

WESTVIC DAIRY NEWS

MAY 2022

What to do amid rising input costs

Nadine Markham

How do you effectively manage a dairy farm when the goal posts or cost structures keep changing? Farmers are told to focus on margins and not costs, but how do you do that and how can you influence them anyway? The following article explores these concepts and aims to assist farm managers with the confidence to make profitable feeding decisions.

Feeding Pastures for Profit – Principles of Profitable Farming

Every farm is different, but on all farms there will be a 'sweet spot' where stocking rate and feed inputs combine to generate the highest level of profit on the farm. In the Dairy Australia program 'Feeding Pastures for Profit', this is referred to as the 'Profit Zone'. On one side of that zone, cows will be underfed and pastures will be overgrazed, resulting in a lower level of profit for the business. On the other side of the zone, too much feed will be bought in and pastures will be used inefficiently, reducing profit. The Profit Zone is the area where pastures can be grazed at the correct leaf stage without causing excessive pasture damage over winter and sufficient feed is purchased to both complement the pasture (balance the diet) and to fill any feed gaps, so that the cows are fully fed, thus achieving both cow and per hectare efficiencies. When



this occurs, it's deemed that you are now in the Profit Zone.

The main lever that farmers have to play with from year to year is stocking rate. If seasonal conditions and prices are unfavourable, then there is an option to reduce stocking rate, but fully feeding cows and grazing pastures following the Feeding Pasture For Profit principles remains essential to remaining in the zone. Once the zone has been achieved, annual profit margins will fluctuate from year to year due to the economic environment, but the farm will still be operating in the most profitable position it can.

John Mulvaney's 'Tower of Resilience' helps farmers to determine a stocking rate that will suit their farm best. He has suggested that 3 to 4 tonnes of feed per cow is the best position. Based on the annual homegrown feed intake of

3.5 tonnes DM/cow, a farm capable of growing and utilising 7 tonnes per ha would have a stocking of 2 cows/ha versus a farm with an annual utilisation of 5 tonnes per ha, which would be capable of a stocking rate of 1.4 cows/ha.

Once the Profit Zone has been found, then you are farming as profitably as possible, from a feed management perspective. Of course, there are many other factors that ultimately determine the profitability of the farming business, such as the amount of labour used, depreciation and debt servicing. Profit margins fluctuate from year to year due to climatic and economic circumstances so it's important to resist the temptation to cut back on feed or fertiliser if you are farming as profitably as possible and are in the Profit Zone.

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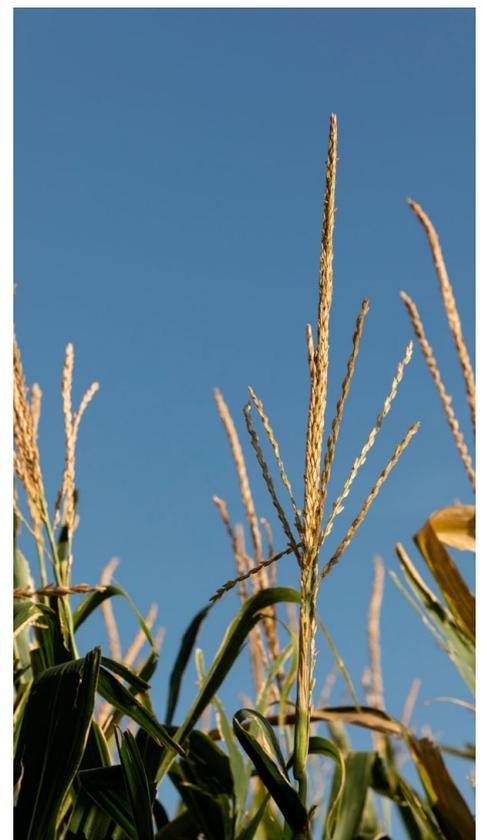
A margin over feed cost simulation

The natural reaction when input prices rise is to cut costs by reducing the amount of inputs used. However, this is dangerous because it ignores the impact of cost reduction on generating income. Therefore, the advice commonly given to farmers is to focus on margins instead of input, but what does 'focusing on margins' mean and how are you supposed to do that?

