

Mobile Scanning for Herd Test Day

The Dairy Herd Improvement Fund joined in a partnership venture with Department of Natural Resources, and four Victorian Herd Improvement Centres, namely Bovine Inseminations, Maffra HI, Northern Herd Development and Timboon HI to support a project which aimed identifying the benefits to the dairy farmer or operator, of Electronic Identification Transponders and a form of Mobile Scanning System (MSS) which can be moved from dairy to dairy (by an HI Technician) to facilitate the actual cow identity being linked electronically to a sample flask and a crate position. In addition, the project sought to identify problems associated with such a system and ways of overcoming such difficulties, if any.

During the course of the project which was undertaken by On Farm electronics Pty Ltd, forty-four dairies were involved and a total of 153 tests were run in all. The comments received from those dairies having run tests indicated that 88% felt the herd tests went well with comments such as 'more accurate testing' and 'almost a pleasure to test' among those received.

According to the researcher, Mr Richard Loth, the project raised the level of awareness of Dairy Farmers in Victoria, to the use(s) of Electronic Herd Identification in the Dairy operations of Herd Testing. Additionally, it alerted Dairy operators to the benefits of technology in assisting them in tedious, and often boring, tasks which are necessary to the success of milk harvesting.

The spread of knowledge in this area can only add to the overall benefits to the Victorian Dairy Industry. According to Mr Loth the project conclusively demonstrated the benefits of Electronic Identification in making herd test day easy for the dairy farmer and the following is an extract from the Executive Summary of the Project Report

In the context of the project the equipment involved was a combination of both software and hardware, which was applied to the cows in the form of microchips, the antenna system the farmer installed in his dairy, and also the hardware purchased by the HI Centre.

Consequently, there were numerous areas for potential failure. Most of the problems encountered during the project could not have been foreseen as the unique way in which every farmer operates his enterprise leads to farm-specific issues which require individual attention. The effort put into addressing these issues is the main reason for the project's success.

Unlike most other procedures in a dairy, herd test occurs on either a monthly or bimonthly basis, and as such does not offer the opportunity for a routine to be established. This fact combined with the stresses which herd test has traditionally placed on the farmer, meant that the MSS had to be a significant improvement over the normal way of doing things before the farmer would give it his endorsement.

On a technology level, largely off-the-shelf products were combined with proprietary software and antennas to come up with a product which would perform a specific function - namely that of printing labels automatically as cows passed by an antenna.

Farmers showed a positive involvement throughout this project with suggestions and feedback forthcoming right throughout the project. Many of these suggestions were implemented in quick time into the system. The end result was a product which is extremely fit for purpose and widely accepted by all the stakeholders.

Further developments are possible with the product, eg.

- Printing bar codes on the labels
- Voice messaging of the cow/sample number
- Sequential placement of samples in the crates
- Identification of transponders not read

A groundswell of interest in EHID has been generated with a common question being asked, 'what is the next step I can take to use this technology (EHID) every day?'

Another spin-off effect is that farmers with permanently installed EHID systems are now using the HI Centre's thermal label printer on herd test day in order to obtain greater accuracy in their sampling.

The fact that so many successful installations are operating is testament to the fact that farmers CAN adapt to new technology, that they ARE prepared to work with it, and they WILL tolerate problems provided they can see that effort is being put into resolving these.