off.

“Having a split herd means that we can keep milking a cow that is a high producer and not in calf at the end of the season and carry her across into the other calving period.”

## 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).*

## CONTACT US

ABN: 78 613 579 614

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

 email: [enquiries@datagene.com.au](mailto:enquiries@datagene.com.au)

 [www.datagene.com.au](http://www.datagene.com.au)

 (03) 9032 7191



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July 2018