One of the key margins to monitor is Income over Feed Costs, which ideally should be monitored on a monthly basis. For the purposes of this exercise, the Margin over Feed Costs (MOFC) will be done on an annual per hectare basis to demonstrate the impact reducing key inputs has on potential profit for a well operating farm.

Three farming scenarios, Farm A (farms as usual), Farm B (reduces fertiliser inputs) and Farm C, (reduces stocking rate and N inputs) are presented to review the impact changing feed management practices have on the cost of inputs and on both income and potential profit margin.

Naturally there are a whole host of additional variables, overhead and financial costs that remain to be covered but the assumption is that the higher the initial 'Margin Over Feed Cost', the greater the profit that will remain once these additional costs are covered.



What's your plan for nitrogen this year? – A summary of Matt Harms' presentation

Recently, farm consultant Matt Harms from Onfarm Consulting gave a presentation in Warrnambool entitled 'What's your Plan with Nitrogen this year?'. Matt presented the table below labelled 'The Cost Comparisons of N-boosted Grass and Comparison to Alternatives', which was based on Urea at \$1200/t + GST spread (or \$2,609/t of Nitrogen (N)).

The table below reveals the cost of dry matter at the response rates frequently experienced during the Autumn/Winter period (ranging between 5 kg Dry Matter (kg DM) to 1 kg N applied to 15kg DM to 1 kg N applied). At the lower response rate, the cost of dry matter was \$522/t DM and at the higher response rate, the cost of dry matter was \$196/t DM. The key determinants impacting on the response rate that we can influence are rotation length, pasture species, weed and pest control, pugging damage, base fertility levels, timing of application (3-4 days +/- grazing) and grazing pressure. The other contributors to nitrogen response include soil temperature, day length, amount of sunshine and soil moisture. Hence responses to nitrogen are usually lowest over the winter period.

The cost of N boosted pasture was then compared to bought in feed options:

Grain mixes at \$420/t (as fed) which equated \$467/t DM eaten and vetch/ lucerne hay at \$320/t (as fed) or \$364/t DM and with a 15% wastage applied, at \$428/t when eaten.

At the same time, N-supplemented pastures become more expensive when utilisation is taken into account. Even at the higher response rates, if pastures are only 70% utilised, the cost of pasture increases from \$196/t to \$280/t.

Matt Harm's "The Cost Comparisons of N-boosted grass and Comparison to Alternatives" ready reckoner, please see below:

Response	100% eaten	85% eaten	70% eaten
5:1	\$522 /t DM	\$614 /t DM	\$746 /t DM
10:1	\$261 /t DM	\$307 /t DM	\$373 /t DM
15:1	\$174 /tDM	\$205 /t DM	\$249 /t DM

According to Matt, the cost of not using (enough) nitrogen this year included reduced pasture growth, underfed cows, less milk in a high milk price year and more bought in feed.

The aim of Matt's ready reckoner table was to assist farmers making feeding decisions based on response rates to nitrogen, pasture utilisation and the cost of alternative feed sources. Based on the information provided by Matt, under ideal grazing management conditions urea can still be cheapest supplement feed, even though the overall cost of fertiliser has increased.



Table 2 contains the income and costs associated, based on the physical requirements determined from Table 1. Based on milk income at \$7.50/kg MS, grain at \$420/t, purchased fodder at \$240/t and urea at \$1200/t, Farm A (farms as usual) is the most profitable farm. This is followed by Farm B (reduces fertiliser inputs) and Farm C (reduces stocking rate and N inputs). Please refer to Table 2 opposite.

