

Once-a-day milking works for large herd

Once-a-day milking has proven to be the way to go for a large scale northern Victorian dairy.

Better condition scores, higher conception rates, reduced lameness and ease of management are the biggest benefits of milking cows once-a-day instead of twice a day, according to Tim and Leah Kennedy, who share-farm at Torrumbarry in northern Victoria.

But the switch has involved putting the emphasis on production per hectare, rather than per cow, and a reliance on home grown feed rather than high levels of supplementary feed.

Although per cow milk production fell with the switch to once-a-day milking, milk production per hectare has been maintained by increasing stocking rate.

Change of mindset

“People often talk to me about once-a-day milking and I tell them that it often involves a complete change in mind set, and their farming system,” Tim Kennedy said.

“People need to forget about production per cow. If they want to calve down the herd and start feeding high levels of concentrates to get 30-35L/cow/day then it won't work and their cows may have udder problems or difficulties with mastitis.

“They have to expect less per cow, feed their cows lower levels of concentrates, maximise grass intake and focus on per hectare production.”

At the peak of their production two years ago the Kennedys were milking 1700 cows once a day.

The move to once-a-day milking on the Torrumbarry farm resulted from dealing with a large property and just one dairy. The 1300 ha farm is all in one block with a single 60 unit rotary dairy.

Land not utilized for the dairy operation is cropped with a variety of cereals.

Building a second dairy was considered, but the New Zealand owners, the Wilkins Family, along with Tim and Leah, were more comfortable with the idea of once-a-day milking, rather than investing in a new dairy and associated infrastructure and employing more staff.

“The philosophy of the farm is that we have a simple, sustainable system. This approach covers all aspects of farm management,” Tim said.

“It means we only feed minimal grain when needed and the rest of our production comes off grass.

“I started on the property 4½ years ago as a manager, but two years before I started the property was milking 700 spring calvers twice a day and 500 cows once a day.

“Once-a-day milking was to allow the cows to utilize pastures which were a long way from the dairy and meant the cows only had to walk to the dairy once a day.

“The most distant paddocks are more than 3.5km from the dairy, so just one milking involved the cows walking 7 km while twice a day would have involved the cows walking 14 km a day.

“The time taken getting to and from the dairy, plus the hours spent in the yards all added



up to a lot of time when the cows weren't eating.”

Once-a-day milking was a new concept when Tim started at the property and he kept in close contact with New Zealand farmers who were also milking once a day.

“We regularly talked with other farmers in NZ who were trialling once-a-day milking and visited the Turner family in New Zealand who were pioneering once-a-day milking with a herd of 5000 cows.”

After a couple of years the Kennedys were milking 1700 cows through the one dairy. Two thirds were spring calving and one third were autumn calving with the some spring calvers milked once a day and autumn calvers milked twice a day.

The initial split of the herd was also based on breed. Friesians calved in spring and were milked twice a day while Jerseys and cross bred cows made up the once day milking herd.

“We initially had concerns that the larger cows wouldn't cope with once-a-day milking, but our fears were unfounded,” Tim said.

About three years ago, the decision was made to put the entire herd on once-a-day milking.

The cows were travelling increasing distances from the dairy to reach pasture and a single milking of 1700 cows in the one dairy was taking six hours.

Milk production

Tim estimated that production fell 18-20 per cent per cow in the first seson of milking the whole herd once a day.

Some cows struggled to cope with the change and were culled.

“We had some cows that started drying off, and other cows that suffered from

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Once-a-day milking works for large herd (continued...)

mastitis, with the switch to once-a-day milking. All up these cows represented less than 10 per cent of the herd, so they went," Tim said.

"After three seasons we were left with a predominantly crossbred and Jersey herd which had their production levels bouncing back to previous levels after the problem cows had been culled.

"The flipside of the fall in production was that the cows ate less pasture so there was the capacity to increase stocking rate.

Milk production last season was 300 kg milk solids/cow or 1050kg MS/ha, with the property stocked at 3.5 cows/ha.

"We've effectively maintained our per ha production by increasing the stocking rate.

Fertility

Tim has closely monitored the condition scores and in-calf rates during his time on the property and has noticed an improvement in herd fertility with the switch to once-a-day milking.

The cows are now in better condition scores post calving and showing improved fertility levels.

When the herd was milked twice a day, there were consistently 14-15 per cent of the cows not in calf.

With once-a-day milking this figure halved to 6-7 per cent not in calf after a 10 week joining period. Seventy five per cent of these are in calf to AI after the first 21 day round then bulls mop up for a further seven weeks.

"That difference in in-calf rates equates to a lot of calves when you are dealing with a herd of 1700 cows.

"It also means a lot less cows are culled for infertility which means we can look at culling cows on production.

"Once-a-day milking has dramatically reduced the incidence in lameness we were experiencing when the herd was milked twice a day – we rarely get a lame cow now."

But one of the biggest gains Tim has witnessed with the swing to once-a-day milking has been staff contentment.

"When you're milking 1700 cows twice a day, there is a lot of stress on the cows and staff. The staff and cows took about five minutes to adjust to once-a-day milking and both love it," he said.

Flexibility

The ongoing lack of irrigation water has meant slashing herd numbers this season and only milking 300 cows twice a day on paddocks close to the dairy.



However, the experience has demonstrated that once-a-day milking systems have the flexibility to adapt to different seasonal conditions and Tim is ready to switch back to once-a-day milking if the herd increases.

A high number of young stock have been retained and 250 heifers are set to come in next season.

"Next year we have the capacity to double our herd size. All the infrastructure is in place and we are in a position to build numbers back up if the conditions suit."