PRESENT FARMING PROBLEMS OF A DAIRY FARMER IN TARANAKI

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Subject matter for this paper has, in part, been taken from the result of a survey carried out by South Taranaki Provincial Executive of Federated Farmers to determine the major problems confronting farmers in the area.

Though the shortcomings of such a survey are recognised, the survey findings, plus the conclusions and lack of conclusions of numerous discussion group meetings, field days, panel discussions, and plain farmer yarning, leave one conscious of a substantial array of problems. Time does not permit me to deal with them all. I intend to devote my time to those I feel to be the most pressing and, in the main, to be met daily on farms.

Farming today is a business, a business of costs and net returns. Any purchase of farm requirements for which full value is not received adds to our costs to the detriment of net return. Elementary! Maybe, but how many of us dairy farming in Taranaki today get the ultimate return from our fertiliser bill, perhaps the largest single annual expense on our farms?

Survey replies to this problem presented a picture of confusion. Application rates ranged from 2 to 10 cwt per acre of slag, super, serpentine super, potash, blood and bone, lime, and nitrogen in a variety of mixtures and combinations.

This is a fair indication of how little is known, at least by the farmer, of the manurial requirements of Taranaki soils. A request for more information to be made available was expressed by 70 per cent of survey farmers. Just how much do we know of optimum economic rates? Of all advisory officers resting from their usual labours by attending this conference, is there one able to tell me whether I would 'grow more grass on my farm by applying, say, 2 cwt of potash and 4 cwt of phosphate or 1 cwt of potash and 5 cwt of phosphate? A difference of 10s. per acre, or £75 on my farm; or, to put it another way, 500 lb more butterfat required to meet the difference. A Waimate West Demonstration Farm trial is throwing a little light on the problem. It appears that, under high stocking rate, on the particular soil type in that area there is an **economic** return on 2 cwt of potash per acre. But would anyone suggest that this return could or could not be increased by higher or lower rates, or a different ratio of

potash to phosphate? Timing of application to grow the most feed when it is most urgently needed could be one of the vital factors influencing economic return. Results at Waimate West point to some evidence of slumping for a period after the application of potash. If this is borne out in subsequent work, this could have a big bearing on time of application.

Some farmers attempting to make use of the Government soil-testing service as a guide have been disappointed with the conflicting results of follow-up tests. In one case the agricultural instructor expressed himself as unable to advise on the basis of the test-a poor return to this farmer for his investment in quest of knowledge. Can he be blamed if he questions the value of testing and wonders just how much real knowledge there is of Taranaki soils after an experience of this nature? I am afraid a certain amount of complacency exists in some quarters on this question of economic rates of fertiliser.

Advice to a farmer on a low level of fertility is relatively easy. We know that the triggering-off shot must be heavy, but almost any fertiliser or mixture or rate will present him with an economic return. It is when we come to the farm producing 300 lb of fat and better (and in some cases much better) that the problem of rates and ratios becomes important. Yet I have heard it stated in professional quarters that the chap at that level is well able to look after his own problems and that advisory workers should concentrate on the farmer on a lower level of production. To my mind this is short-sighted in the extreme. Problems tackled and solved now, by making full use of the enthusiasm of the few, could be of inestimable value to the many in future.

Rarely does a discussion among farmers conclude without the question of new grass versus old receiving a good doing over.

A fairly strong body of opinion in Taranaki holds that a pasture has to be really poor before it pays to plough and resow. There is a widely held view that there are more management problems associated with the new grasses than our old ones. Bloat is more evident on farms regrassed in the last ten years than on those in older swards. The survey findings showed that where bloat was a problem, the percentage of farm area in new grass averaged 57 per cent; where bloat was not a problem the average area being 27 per cent of the farm. Other criticisms noted were: "Has little resistance to drought conditions, is subject to insect damage, and takes at least two years to establish before it produces up to the level of the poor pasture it replaces." There is a feeling that something is lacking.

Could it be that management techniques are being outpacedby our plant breeders?

Is the plant too gutless to take the use and abuse of commercial dairying? Are we trying to fit a high-fertility-demanding grass to too low a fertility level for it to realise its true potential, or in a number of cases to even survive? Is the grazing pattern at fault?