Table 3 contains the income and costs associated, based on the physical requirements determined from Table 1. Based on milk income at \$7.50/kg MS, grain at \$500/t, purchased fodder at \$240/t and urea at \$1800/t, Farm A (farms as usual) remains the most profitable farm. Please refer to Table 3 opposite.

It is of interest to note that if the price of milk solids in Table 3 increased to \$8/kgMS, then the MOFC for Farm A, Farm B and Farm C would be \$4,060, \$3,898, \$3,302/ha respectively.

In all scenarios explored in the above examples the MOFC remain highest where per cow and per hectare efficiencies are maintained. Once the Profit Zone on your farm has been reached, it is still the most profitable position to maintain. Reducing stocking rate and/or reducing urea usage (provided it is being used responsibly) is likely to result in losses of potential profit.

As margins get tighter, best management practices become more crucial than ever. WestVic Dairy has a range of Feedbase and financial extension programs and tools available to assist farmers to identify and manage business in their own unique Profit Zone.

For more information, please contact **WestVic Dairy** on **5557 1000**.

Table 1 Three farming scenarios to demonstrate the potential impact on bought in feed by reducing urea and stocking rate:

	Farm A: Farms as usual	Farm B: Reduces N inputs	Farm C: Reduces stocking rate + N inputs
Pasture t DM/ha	7	5.25	5
Stocking rate	2	2	1.6
Pasture DM/cow/year	3.5	2.6	3.1
Cow Weight kg	520	520	520
Target production kg MS/cow	520	520	520
Maintenance, etc. t DM/Cow	2.5	2.5	2.5
Milk production t DM/Cow	3.38	3.38	3.38
Total Dry matter/cow	5.88	5.88	5.88
Bought in Feed t DM/cow	2.38	3.255	2.755
Bought in feed t DM/ha	4.76	6.51	4.408
Concentrate t DM/cow	2.2	2.6	2.2
Concentrate t DM/ha	4.4	5.2	3.52
Hay t DM/ha	0.36	1.31	0.888

Please note: Every effort has been made to base the figures on realistic farming scenarios. The figures used have been based on a combination of Matt Harm's presentation, Dairy Farm Monitor report and John Mulvaney's "Tower of Resilience" benchmarks.

Table 2 Impact of changing urea usage and/or stocking rate on Margin over Feed Costs on per hectare basis:

	Farm A: Farms as usual	Farm B: Reduces N inputs	Farm C: Reduces stocking rate + N inputs
Milk income/kgMS	7.5	7.5	7.5
Total income ha	7800	7800	6240
Cost Grain \$/t	420	420	420
Cost Grain \$/t DM	467	467	467
Cost Grain \$/ha	2053	2427	1643
Cost hay \$/t	240	240	240
Cost hay \$/t DM	273	273	273
Cost hay \$/t ha utilised	116	420	285
Application of N/ha/year	230	80	80
Cost of Urea/t	1200	1200	1200
Cost of Urea/ha	600	209	209
Cost of PKS/ha	800	800	800
Margin over Feed Cost	\$4,231	\$3,944	\$3,303

Table 3 Impact on Margin over Feed Costs on per hectare basis with increases to concentrate and urea prices:

	Farm A: Farms as usual	Farm B: Reduces N inputs	Farm C: Reduces stocking rate + N inputs
Milk income/kgMS	7.5	7.5	7.5
Total income ha	7800	7800	6240
Cost Grain \$/t	500	500	500
Cost Grain \$/t DM	556	556	556
Cost Grain \$/ha	2444	2889	1956
Cost hay \$/t	240	240	240
Cost hay \$/t DM	273	273	273
Cost hay \$/t ha utilised	116	420	285
Application of N/ha/year	230	80	80
Cost of Urea/t	1800	1800	1800
Cost of Urea/ha	900	313	313
Cost of PKS/ha	800	800	800
Margin over Feed Cost	\$3,540	\$3,377	\$2,886



Congratulations to the winners of the Great South West Dairy Awards 2022.

