

Sources and uses of information on a West Coast dairy farm

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Introduction

I am a 30-year-old sharemilker on my parent's 600 cow developing farm near Blackball on the western side of the Grey Valley. Earlier this year I competed in the National Young Farmer of the Year competition and finished a close third.

So what is information?

There are two types of information that I use. There is data gathered from my farm to help fine tune the running of the day to day operations on the farm

And directional information

This is the information that arrives in papers and directs the long-term direction and plans of the farm and farming businesses.

Sources of information

Last year I was slightly different from most farmers with my collection of information, due to competing in the young farmer's contest. In the quest for information I used all avenues open that I could find; printed, audio, visual, discussion groups, field days and Internet.

The major downfalls of off-farm information supply were:

- Unproven information
- Time finding and filtering quality information

How many articles in farmer magazines are scientifically based and how many are advertising in disguise? Is there a way of increasing the reliability of information that is supplied to farmers and related industries. This lack of reliability of information increases the time that is required to sift through all the articles that arrive on farm every week to find the information that is reliable.

The effects of information

Due to the variability in weather on the Coast there is a greater need to monitor and adjust the farming system compared to an area like Canterbury. This was shown last year (2001/02) when the farm was undergoing a rapid period of development and I was under time restraints from increasing the herd size, building a new shed as well as developing the farm. The results of the time pressure was that day to day information gathering was lower resulting in per cow production falling by 11% or around \$182 per cow.

So what information was lacking that caused this large drop in profit.

- Pasture growth rates

- Cow condition
- Nitrogen requirements
- Paddock performance
- Milk production
- Pre-mating heat detection

As scientists and advisers I hear you say that it is the farmer's responsibility to gather and analyse this information. You have the bigger topics to research and discover, gene marking, improving pasture species, sexing of sperm and ideas that I have not even contemplated yet.

This is indeed very valuable research. Where would farming be without the invention of electric fences, artificial breeding and nitrogen research? But my problem is to take a farm with below average production to the top 10% in production with the existing technology and farming principles.

I have all the technical information I need at the end of a phone. I can and do ring my consultant, fertiliser rep, vet, neighbour and due to the size and openness of New Zealand science, at present if they do not know I can ring an expert in agronomy, nutrition, soils and receive the answer that I require. I hope that this openness remains as in a time of privatisation and cost cutting it is a true advantage.

I feel that for myself the next leap in information is not in the growing of grass or production of milk but in the tools to collect, store and utilise that information. This being tied to a financial benefit to the farming business is the real reason that I farm.

Think of the benefits of being able to read pasture cover on a motorbike instantly downloaded, overlaying cow intake with milk production, changes in cow weight, daily soil temperature and predicted nitrogen response. Telling me low producing cows and poor producing paddocks, any potential feed deficits or surpluses. This would be a powerful information tool to use. The majority of this information is already available but until the restraints of time and cost are removed from data gathering and storage, this will not happen.

How to overcome time restraints

I am sure that presently, somewhere in the world some work is being done on this but until the results become mainstream I have to overcome some of the problems on a large-scale farm. Even though I can run a farm by myself and complete all aspects of farm work and management, there are people that are better at some

areas of work than I am, and some areas that pay a higher hourly rate than others.

This season, data gathering and pasture monitoring has been delegated as has management of the milking shed. This will free more time to analyse, forward plan and ensure the smooth running of the farm. Hardly a large leap forward but you would be surprised at how few people do it and do it well. I will tell you in a year how well I have delegated. Hopefully I will have learnt a new skill of delegation and overseeing. If I do not do this my business will stagnate. Maybe there is a need for further training and research on efficient methods of delegation to and teaching new entrants to the dairy industry. I have people that have been in the industry for one season taking charge of high-end production management of operations on the farm. This would have been unheard of in my father's day.

How do we break the complicated operations of dairy farming up into easy bite size pieces so that new entrants can learn and take responsibility while not over simplifying dairying and taking the fun out of the job?

How to change the teachers

No one likes change and information is change.

For there to be change there has to be a driver to change or some need.

How can information be best spread to the end users?

This is how can the uptake of information be improved. In general farmers are people that learn best by doing, they have inquisitive minds and are born doubters or questioners.

Time is becoming more valuable, has farming reached a stage where farmers are again willing to pay for information in a way that is guaranteed accurate.

Questions that I want answered

These questions are:

What is the most economical way of wintering cows in extremely wet conditions?

What methods are there of managing feed surpluses effectively on land that can not be mown?

What is the cost of having to cull cows for reasons other than age and how can I effectively minimise this cow wastage?