Recording helps measure performance for Larpent family

Dairy farmer: Suares family

Region: South-West Victoria

Topic: Herd recording

Having data at their finger-tips helps Ross and Jacqui Suares make objective farm business decisions. The Larpent dairy farmers operate Calderbrae Holsteins, a Master Breeder herd, which peaks at 180 cows across 100 hectares.

The couple use DataGene's HerdData and Good Bulls apps, backed-up by dairy herd management software Mistro Farm.

"I've always thought of Mistro Farm as a client management system, but for cows," Jacqui said.

"All the information you need for each person or cow has to be there when you need it; and you can generate useful management reports."

Drawing on her experience working off-farm in the disability sector, Jacqui says the DataGene apps have a lot of similarities with other programs.

"Our client management system (at off-farm work) was web-based and you could access a person's information on the I-Pad when you are with the person out in the field," Jacqui said. "I see the HerdData app as the same thing; it gives you the capacity to access the information you need when you need it, on the phone."

The Suares' main use of HerdData to identify which cows should be dried-off and what ones need to be culled.

To determine a dry-off time, Jacqui and Ross look at how many days a cow has been in-milk and when she's due to calve. Her joining, pregnancy test and treatment data gets entered via the computer, which synchs to the app. Production and cell count information gets sent to the app following herd recording.

"'Like all data systems, the HerdData app and Mistro farm are garbage in - garbage out – their usefulness depends entirely on the quality and quantity of information you put into them as a farmer," Jacqui said. "You really need to be prepared to spend the time inputting the information you

Larpent Holstein breeders Jacqui and Ross Suares say the HerdData and Good Bulls Guide App both ensure data is at their finger-tips and this means better decision making on farm.

want to be able to access, so that you can extract value to your operation from them."
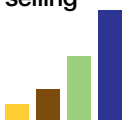
The app ensures the right cows are culled.

"When we are picking cows, Wednesday night before chopper day, and a few need to go, we can always look up their cell count and how long they have been in. It is at your finger-tips if you need it," Jacqui said.

Ross also works as a stock agent and sometimes this means he and Jacqui are away from the farm. Jacqui said she uses the downtime while travelling to look through the herd records on the app and make 'to do' lists.

"We can make more informed decisions," Jacqui said.

Data has always played a huge roll in the Suares family farm. They herd record regularly and have done since they are started in the industry as sharefarmers.

"You can't improve on what you don't measure," Jacqui said. "With some cows, how do you know if you are selling

Calves at the Suares dairy farm at Larpent.

or keeping the right cow if you don't always measure? You have an idea by looking at a cow, but you have no idea about the butterfat and protein she's producing or her cell count. At the end of the day, it is milk solids which count, not milk volume."

The HerdData app is also used for general farm management and it helps with farm audits.

"We are starting to use the paddock diary to keep records of what chemicals have been sprayed on which paddock, fertiliser applications and what's planted where," Jacqui said.

"You can record who milked, cow treatments and antibiotics used so when it's audit time you can generate a report that generally provides the auditors with all the information they require. It saves time and looks a whole lot more professional."

The Good Bulls app

The Suares also use the Good Bulls app, primarily at joining time.

Ross and Jacqui classify their herd regularly through Holstein Australia. They use this classification summary of their herd, which highlights both the strong and weak points, to make breeding decisions.

Jacqui said the classification highlighted "issues they need to watch" and these were considered and used as a starting-point for their breeding selection criteria.

Calderbrae Holsteins use the DataGene Balanced Performance Index (BPI) list to select sires and have a specific list of traits which they would not "go below 96" with. These include, size – the Suares like to maintain a cow about 600kg to maintain a margin over feed costs – capacity, including chest and muzzle width, feet, legs and mammary system.

They have also focused on selecting bulls that only produce the A2 protein. Ross said there's a premium in the market for these animals and they both believe there will be a strong future for the differentiated A2 products.

The Suares use a combination of genomic and proven sires. Jacqui said they like to investigate cow families, but fundamentally objective information provides the starting point for breeding decisions.

"We start with what the data says and then go from there," Jacqui said. "It is much quicker, you could spend days and days going through bull catalogues. "

The Suares set their Good Bulls app to avoid certain bloodlines to ensure – subject to availability – they can use all the bulls that are recommended to them by the app. To avoid inbreeding, they do not like to use common bloodlines they have used extensively in the past.

"With the app it really is just setting your own criteria," Jacqui said. "The app comes up with a list and then, from there, we will look at the catalogues and pedigrees."

"Decisions have got to be better, we are using the data and information effectively," Jacqui said. "This takes the emotion out of it and allows us to be more objective about things. It gives us more confidence in our decision making," she said.

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