Maryke Roux
WINNER 2022 Dairy Farm Business Management Award
Sponsor: Supported by Dairy Australia and WestVic Dairy

Liz Mackley
WINNER 2022 Employee Award
Sponsor: Fonterra Australia

Karen Angus
WINNER 2022 Farm Photo Award
Sponsor: Lactalis Australia Pty Ltd

John and Rochelle Pekin
WINNER 2022 Natural Resource and Sustainability Management Award
Sponsor: Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority and Corangamite Catchment Management Authority

Meaghan Johnston
WINNER 2022 Service Provider Award
Sponsor: Moyne Shire

Renata Cumming
WINNER 2022 Young Dairy Leader Award
Sponsor: Gardiner Foundation

Jason Karney
RUNNER UP 2022 Dairy Farm Business Management Award
Sponsor: Saputo Dairy Australia

Jeffery Caballero
RUNNER UP 2022 Employee Award
Sponsor: Apiam Animal Health

Janine Thow
RUNNER UP 2022 Farm Photo Award
Sponsor: WestVic Dairy

Tim and Marie Humphris
RUNNER UP 2022 Natural Resource and Sustainability Management Award
Sponsor: Bega Cheese Limited

James O'Brien
RUNNER UP 2022 Service Provider Award
Sponsor: Greencon Australia Pty Ltd

Melanie Ackerley
RUNNER UP 2022 Young Dairy Leader Award
Sponsor: The Union Dairy Company



Lyn Parish with dairy cows

Genomics on farm

Debbie Twiss, Regional Extension Officer – Animal Health and Performance

Milking 650 registered Jerseys on the fertile slopes south of Winchelsea in Western Victoria, Lyn and David Parish started genotyping their herd through their involvement in the ImProving Herds Project.

In 2014, their first genomic results ranked the Dornoch herd ranked at 278th place of 387 herd-recorded Jersey herds in Australia for profit, which combines the key traits that contribute to profit. The Parishes herd is the first Jersey herd in Australia to reach more than 2,000 genotyped cows.

DataGene Extension Officer Peter Williams has tracked the progress of the Dornoch herd over the past 10 years. Peter praised the Parishes for their dedication to accurate record keeping and data collection, claiming he has not seen another herd improve so much in such a short period of time.

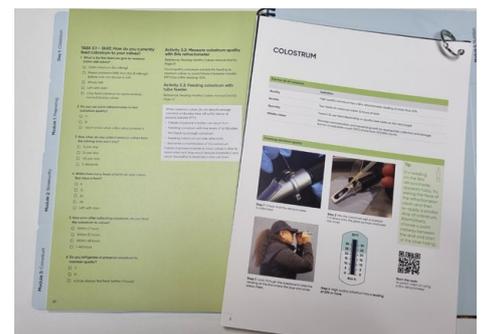
By utilising the genomic data and the information provided in their Genetic Progress Report (GPR), the Parishes have seen a dramatic rise in their herd's overall genetic performance. After the April 2022

Australian Breeding Value (ABV) release, the Parishes herd rose to an average Balanced Performance Index (BPI) score of +139 and Health Weighted Index (HWI) of +121, earning them a ranking of 25 for BPI and 14 for HWI out of 232 Jersey herds nationally.

Lyn said she didn't have any specific goals or expectations when she first began genomically testing her cows. Though she admits their early genomic results showing their low overall herd ranking was disappointing, Lyn was not disheartened. Instead, she was motivated to implement new strategies in the hope of achieving change.

"I never thought of reaching the top 10 or anything like that – it seemed so out of reach," she said, "but it gave us something to aim for, so we kept plugging away. Now we're nearly there it's a bit of a thrill."

Alongside BPI, Lyn has concentrated her program on type traits such as udders and chest width with positive results.





“We are now giving more attention to the fertility and health traits. It’s just another stepping-stone forward each time.” she said

Lyn believes the use of sexed semen over the maiden heifers and high genetic merit cows, combined with the use of beef sires over the lower genetic merit cows, has helped accelerate the genetic improvement in the herd.

