

Once a day - still the way!

September 2018

Dave and Jane Field's (Field Agri Pty Ltd) farm at Montagu in the state's North West has just completed their first full season of once-a-day milking (OAD) and are about to hit the 12-month mark as the DairyTas Focus Farm. Project Coordinator, Jacki Hine from DairyTas says, "It's been an interesting and exciting 12 months. We have covered a lot of topics at the seasonal field days including, OAD milking, drainage, irrigation, cow condition, labour and staff management. In addition to that, we have been reporting our budget to actual figures (both physical and financial) fortnightly to industry".

The Field's are encouraged and assisted in their decision-making by a 9-member Support Group that consists of leading Tasmanian dairy farmers and industry professionals. The Support Group consists of; Bob Bush, Hugo Avery, Rhys Palmer, Gerard Mulder, Wayne Hansen, Leigh Schuurung, Aaron Robertson, Samantha Flight and Duncan MacDonald. The aim of the Support Group is to discuss, challenge and support the proposed actions on the ground. This has had great value to the Fields and was one of the motivating factors behind them wanting to become the Focus Farm for 2017-2019. "We were new to Tasmania and knew that it would be really different to farming in New Zealand, we thought it was a fantastic opportunity to help us through the transition period and to give something back to industry" said Jane Field.

The Field's, in conjunction with their consultant Basil Doonan (Macquarie Franklin) had decided to employ an OAD milking system prior to becoming the Dairy Tas Focus Farm, in an effort to "keep things simple" and to reduce the size of the workforce to 8 people - a size the Field's felt was manageable and would have more of a team feel.

At the same time the Fields were trying to implement an OAD milking system, they were also planning to grow their herd numbers, employ a management team and workforce, come to terms with farming in a new environment and start a new business with a split calving pattern. Basil says, "I thought our targets were pretty challenging, maybe even unrealistic and I wasn't surprised that we were falling short on production per cow, cell count and cashflow targets. However, I was surprised at how close Dave and Jane got, and in the final wash-up it was really interesting to note just what a strong performance it actually was".

Aaron Robertson, an accountant with Crowe Howarth, Smithton, and a member of the Support Group spent time at the end of the 2017-18 financial year moving the business accounts to an accrual basis, which highlighted the fact that the Fields had actually exceeded budget for the year. Aaron says, "I had a suspicion that the business was travelling better than the cash position was suggesting and I was keen to get this sorted out". At the end of the financial year it was observed that the targeted total production of milk solids, in addition to the targeted levels of production per hectare was achieved, despite production per cow being below budget. The main reason for this was that more cows than budgeted were milked.

The reason that more cows were milked than budgeted was that the ratio of cull cow value to milking cow value was almost one to one throughout the year, and as a result as cows were culled from the farm system, replacements were purchased. This was a strategy that was strongly encouraged by the Support Group. Bob Bush was quick to highlight that he had rarely seen these

prices during his dairy farming career and it was “a great opportunity to fast track cow type in terms of suitability to OAD milking”.

The focus for the next 12 months is to make a move towards a single calving period, and to determine at what point in the year that calving period should be. Establishing a management group and farm team remains high on the list of challenges and is something Dave and Jane will continue to progress. Hugo Avery, Operations Manager for Dairy Moonlake said that establishing a strong management and farm team “is a real challenge for all farms let alone larger farms, and it doesn’t happen overnight”. He encouraged the Fields to keep persisting with their objective to grow a team that can function without them as they gravitate towards achieving their goal of managing the dry stock side of the business.

Gerard Mulder, from Circular Head says “it was interesting to see how the organisation of staff and labour is such a big part of running a large farm business and demands a diverse set of skills. It is impressive to see how the Focus Farm has developed in one year and how much effort the Field’s put in”.

Samantha Flight, a dairy extension officer with TIA, and Wayne Hansen from Flowerdale say they have enjoyed being a part of the Focus Farm Support Group for the first year and are looking forward to learning more about Dave and Jane’s operation and understanding their system.

The next Open Day is on October 3rd from 11 -2 at the farm. It will include a farm tour featuring guest presenters Joyce Voogt, Mark Freeman & David McLaren. The day will also feature a summary of last financial year’s performance by Basil Doonan. A free BBQ lunch will be provided on the day. RSVP here <https://www.dairyaustralia.com.au/Events-Calendar/event?sfid=7016F000001HzOxQAK>

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