
NHIA News

Herd Improvement Newsletter

Vol. 1 Issue 2 October 2006 (c)

Notes from Vale St

This time of the year is a busy one for the member base and October has also been a busy month for the Association.

Ute orders, fuel sales, Liquid Nitrogen deliveries and AI docket book orders have been healthy, although most members are predicting a shortened season due to the dry.

NHIA Chairman, Mr Gordon Stewart, met with the Chairman of Australian Dairy Farmers, Mr Allan Burgess, in October. Discussion points included:

- Issues related to fragmentation of production and non production data on farms. There has been some efforts to converge data platforms but the work is slow. NHIA expects to see some significant activity in this area in the future.
- The expression of ABVs was discussed. Subsequently, this has been raised at the ADHIS Advisory Meeting. There is general consensus that the production traits are well understood and do not need modification. There also seems to be significant consensus that other traits could be modified to make them easier to use.
- A significant issue raised was the drought and the effect this has on herd recording participation and PT recovery rates. Allan suggested the PT recovery is best dealt with by the industry and most semen firms tend to agree. However, HR participation is a big issue, even without the drought. In this regard, NHIA views a concerted effort by the HI industry, the dairy industry and policy makers is required to minimize the negative impact on Australian dairy genetics by the current drought.

**A publication of
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National
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**Nothing is
a waste of
time if you
use the
experience
wisely-
Auguste
Rodin**

New Extension Role

Denise Burrell Joins NHIA

Farmers are set to benefit from a new service offered in South West Victoria by NHIA. In co-operation with the local HI companies, Denise Burrell will help farmers manage herd improvement information, analyse farm management data and get the most from their fertility and genetics programs.

Denise has previously worked in dairy nutrition and dairy education in the region and is excited about the role, "When times get tight a dairy farmer needs to know which cows in the herd are performing and which ones are not pulling their weight. Herd recording is the most accurate way to know this, and farmers can make good management decisions based on the information they get from herd testing".

The new role includes assisting farmers across the region to interpret their herd recording data, as well as compiling a "snapshot" of current breeding and herd fertility management practices.

"NHIA is an independent organization and supports herd testing companies and semen distributors", said Denise. "In partnership with farmers, these companies provide important data to the ADHIS national database on the performance of the cows and bulls being used in breeding programs. My role with the NHIA will be in linking all the players together, so that more data can be collected more efficiently, both on farm and in genetic evaluation".

General Manager of NHIA, Dr Chris Braniff, adds "In the last few years, there has been little extension for genetic management offered to dairy farmers. The Herd Improvement Extension Program is a "first" across Australia. We hope that this new initiative will lead the way for similar positions in other dairy regions in Australia".

Denise Burrell is based in Terang and available to discuss her new role at any time. Denise can be contacted on 0430 211 206 or by e-mail at denise@nhia.org.au.

Herd Improvement Insights.

Herd Recording Even More Valuable During Drought

As dairy farmers face dry conditions expected well into next year, it's appropriate to assess which tools are required to manage the milking herd. Significant to this assessment is the cost versus benefit of each tool and the effect on the bottom line.

Herd production testing and the systematic analysis of herd data in herd recording systems are critical tools for the ongoing viability of dairy farms. Whilst there are many reasons to herd record, the main ones cited by dairy farmers include:

- Maximizing production payment and profit based on yield and composition
- Maintain milk quality and BMCC premium through management of cows based on ISCC
- Identification and drying off/culling of low producers or unprofitable cows
- Good herd records are a marketing tool when dispersing herds
- Individual and herd based breeding decisions based on good data lead to more rapid genetic gain, and
- Herd recording ensures maintenance of accurate records for management practices like joining, drying off and calving management.

ABARE data shows that herd recorded dairy farms are 16% more productive than non recorded farms. They also have higher per cow pro-

duction, have lower production variation between cows and are more profitable than non recorded farms.

The value of herd recording information increases as climatic and economic conditions worsen. At the same time the consequences of poor decision making increase.