This additional selection pressure, combined with a strict culling regime, is continually ‘pushing the bottom cows out’, with very few replacements entering the milking herd that have tested below the herd average for BPI. To ensure 100% of their herd is genomically tested, the Parishes collect tissue sampling units (TSUs) from every calf born (including bull calves) at dehorning.

Over the last 10 years, with the use of BPI, HWI and more recently daughter fertility, the Australia herd genomics for fertility has improved without sacrifice of herd production. Survival in the herd, fertility and health are traits that dilute heifer rearing costs and contribute to herd/cow profitability.

During February and March 2022, the new Rearing Healthy Calves fundamentals program has supported about 40 farmers across south west Victoria to improve their capacity to manage calf

rearing operations to maximise return of genomic investment, by minimising risk of disease and maximising growth from milk dependent newborn to weaned grazing ruminant.

With the use of sexed semen and improved calf rearing management, farmers are likely to have replacement heifers surplus to herd requirements. Genomic testing provides a means to rank animals by traits, including BPI, to assist herd management decisions.

On Wednesday 18th May, there will be a on farm workshop: Genomics in Practice – On Farm, held on farm in Bookaar, to explore how genomic testing can be used to inform breeding and business decisions. The session will includedemonstration of tissue sampling with TSUs and using DataVat to access and interpret results.

INFORMATION AND REGISTRATION

Please **scan the QR code** or **contact WestVic Dairy on 03 5557 1000** to register your attendance.



Presenter: Peter Williams, DataGene extension

Date: Wednesday 18 May 2022

Time: 10:00am registration and morning tea, 10:30am start – 2:00pm finish

RSVP: Monday 16 May 2022

Address: 440 Camperdown Darlington Road (look out for the WestVic Dairy sign)

Dairy Australia employee visit

Michelle Leech, Marketing and Communications Officer

WestVic Dairy had the opportunity to host a number of Dairy Australia employees for a tour of the region at the beginning of April. Many of these employees are experts in their own technical fields, such as finance or IT but had not been on a dairy farm in our region before, so the visit provided an excellent opportunity to increase their familiarity with our farming systems and regional conditions. This, in turn, enables them to provide resources that are more directly relevant to farming conditions locally.

Over the course of the two-day program, the visitors took part in a number of activities designed to help them gain a better understanding of our region, community and farming conditions. On Monday, the day started with a visit to the WestVic Dairy office, where our staff introduced their areas of extension work, including some fantastic demonstrations of what this looks like practically.

A picnic lunch at the Camperdown Botanic Gardens was followed by an introduction to the region and shire. Following this, the group stopped at Simpson for an introduction to the local history of land clearing for agriculture.

Next stop was Apostle Whey Cheese, where owner Julian Benson shared his career journey and offered the visitors an opportunity to taste and buy some delicious cheese and gelato. After this they viewed the herd during milking and discussed the farming practices.

The evening concluded with a shared dinner with the WestVic Dairy Board, who discussed their perspectives as local farmers and service providers. This gave the visitors an opportunity to reflect on where local farmers see a need for solutions in the industry.

The following day, the group split, with Group A visiting Webber and Chivell fertiliser and the Port Campbell Discussion Group ‘tow and fertiliser’ day on farm. Group B visited Notman Pasture Seeds to learn about the various seed trials on



the go at the moment. The group was able to gain a better understanding of the complexities of agricultural decisions, including the selection of pasture. Following this, they attended the final field day of the Smarter Irrigation for Profit (SIP2) project alongside local farmers.

The tour provided an invaluable opportunity to build stronger connections between Dairy Australia and western Victoria, fostering learning and a greater appreciation for our region and the needs of local farmers.



Making our farms safer

Matt Wood, Regional Extension Officer – Workforce Planning

The Doolan family recently took advantage of the free farm safety initiative offered by the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF). The Making our farms safer program provides on-farm consultations with a qualified safety advisor to provide farmers with the tools, education and support to better understand their OH&S obligations.

