

Once-a-day gives flexibility

Leongatha dairy farmers Steve and Lisa Riley have developed a milking system that involves milking once-a-day for some of the year. It gives them the flexibility to spend time together as a family and to work an off-farm business, without a major drop in annual milk production.

The system that started as a response to the 2006/2007 drought is now integral to their everyday farming.

The Riley's experience dispels the belief that once-a-day milking comes with a high production penalty. Their cows peak at 31 L/day and production averages about 6000 L/cow/lactation.

Cows are milked once-a-day from the start of calving in early June until enough pasture is available to fully feed the herd, which is usually about late July.

The Rileys then switch to a conventional twice-a-day milking pattern until feed availability and heat limit milk production. From about mid-January, when the cows are producing about 13-14L/day, they switch back to once-a-day milking for the rest of the lactation.

The couple milk around 270, predominantly-Friesian cows in a seven year old 16-a-side double up dairy on their South Gippsland property.

"It's a good dairy to milk in, works really well and there are no issues when we milk the cows twice-a-day," Steve said.

"But the severe drought conditions two years ago were a strain and we wanted to reduce our feed expenses in late summer and take the pressure off the cows.

"That's when we considered

switching to once-a-day milking over summer as a drought management strategy.

Steve said milk production fell 2-3 litres per cow per day with the switch from twice-a-day milking to once-a-day in late lactation.

"The cows dropped from about 14 litres to 12 litres a day, but milk fat increased from 4.5 to 5 per cent and the protein increased a tiny bit," he said.

"All up the cows handled the change really well and certainly maintained their condition during the drought."

"We originally thought the cows wouldn't do it, but we did our homework. We and the herd have all adapted extremely well."

The switch worked so well that after the drought, the Rileys decided to milk once-a-day at the beginning and end of lactation, resulting in their current system.

But once-a-day milking needs to be well thought out and not a knee jerk reaction to a bad season, according to Steve.

The Rileys have put a number of strategies in place and plan ahead to ensure the success of once-a-day milking.

This includes herd testing five to six days after the summer switch to once-a-day milking to identify any cows with high cell counts.

"We might find 10 to 12 cows with high counts which we then deal with individually by either treating, drying off or culling," Steve said.

"We don't have problems with high cell counts and this approach makes sure we get onto any potential problems before they arise."



While the cows are fed less grain in the bail on once-a-day milking than they were when milked twice-a-day, the paddock feeding and grazing routine is kept exactly the same, with the herd being shifted twice daily.

If the cows were getting eight bales of silage a day, then this continues.

"We put the cows in a far paddock after the morning milking, then in the afternoon open the gates and let them move into a paddock nearer the dairy for the late afternoon and evening."

The change to once-a-day milking has meant the Rileys have saved on labour costs with Steve, Lisa, and Steve's mother Faye, milking the herd.

The time made available through reduced milking is used in the family's earth moving and hay contracting businesses.

"We had a lot of earth moving work cleaning out dams during the drought in the first summer we switched to once-a-day milking and have found the extra off farm income more than offset the fall in milk income," Steve said.

"The change in pace also has clear lifestyle benefits, which

are not something you can put a dollar value on, but are worth a lot."

The reduced milking has meant the Rileys have more time together as a family over the summer school holidays and regularly take their two children, aged nine and 12 to the beach, 20km from the farm.

One of the biggest benefits of changing the milking pattern has been greater flexibility according to Steve.

Having a reduced workload at certain times of the year has meant the family feel less need for a holiday when the cows are dry for six weeks over April and May and in the past two years have opted to continue milking through once-a-day.