

## Tracking Farm Mastitis Dynamics

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On every farm, every day, there are changes in herd mastitis risk. New cows arrive. More cows camp under trees in the heat. The replacement teat spray nozzles give better coverage of teat skin. Rubberware wears. Milking staff change their shifts. A couple of clinical cases are missed. Stale cows are prepared well for drying off. The combination of all these sort of factors changes the likelihood of new infections occurring and of existing infections curing or persisting.

If farmers have good information about the key elements influencing the mastitis status of their herds, they can effectively manage this dynamic part of dairying.

The Dairy Herd Improvement Fund is currently supporting a project by Countdown Downunder to develop a record tracking system focussed on udder health. The aim is to provide farmers and their advisers with the regular management tools they need to improve milk quality and farm profitability. This will be value-adding to Milk Recording.

When cell count data are analysed in new ways, and linked with herd data on clinical cases and Dry Cow Treatment, it is possible to provide early warning triggers and feedback on management decisions for each farm. Value-adding is all about getting more from an investment you've already made. It makes a lot of sense to value-add to Milk Recording in this way.

The first part of this project was to define what performance measures would be really useful, and how to calculate them. This required analysing cell count data on about 200 farms, interacting with a group of experts on milk quality, and writing a series of mathematical descriptions of the indices. This tends to be a long, boring but essential part of a project like this.

The next part is to work with dairy farmers to find the best ways to collect the information needed (in addition to cell counts), and how and when to report their farm performance measures and key messages. This is the fun bit, and this phase is just beginning.

By the end of 2002, approximately 100 farms in Gippsland and the Western District of Victoria will be participating in a joint exercise with the Australian Dairy Herd Improvement Scheme and local herd improvement centres.

We will explore the ways they currently handle information about mastitis and how to make this easier and better on their farms. We will also ask them how they can best use each of the parts of the new record tracking system for the mastitis dynamics.

The dairy industry has a long, proud history of farmers sharing ideas and responses like this. By mid-2003 this will enable us to help the herd improvement software developers incorporate a new reporting system for mastitis dynamics for all farmers who use Milk Recording.