Doolan Farms currently milk 650 cows. Whilst most of the workload is carried out by family members, one full-time employee and one casual are also employed. A desire to provide a safe workplace for everyone involved, encouraged the family to register for the consultation.

“We are a busy family farm with plenty of children around – as well as being responsible for the safety of our employees and each other. Whilst we have safety systems in place, we want to put more structure and record keeping around them. We also want to learn what more we could be doing and highlight any areas where we are putting people or our business at risk,” said Belinda.

Senior Farm Safety Advisor John Darcy and I met with the Doolans at their Brucknell property in April. The session started with a meeting around the kitchen table where John worked through the *Consultancy Handbook*, a detailed document that takes farmers through a systematic approach to improving on-farm safety. It covers topics including:

- Building Blocks for OH&S
- Employee Consultation
- Issue Resolution
- Toolbox meetings
- Complying with OH&S Laws and Regulations.

Then it was time for the farm walk, with the workshop, including the quad bikes and side by side, our first stop.

Key discussions here included having a clear farm map with points such as fire extinguishers, first aid kits and the emergency assembly area clearly identified – key contact phone numbers should also be included. The workshop (and dairy) is kept neat and tidy, which is a tick as general housekeeping around the farm is important in reducing the chance of trips and slips

After checking over the tractors and some machinery, we looked over the fuel and chemical storage. This was

an opportunity to discuss *Safety Data Sheets (SDS)*, employee training in chemical safety and close access to running water and fire extinguishers.

The walk concluded at the dairy, where there are several ‘confined spaces’ such as grain silos and the milk vat. We talked about appropriate signage and employee training when working in confined spaces. Like many dairy farms, the accident/incident reporting register is kept at the dairy office, alongside further first aid kits.

The farm walk highlighted areas that the family is doing well, along with some areas for improvement. However, the improvements advised by John were neither expensive nor time consuming. Many farmers will likely be in this position, where taking a bit of time and utilising the fresh eyes and experience of someone like John can take them from doing a good job of on-farm safety to being excellent at this important aspect of running a farm business.

“We found the consultation really useful. It can seem daunting when you look at all the different policies and Standard Operating Procedures but breaking it down into manageable chunks and tackling it over time helps.”

“It was good to see we are doing a lot of things right; we need to tighten up on a few things and keep building on our OH&S plan. Holding monthly toolbox meetings seems a good idea and something we will implement. Safety can be discussed as well as general farm activities,” said Sam.

Making our farms safer consultations are available to all Victorian farmers, you do not need to be a member of VFF. To book your appointment go to makingourfarmssafier.org.au

Dairy Australia offers a range of resources that can complement this program, including the *Farm Safety Starter Kit* and *Farm Safety Manual*. You can access these online at thepeopleindairy.org.au or by contacting **Matt Wood** on **0417 669 597** or matthew@westvicdairy.com.au.



WorkSafe Farmer story: Matt and Alli Reid from Otway Milk

Matt and Alli Reid run Otway Milk, a dairy farm of roughly 700 cattle on their 688 hectares property in Carlisle River, Victoria.

The couple have five full-time workers year-round. They credit their farm's remarkable staff retention in large part to their positive safety culture.

This retention rate includes employees who have remained in their roles for 10 and 15 years.

"One of the things we've learned along the way is that not everything has to cost money. There are lots of examples where all it has cost is a five-minute conversation to find a better way," said Matt.

"If we think about how we built our safety culture it really comes down to communication. Without strong communication with your employees, you really don't have anything," Matt said.

"We've got to a point with our safety meetings where everyone is willing to talk and willing to listen. No one is afraid to speak up and say if something is not quite right," Alli said.

First steps

When deciding on their first steps towards improving safety, the Reids reached out to Dairy Australia and later WorkSafe's independent OHS Essentials program to help guide their safety journey.