This sentiment is supported by Dr Bill Morgan, of the Timboon Veterinary Group, who explains that during times like this, herd testing provides us with information that assists making good herd management decisions. "The information from herd recording becomes more valuable during drought because if you don't know what is going on, you can't make good decisions".

Dr Morgan specifically cautioned against farmers thinking of getting out of herd recording as a cost cutting measure during drought, "If anything, now is the time to get into herd test". He continues, "You can determine which cows are pulling their weight and which cows are burdens. The herd can be streamlined. Without this information all we can do is guess and we risk making poor or late decisions, which is costly"

If you want to get more out of herd recording and ensure you maintain the productive base for your herd, call your local Herd Testing Centre.

Tru-Test takes the Hassle out of Herd Testing

Tru-Test is a global leader in milk meter technology and recently launched their new Electronic Milk Meter, the Tru-Test EMM.

The Tru-Test EMM simplifies herd test because the sample identification is done automatically. Used in both herringbone and rotary platforms, cows are identified with portable radio antennae that read the cows' NLIS ear tags. The cow ID is linked to a bar code on the sample flask that is read by each meter.

The hand held Data Handler is radio linked to the system and stores cow IDs, sample IDs, flow rate, volumes, etc. Detailed analysis is now possible including time to let down and mapping the milk flow curve.

Because milk volumes are measured by the meter, only a small sample of milk is sent to the lab for components. Within the lab, bar code readers ensure sample IDs are correctly matched to the cow ID. The system is convenient and accurate.

To take the hassle out of herd testing, contact Leanne Kibby at Tru-Test on 03 9558 2537.

Drought Initiative

In October, NHIA has responded to the dry conditions and the impact that we are already seeing on herd recording participation rates. The following letter has been sent to numerous policy makers with a view to getting direct support to keep farmers in herd recording.

"I write in regard to establishing targeted financial relief to dairy farmers to help them to continue using herd recording and to support the national investment in dairy genetics.

Please consider the following points as a background to this matter:

- Herd recording is the systematic collection of production data, health events and management information from individual cows and forms the basis of the dairy farm management information system.
- Herd recorded herds have 16% higher productivity than non recorded herds.
- Herd recording also provides the data required to genetically evaluate elite artificial insemination bulls. This effect in the Australian dairy herd accounts for 35% of all dairy sector productivity gains.
- Despite being a valuable management tool and being inexpensive, herd recording is easily identified as a discretionary cost and farmers tend to elect to stop herd recording during drought.
- In good times, participation rates increase slowly. Successive droughts therefore create a ratchet down effect.
- Participation in herd recording has fallen from 63% in 1997 to 47% of farms in 2005.
- ABARE data shows that the direct benefit of herd recording in Victoria, for example, has been valued at \$16.3 million.
- The net present value of annual productivity improvements from genetics is over \$200 million. However, the lag time to see effects from decisions made today is in the order of 6 years.
- A modest support program will reduce downward pres-

sure on participation rates and ensure the productive capacity of the dairy sector is maintained so that farms can rebound when the drought breaks.

The community has sympathy for the plight of farmers during such difficult conditions as experienced in recent years. Any public support for farmers would logically ensure the farm sector's viability so that production can resume when droughts break. Clearly, the community would not like to see public support go to propping up otherwise unviable entities; but, support that targets maintenance of the productive base of the dairy industry ought to be palatable for members of our community.

During tough conditions, farm production consultants, veterinarians and nutritionists argue that herd recording is exactly the sort of management tool that farmers need to ensure they are making good decisions regarding feeding, culling and management of the herd.

Despite the overwhelming direct and indirect benefits from herd recording, farmers elect to stop herd recording when the farm faces economic challenges. Herd recording costs approximately \$10 per cow per year and so represents an annual cost of about \$2300 for the average herd. Clearly the industry has to do more to demonstrate the benefits of this investment to farmers and that is the subject of a number of new programs being undertaken at NHIA.

However, the serious and current issue is that farmers are pulling out of herd recording as I write and we need to address this issue as a matter of urgency. A Dairy Australia report in 2005 identified that Australia runs the risk of not being able to maintain a domestic dairy genetics program if herd recording rates drop much below the current level.

