

No hiding with herd testing

IMPROVING
HERDS

Brad and Meagan O'Shannessy,
Northern Victoria



Herd Test Case Study

Herd testing has given Brad and Meagan O'Shannessy a quick and clear understanding of their cows' production and performance, resulting in easier culling, decision making and even pregnancy testing.

"Herd test results are our main tool when it comes to culling decisions because we have clear figures on each cow for production and cell counts. It's always easy to identify which cows need to go," Brad said.

The O'Shannessys signed up to take part in regular herd testing when they were invited to be one of the seven ImProving Herds Herd Testing Focus Farms in 2015.

The ImProving Herds project explored how herd test data could be used for improved farm decision making.

Brad said their experience had demonstrated that herd test results gave information on cows that was undetectable by just looking at the animal – and sometimes the results were surprising.

"Even if you think you know your herd really well, you will be surprised at the results you get from herd testing," he said.

"We've had some cows that looked like they were producing really well, but were clearly not producing when you saw their herd test figures.

Farm stats (March 2018)

HERD SIZE

200

BREED

Mixed

FARM SIZE

97 ha

CALVING PATTERN

Split

DAIRY

20-unit swingover

STAFF

Brad and Meagan plus a part-time relief milker

FEEDING SYSTEM

7-8 kg of pellets year-round, 100% reliant on bought-in irrigation water so home-grown feed base varies year to year

HERD TESTING HISTORY

Originally spot tested occasionally to deal with cell count issues. Now committed to bi-monthly herd testing



"Herd test results give information on cows that was undetectable by just looking at the animal"

– Brad O'Shannessy

“Herd test results are our main tool when it comes to culling decisions because we have clear figures on each cow for production and cell counts. It’s always easy to identify which cows need to go.”

Brad O’Shannessy, Northern Victoria, 180 cows, mixed breed



“In contrast, there were some cows that looked ordinary but were producing 50 litres a day in peak lactation.

“It’s the same with milk quality. You can’t pick some of the cows with the higher cell counts because there are no clots or signs of clinical mastitis.

“While we’ve always had premium quality milk, sometimes you can start flirting with the line so it’s always good to make sure you can identify the cows that could push you over. You can pick up on cows that need to be treated or cows that have recurring subclinical mastitis and need to be culled.”

The O’Shannessys now look at herd tests figures for cow production to identify which cows to dry off. Any cow that has been in milk for 300 days is dried off once her milk production falls below feed costs.

This ensures feed resources are directed to the most profitable cows, which is particularly important as their farm is totally reliant on purchased water for irrigation and cows are fed 7-8 kg of pellets all year round.

“When water prices are high we really need to make sure we are running cows that are producing well and the herd tests results let us identify those cows.”

Brad and Meagan milk 180 cows in a split-calving herd on 97 ha at Cooma in Northern Victoria and have recently moved to total A2 milk production.

“We’ve been farming for 10 years and started with help of our parents. My parents put 80 cows into the herd while we

bought in another 50-60 head and have been slowly building up ever since.

“While I came from a dairy farm, we are still learning. When you buy in cows you don’t have a lot of records.

“We had only done the occasional spot test before joining the ImProving Herds project – but now we are herd testing every second month because the information it generates is helping with our farm management.

“You know a lot more about your cows and your business if you herd test.”

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

The O’Shannessys’ local herd test centre also provided a person to take samples in the shed on herd test days.

“We operate a 20-unit swingover so the person sampling did all the work and I just wrote cow numbers on the flasks so it really didn’t disrupt milking at all,” Brad said.

The O’Shannessys had six bimonthly herd tests over the first year of the project and were amazed by the information it gave them.

“We received our results electronically on the same day as the herd test and could then either rank the cows on Excel or upload the results into EasyDairy,” Brad said.

“There are two main things I look at whenever we get herd test results back: the cows in the lowest 10% of the herd for

Dairy Australia research has found milk testing is an accurate method of pregnancy diagnosis when most cows are expected to be pregnant, however it is less accurate when many cows are likely to be empty, and cannot provide accurate calving dates. See the InCalf Book 2nd edition (dairyaustralia.com.au/incalfbooks) pages 159-172 for a full explanation of the pros and cons of the different pregnancy testing strategies.

production, and the cows in the top 10% in the herd for cell counts because these cows are the ones we need to make decisions about.

“If I wanted to get excited, then I look at the top 10% of the cows for production and the lowest 10% for cells counts because these cows show you what is possible.”

Hassle-free preg. testing

In recent months, the O’Shannessys have also used herd testing as a way of pregnancy testing cows via milk samples (see box above).

The cost of pregnancy testing using milk samples is comparable to traditional pregnancy testing with a vet but the milk sample option has clear advantages, according to Brad.

“We use fixed time AI in two joining periods and recently used herd testing in October to pregnancy test the March-April calving cows,” he said.

“In the past, we would draft off these cows as they came through the dairy and hold them in the yards until the vet arrived. It was more work and meant that the cows that were held back in the yards lost grazing time.

“Their milk production would drop by a third at the next milking because they had been off feed and it often took a day or two to recover.

“Using herd testing to pregnancy test meant no extra handling, no stress on the cows, no time off feed and no lost production.”

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 of 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 the BPI in a herd outperform cows in the bottom 25% for production, fertility, longevity and contributed on average an extra \$300 to farm margins.*
- *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, the Victorian Government, DataGene, Holstein Australia and the National Herd Improvement Association of Australia (NHIA).

CONTACT US

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



email: enquiries@datagene.com.au



www.datagene.com.au

ABN: 78 613 579 614



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.