"We've always understood the value of getting an outside perspective. Sometimes all it takes is a fresh set of eyes to see how we could be doing things in a better way," Matt said.

From Dairy Australia the Reids introduced a traffic light system for safety on-farm and came to understand how their own actions impact the culture of the farm.

"One of the traffic light systems asked if all employees wore a helmet while on a bike. It was discovered at that time that Matt didn't," Alli said.

'The message it was sending to our employees was a bad one,' Matt said.

"Matt's just as important as an employee and we all need to be in this together," said Alli.

After working with Dairy Australia and utilising the free OHS Essentials program, the Reids now engage with a private consultant who has given them the confidence they're doing everything they can to keep everyone safe on-farm.

Sign up for the OHS Essentials program

Get free, confidential and personalised safety support from an ag industry expert at a time that suits you.

Sign up for the OHS Essentials program by emailing us your interest at ohsessentials@worksafe.vic.gov.au





WestVic Dairy Focus Farm reports

	Bostocks Creek	Macarthur	Jancourt East
Date	12/4/22	01/05/22	21/04/22
Milking area	182 ha	310 ha	216
Production			
Cow numbers	170	600	275
kg milk solids/cow/day	1.51	2.06	1.71
Litres/cow/day	18	25.8	22
Fat %	4.83	4.62	4.25
Protein %	3.65	3.39	3.50
Grazing and supplement feeding kg DM/cow/day			
Pellets @ \$0.55/kgDM			6.3
Wheat @ 39c/kg DM (\$360/t)	5		
Wheat @ 38c/kg DM (\$340/t)		8	
Profeed @ 70c/kg DM (\$626/T)	2		
Profeed @ 79c/kg DM (\$713/T)		2.4	
Silage @ 15c/kg DM	3.7		
Silage @ 12c/kgDM			6.5
Silage kg DM		8	
Pasture (kg DM)	4-5		5.5
Area in rotation (ha)	182		171
Rotation length (days)	90	Following grass growth	66
Grazing area (ha/24 hrs)	2	5	2.6
Daily income over supplementary feed costs (IOSFC) \$			
April 2022 milk price (\$/kg MS)	7.85		7.35
May 2022 milk price (\$/kgMS)		8.10	
Income/cow	11.85	16.69	12.53
Supplementary feed cost/cow	2.85	6.43	4.25
IOSFC/cow	9.00	10.25	8.29
IOSFC/ha	8.40	19.85	10.60

Bostocks Creek

The herd calves from the 1st of May and again in spring. There are still around 40 cows to dry off. The herd will peak at just over 300 cows in winter. The transition diet will include lead feed, oaten hay and pasture hay. The best silage has been tested and retained to feed through May to fresh cows. Also considering buying some quality hay to feed in May. Silage is being fed at 2.5 bales per 24 hours to the milking herd. Using a long grazing rotation to build pasture cover before winter. Resowing has mostly been completed but needs rain to germinate. Dry cows will spend another week on the milking area and then will be moved to outpaddocks and offered hay and a strip of pasture daily.

Macarthur

Calving cows down. Feeding calves. Finishing shed and feed pad earthworks. About to start feeding kale off to milkers.

Jancourt East

Herd and dry cows:

- 117 autumn cows calved since 1st March (158 Spring calved cows in herd)
- 48 dry cows to calve soon
- 45 heifer calves to rear (from Autumn drop)
- 13 spring calving heifers at home, 51 rising 1 yo heifers on agistment
- 69 cows PTIC for Spring calving
- 84 cows being joined for calving in late Jan.

Pastures:

- 53 ha oversown with Zoom
- 17 ha sown with Annual (Tetilia)
- 22.5 ha sown to Perennial (Matrix) – summer crop paddocks
- 3.9 ha sprayed out and sown to Perennial
- Cricket bait over whole farm
- Recent fertilizer application: 45 ha blend (36:0:15:15) on higher performing paddocks (new in 2021).

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