When he considers the level of production per acre obtained at Ruakura and on some local farms from pasture which is the very antithesis of an accepted good new pasture a farmer finds himself faced with a knotty problem in making the decision to plough and resow or feed the existing old pasture, which has survived years of abuse. Cut for hay after standing anything up to four months or more, attacked by grass-grub below, porina and stem weevil above, pugged out of sight in winter, and cooked by droughts in summer, yet under sound-management giving production figures unexcelled by new grass farms under equally good management. Old pasture, too, does not appear to have the same tendency to become clover dominant, whereas with new pasture one slip in management practice (sometimes broughht about by factors beyond the farmer's control) and the resultant mess becomes a management headache for months.

Grass-grub and stem weevil are much more severe on our new grasses, too, though there is hope that the new ryegrass will be the answer to the latter pest. There is, however, considerable apprehension in the Province regarding the withdrawing- of DDT super. Grass-grub and porina are being kept under reasonable control by the use of DDT super. What will happen if a satisfactory substitute is not available is too painful to contemplate. These two pests are a far more serious threat to our dairy farming economy than all the weeds in Taranaki rolled into one.

Weeds, on the whole, are not now a serious threat to the province's dairy farms. Ragwort, giant buttercup, tall fescue, Californian thistle and others are still with us despite the widespread use of -expensive hormones, and it is impossible to select any one as being more serious than the others. The extent of the problem is mostly of a local nature and varies greatly from farm to farm, according to locality, stocking rate, management, etc.: for instance, tall fescue ceases to be a problem when the stocking rate gets well up and management is good.

Stocking Rate

For every real problem a farmer faces when contemplating increasing his stocking rate he considers at least three which are wholly or partly illusory. His first **big** problem is to break through the barrier of years of conventional thought. My farm is too wet to carry more stock. How would stock fare in a drought? Stock health problems would prove insurmountable, etc.

At one time it was considered that more than 150 to 200 cows through one shed was the absolute limit. Today there are farmers putting through over 300 and considering pushing numbers even higher. Most of these are bogy problems put up by people who don't want to be convinced or are genuinely unable to adjust their thinking to modern conditions. However, there are problems associated with increasing the stocking rate.

Having decided to give it a go and to "up" his stocking rate the farmer must make some immediate decisions. Does he alter the calving date? How much more fertiliser, or is it a question of better utilisation of what he is already growing? How many more cows? How to manage the herd through the winter to avoid pasture damage which could make his spring problem a headache? How to arrange for the extra stock? Buy or breed? Where is the money to come from to finance the increase and the labour to handle the work involved. I realise that this problem of stocking rate and associated problems is of immediate concern to only a small percentage of Taranaki dairy farmers. Too few in my opinion.

Every man Jack of us should be considering now how best to respond to the call for more dairy products. Government and producer board leaders have made the position clear. Problems involved -in answering the call must be taken up by this conference and others, and ways of achieving the required targets pinpointed.

There is abundant evidence that increasing the stocking rate gives the quickest increase in per-acre production. When associated with efficient use of fertiliser it is a sure bet. But much requires to be done before the latter requirement can be fulfilled. The majority of farmers showing good production returns are generally the first to admit to groping in the dark and that they are only scratching the surface and that much higher figures are reasonably easy of attainment. I for one do not believe that some of the "silly" figures suggested by research workers in the past are very far beyond our reach. But we do require more technical-help.

Stock-health problems in the main are no greater on high-stocked farms than on those stocked at a lower rate. It appears that the incidence of bloat is higher under heavy stocking, but metabolic diseases could be less. I believe the two stock-health problems to cause most widespread concern to Taranaki farmers are bloat and mastitis. Sterility, milk fever, black pox, and others take toll of our herds but bloat and mastitis cause the greatest loss of cows and man hours, even though science has provided us with penicillin and pasture spraying.

