

Discussion Groups – ‘Eight years on and still going strong’

By Jo Gorman – DAF Development Officer

More than eight years ago the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (formerly DPI&F) commenced a number of small discussion groups as part of one of their Nutrition Plu\$ project, to support farmers learning and confidence in making management decisions and changes on farm. Since that time, farms have grown, milk price has fluctuated, droughts and floods have come to pass but most importantly, the discussion group remained with many of the farmers still catching up on a monthly basis making improvements and reinvesting in their businesses.

The West Moreton discussion group was one of the first groups to commence, and has grown and developed into a highly productive and innovative group. Members of the group visit each other’s farms on a four to six weekly basis, discussing and analysing new ideas and solutions to issues that help improve production and efficiencies on farm. One of the more recent on-farm improvements that came about from a discussion group visit to the UQ dairy, was that of Adrian and Lynne Anstis, who decided to install a permanent feed pad with shade.

Adrian and Lynne, from Marburg, had known of the limitations that were costing them money and milk production in their TMR feeding system, with a discussion group visit to the UQ Research dairy prompting them to investigate feed pads. Issues such as feed wastage, shade for the cows and wet boggy areas around their feed out troughs increasing mastitis load, were all issues that could be addressed by putting in a permanent feed pad. The Anstis’s had toyed with the idea of a feed pad for years, however it was the visit to UQ and further discussion within the group that finally prompted them to take the plunge and they sought further professional advice on costing out payback periods and getting the project underway.

The project started with getting the right drainage and ensuring a thick, compacted, gravel base surface. The feed pad followed and was installed in November 2013, built to cater for 120 cows, with the shade to follow 12 months later. Adrian made comment that as soon as the cows transitioned from the old concrete feed out troughs to the feed pad, he noticed an instant 2 litre jump in milk production per cow per day. Adrian said that there had been no changes in the diet or amount that was fed out, and that he saw significant benefits in the

reduced competition for younger and smaller cows as well as an overall reduction in feed wastage ultimately increasing feed intake. Initially, Adrian and Lynne, along with David Barber (former DAF dairy team leader) costed out a conservative figure of a one litre/cow/day response on 100 cows, which equated to approximately \$18,000 and \$20,000 annually just in increased milk production. Adrian said that working on that figure alone, the payback period would be around 4 years. As Adrian went on to discuss that the benefits have not only been seen in the vat, they have also been seen in terms of cow condition, cow comfort and most significantly, in terms of reduced injuries incurred when eating out of the old concrete troughs. Previously, cows had suffered bruising on the legs, udders and even hoof damage, not to mention the odd cow found upside down in the trough! However, the new feed pad offers plenty of room for cows, has reduced bullying and eradicated injuries to the cows, reducing stress and improving production. Prior to the roof construction, Adrian said that we know we got the slope of 2% on the feedpad right too, when it rains the water just runs nice as you like off of the feedpad and doesn't pool anywhere.

In terms of shade and cow comfort, Adrian and Lynne finished off the project by installing an open roof over the feed pad in November 2014. The roof is designed to cover the cows heads when eating, cover the feed during showers and reduce spoilage and maintain a cool temperature of feed. Adrian made comment that as soon as the first half of the roof was on, the cows all flocked to that particular side of the pad – reinforcing to him the need for cow comfort which he set out to achieve. Adrian said that 'the roof has made the world of difference, and the design has worked really well in terms of air flow (as they are positioned on top of a hill where there are very gusty winds) as well as providing shade for majority of the day'. He commented that 'the feed stays fresh all day, it remains cooler and the reduction in wastage from the cows has been tremendous'. Previously, Adrian said the cows would flick feed everywhere with a considerable amount of wastage, where now, as the feed pad has a neck rail, cows are unable to flick feed and it is contained to the concrete surface which can be swept up. Working on a reduction of 5% wastage on the feedpad of the TMR mix, around \$8,300 was saved annually based on a TMR diet (silage, protein meals, brewers grain, minerals) costed conservatively at \$4.60/cow/day.

The Department of Agriculture & Fisheries (DAF) dairy discussion groups are a great means of connecting farmers, developing ideas, providing a supportive learning environment and a great chance for farmers share similar issues faced. The Anstis's have hosted a number of discussion days at their farm since their feed pad project commenced, which has generated other farmers interests in looking at similar options. By sharing their knowledge and experience of installing the feed pad and shade, the Anstis's have been able to assist other farmers in the group to looking at similar solutions to the same cow comfort and wastage issues they had dealt with. The groups are funded directly by DAF and Dairy Australia and are a great way to feel connected within the northern dairy industry and access the latest information and technical resources. Groups exist in West Moreton, Lockyer Valley,

Northern Downs, Gympie and Kenilworth. If you are interested in joining one of these groups please get in contact with us.



Halfway - December 2014 - the feedpad prior to the construction of shade



Adrian and Lynne's new feed pad – almost completed, that allows for 120 cows.

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