

# Herd testing pays dividends

IMPROVING  
HERDS

Theo van Brecht and Cheryl McCartie,  
Tasmania



## Herd Test Case Study

Tasmanian dairy farmers Cheryl McCartie and Theo van Brecht are using herd testing to fine tune the management of the 490 spring calving cows on their dairy at Ringarooma.

The herd test information generated on individual cows has allowed them to draft off high-producing cows into a separate herd to make the most of high-value feed, identify cows with high cell counts for treatment or culling and cows for drying off.

Herd test results have also been used in dealing with banks to verify their herd's production when applying for a loan.

As one of the seven ImProving Herds Herd Test Focus Farms for the 2015/16 season, Cheryl and Theo were given free herd tests for a season, as well as assistance in interpreting the results.

"We have the ability to make the production happen and you know exactly what each cow is doing when you herd test," Cheryl said.

"You can't improve things unless you can measure what you are doing and the changes you are making. Herd testing gives you those measures on individual cows."

Cheryl and Theo's spring calving cows run in two herds on the one property. The main herd is made up of the high producing mature cows with a smaller second herd of heifers and smaller cows.

The two herds are milked one after the other through their 36-a-side swingover with the cows fed 2-4 kg/cow/day of grain in the shed over the season.

## Farm stats (Feb 2018)

### HERD SIZE

490 cows run in two herds

### BREED

Holstein, Jersey, 70% crossbred

### FARM SIZE

195 effective ha

### PASTURE AREAS

70% irrigated with two centre pivots and a couple of laterals

### CALVING PATTERN

Spring

### DAIRY

36-a-side swingover

### STAFF

5

### FEEDING SYSTEM

2-4 kg over the season



*"We have the ability to make the production happen and you know exactly what each cow is doing when you herd test."*

– Cheryl McCartie  
and Theo van Brecht

The two-herd system is used to spread the traffic on laneways, reduce the pressure on heifers and allow high-producing cows to be rotated onto high-value pastures.

### Share milking benefits

Cheryl and Theo have been on the Ringarooma farm since 1998 when they started as share milkers, before buying the farm in 2007/08.

“As share milkers, the cows were our asset so herd testing was really important to know what they were doing and to build the capacity of our herd,” Cheryl said.

“When we were share milking we had to borrow money to buy more cows and the bank requested that we had herd tests figures to verify our herd’s level of production.

“It gave the bank another level of certainty that we were capable of producing the income that our budgets were based on for the loan.”

After buying the farm, Cheryl and Theo made significant farm improvements, such as expanding the dairy and investing in a \$600,000 irrigation system, which includes a large dam and two centre pivots. They also purchased a neighbouring farm.

“There have been times when we have dropped out of herd testing,” Cheryl said.

“It’s a decision we haven’t taken lightly because we value the information we get back from herd tests, but there have been times when we have been under financial pressure, such as the when the dairy price crashed, or when we have been expanding the herd, combined with significant expenditure and haven’t been in a position to cull cows.”

Being involved in the ImProving Herds project was the impetus for Cheryl and Theo to get back on track with herd testing in the 2015/16 season and they’ve continued on with monthly herd tests.

### Herd testing

The monthly tests start when all the cows have calved, which is about the end of October, and continues until the herd is dried off 10 months later.

“Our herd testing is done by TasHerd who provide an extra staff member with the flasks at milking time, who we pay for. We have two people milking, which takes the pressure off, especially at herd test time,” Cheryl said.

“Having the extra person from TasHerd in the dairy means we just continue on as normal at milking and it doesn’t take any extra time.”

Good individual cow identification systems are essential for herd testing. Cows are identified through their NLIS tags, which are read by a scanner and matched to a visual ear tag.



***“If you aren’t herd testing then you may only have average cows and not know which cows are doing the business and putting production in the vat.”***

About 90% of the herd is also freeze branded.

The cost for the year varies from \$9,000 to \$12,000 depending on the number cows over the season but it equates to less than \$20/cow/year.

## Results

Herd test results are available electronically within 24 hours and a hard copy is mailed.

“Theo likes to look at a hard copy when he is sitting at the kitchen table because that’s the way he likes to work whereas I like to go through the results electronically using Excel so I can sort animals based on cell count and production,” Cheryl said.

“Before the herd test we draw up a list of cows that are under scrutiny based on our observations – it might be that a cow seems to be dropping off in production.

“We use the herd test results for culling and drying off decisions – it’s a fantastic tool when you also have preg. test results.

“Our culling decisions are all based on solids – if a cow has low litres and low solids then I look at her calving date and she will either be dried off if calving early or culled.

“We will dry off some cows at the beginning of June based on production. When we are feeding 4 kg of grain we want to know that we are getting a return on the feed and the

herd tests results are a great tool for deciding which cows to milk and which cows to dry off.”

The herd test results are also used to fine tune which cows are in the main herd, which are grazed under the two centre pivots.

“The older, bigger cows are mainly grazed under the centre pivots because they can handle the walking and have the potential production to maximise the return from the irrigation investment,” Cheryl said.

“Our herd was averaging 380 kg of milk solids before we put in the centre pivot irrigation system and we are now averaging around 400 kg milk solids, with our aim to get to 420-430 kg milk solids.

“People can get caught up in putting new pasture species or adopting the latest technology on the farm, but if you aren’t herd testing then you may only have average cows and not know which cows are doing the business and putting production in the vat.”

## Cell counts

Cheryl also uses herd tests results to identify and cull cows with ongoing cell count problems.

“We don’t have a mastitis issue in the herd but there are some cows that keep coming up with high cell counts, which you just tell by looking at them in the dairy. Herd testing



## ImProving Herds pays dividends

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*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).*



***Cheryl McCartie and Theo van Brecht are using herd testing to maximise their return on irrigation investment by identifying high-producing cows for priority access to high value feed.***

allows you to identify cows who are repeat offenders,” she said.

“When you look at the results at the end of the season there can be cows that have been treated a number of times and it’s easy to make a decision to cull them.

“Then there are the cows that had high cell counts the previous season and were treated at drying off – if they come back with a high cell count for their first herd test, the following season they get culled straight away.”

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