Penicillin when it was introduced lulled us into a false sense of

security. Today penicillin, with all the attendant worries associated with its use, poses almost as many problems as the disease it is supposed to control. To carry out all the recommendations of the experts on shed technique and mastitis control a farmer would need a little army. When days of rain make spraying "iffy" or you pick the wrong time or pasture to see if it's safe to "knock off)', even an army could be fully employed. Pasture spraying has proved a great boon. Let there be no question about that. But the most ardent enthusiast, trying it with a large herd, shortage of labour conditions, is quickly brought to a realisation of its shortcomings. The national loss due to bloat must be enormous. Not only is there loss of valuable stock, or the loss of production (and this can be substantial) due to milk bloat, but a big loss caused by fear of bloat. There are those who **want** to progress, but are held back because of what they see is happening on Joe Brown's farm next door. The question of incentives is topical in farmer discussions today. If finance is a factor limiting bloat research, what better incentive could be suggested than more funds to help solve this problem?

Of course, being only human, the farmer would like a little wine with his cake. "Wipe" death duties and so divert finance (at present tied up in making provision to pay death duties or being spent to ensure that there is as little as possible left to tax) back into a productive field; then give him 12 months or more free of tax on his increase as compared to the previous five-year average. Do it any way at all that seems just and equitable. The point is not so much how to do it, but that some worth-while incentive must be offered the primary producer if increased production is to be obtained-a vital matter to our whole economy.

Labour is, of course, another factor influencing production and is a major problem in Taranaki. Over a period of 12 years from 1950 to 1962 the number of dairy farmers in Taranaki fell by approximately 800. In the same period cow numbers rose by 46,000. In effect 800 fewer farmers are milking 46,000 more cows for an average increase of 5,000 lb of fat per farm. Whilst advances in technique have largely enabled the farmer to keep abreast of his work there is a limit to the endurance of even a Taranaki dairyman. Lack of labour is proving a definite bar to progress on a large number of farms. The need at the moment is not only labour, but the assurance that labour will be available in future. No long-term plan (and farming is essentially long-term) can be laid down without that assurance. The farmer is endeavouring to help himself-with a farm cadet scheme run through his federation, by improving the working conditions on the farm, and in other ways.

The question of labour availability is, however, so much a political matter that it can only be tackled successfully at a national level. Labour, farm size and the Land Aggregation Act, death duties, land valuation-powerful inhibiting factors to farm improvement and high production-are politically imposed and only politically can they be corrected.

I have offered criticism which I feel is a fair summary of the thinking of the majority of Taranaki dairy farmers. Some will not agree with criticisms of new grass. Some may not consider bloat to be important. Others will argue against increasing stocking rate, but one thought common to all will be the desire for more information 'on these problems. I trust that this conference will help to provide that knowledge.

DISCUSSION

Comment (A. Pantall): We need a sub-station in Taranaki to investigate fertiliser requirements. There are problems with new grass caused by sowing too much H.l and better seed mixtures. will overcome this.

A. The majority of Taranaki farmers share my opinions on the shortcomings of new pastures. Some are very satisfied with the production of new grass, even including H.l.

Q. (A. Pantall): Haven't people who are dissatisfied with new pastures often ploughed up their worst paddocks and then compared the new grass in these with the old pastures in their night paddocks?

A. Most of the dissatisfaction with new grass is brought about by farmers not applying heavy rates of fertiliser on new pasture. Those farmers who feed the plant in relation to its production potential are very happy with the result.

Q. (A. Campbell): When do these difficulties with new grass occur-after brassicas or after old grass? Is the trouble a failure of clover to establish and then a slump in grass because there isn't enough clover?

A. The trouble occurs after crop and after grass. Usually clover establishes very easily.

Q. (Thompson): Are you satisfied that new entrants to agriculture are well enough educated in business methods and in technical matters?

A. No, I don't consider their education is adequate.

Q. (I. L. Elliott): You mentioned difficulties with soil testing. Could you give more detail?

A. The tests were taken over 12 paddocks. They failed because the adviser could not tell us what fertiliser to apply (on the basis of the test) to increase our pasture production. We need more information on soil testing.

Comment (I. L. Elliott): Soil testing is a guide to tell whether a certain element will give a response if you use it. In the Waikato we have been able to make a closer study of some of our 'soils, and this type of study is needed here, too. Let us not condemn soil testing altogether, just because we have not been able to study Taranaki soils as closely as we would like.

A. Nor as closely as we would like. However, we recognise the difficulties confronting your department and are not unappreciative of your considerate and understanding attitude.