I welcome your input on this important issue and will make myself available at your convenience to discuss potential solutions. As a starting point, members of the industry have suggested there is merit in providing to farmers who are eligible for drought relief, access to direct support to maintain herd recording.

About NHIA . . .

Interested in any of the material covered?

Call Chris Braniff, General Manager

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Upcoming Events . . .

- NHIA General Meeting, 23 November 2006
- NHIA Board Meeting, 23 November 2006
- Dairy Australia AGM, 24 November 2006
- International Dairy Week, 14-18 Jan 2006
- NHIA Member Forum, 16 January 2006
- NHIA Dairy Dinner, 16 January 2006

What Does NHIA Do?

NHIA is the industry body that services the needs of its members in a variety of ways. NHIA is governed by the member base and only exists because you and your business see value in NHIA activities.

The member base consists of Herd Test Associations and Herd Testing Centres, Artificial Breeding Companies and Semen Marketing Firms. We also have Associate Members which are businesses not directly providing HI services, but which value their relationship with the industry.

Statement of Purposes

The activities of NHIA are governed by its Statement of Purposes which was refined during the Strategic Review completed in 2005. There has been wide consultation on the new Statement of Purposes and it will go to a vote of the member base on 23 November 2006.

The Statement of Purposes is important for the Association because it can only conduct activities that are specifically outlined in the Statement. Being an Incorporated Association, we are different from a normal business that can do whatever activity its director's deem to be in the best interest of shareholders. At NHIA, the activities must operate within the Association's tight rules.

The Proposed new Statement of Purposes is:

- To Lead the Further Development of the HI Industry
- To effectively represent the industry for the benefit of members
- To stimulate the continual exchange of ideas and technology within the HI industry
- To increase the level of professionalism within the industry; and
- To deliver cost effective products and services to the benefit of members.

NHIA Activities

This statement is just a bunch of words. Members gauge NHIA effectiveness by how well we deliver against your needs.

Some of the specific activities at NHIA include:

- NHIA has sought funding and employed a fulltime staff member to work with members in an extension role
- NHIA actively takes the collective view of the member base and presents it to players within the dairy industry and at a public policy level

- At member meetings, small group and at on site meetings, NHIA facilitates the exchange of technical knowledge and seeks ways to implement these practically
- With strong member support, NHIA developed and maintains accreditation programs in Semen and Embryo Handling as well as Profession AI Technician
- NHIA maintains a large number of member buying deals including; Fuel, liquid nitrogen, ute rentals, stationary supplies, insurance cover, methylated spirits purchase, diagnostic tests, etc

If you have any questions about the services offered at NHIA, please call Chris Braniff on 0438 347 451 today.

Genetic Markers in Dairy Cattle

What are genetic markers?

Particular traits in animals can correlate with patterns in DNA known as genetic markers. DNA testing of an animal can reveal if it carries particular markers, and is therefore likely to possess the desired traits. This technology is already being used to identify animals that carry undesirable genes such as BLAD or CVM. The Dairy CRC and Genetics Australia are identifying genes that have a positive impact on production, type and workability.

How will the technology benefit the dairy industry?

The genetic gain of the Australian dairy herd will be accelerated if we are able accurately to identify animals which possess desired traits using genetic markers, and breed from them. This process is known as marker assisted selection. It gives breeders a chance to take a 'sneak peek' at an animal's traits while it is still a calf, rather than having to wait until it reaches maturity when these traits would become apparent.

Gene Markers in bulls?

Of the almost 300 bulls that go into PT programs in Australia, only about 10 graduate six years later. Gene markers allow bull farms to pre-select young bulls so that the probability of graduating is higher. This will have two potential effects, it will reduce the number of bulls needed to go through the expensive PT program and it will increase the number of graduates.

Can the technology be used in cows?

Dairy farmers will be able to send off a sample of a cow's hair to a laboratory to determine if she has the markers for particular traits. Farmers will then be able to use that information in breeding and herd management decision-making. This will also allow for better selection in contract mating selection by Genetics Australia.