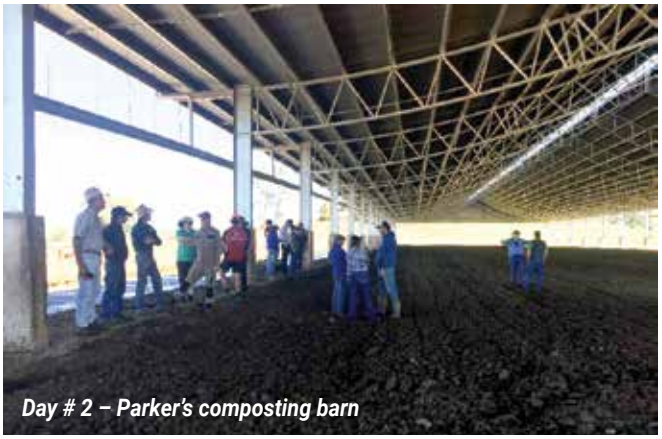
C4 Milk Gympie Farm Tour Report

Day # 2 – Warren's ryegrass variety trial site

C4Milk discussion groups have recently participated in a number of overnight farm tours made possible by the continued support and funding from Subtropical Dairy and Dairy Australia. As part of the Department of Agriculture & Fisheries (DAF) C4Milk R, D & E project, five dairy discussion groups meet on a bimonthly basis to discuss feed base and management decisions aimed at improving margins over feed costs (MOFC). To broaden the group's exposure to different feeding systems and regions, members were given the opportunity to participate in a number of bus tours, one of which was an overnight trip to the Gympie and hinterland regions in late August 2018. Members from six dairy businesses across south-east Queensland and southern Darling Downs participated in the two-day tour that visited three farms as well as a DAF and Subtropical Dairy kikuyu legume trial site. At discussion days during the year, many of the group's members had shared their frustrations at the challenges they had faced during the 2018 ryegrass season, as the warm dry start caused issues with establishment, persistence and yield. These topics became the primary focus of the tour looking at alternative methods of ryegrass establishment, variety selection, grazing methods and mixed pastures to maximise yield and utilisation under increasingly challenging and shortening seasons.



Day # 2 – Parker's composting barn

Day # 1 – Wheeler's & DAF/SDP trial site

The first stop of the tour was at a family owned pasture based farm at Kandanga, milking 250 cows. It was soon established that even in a valley that provided a cooler climate suited to growing temperate pastures, the warmer drier autumns and shorter ryegrass growing seasons proved to be a common challenge. The key point discussed during the afternoon was the management of kikuyu's persistency in warmer autumns

during ryegrass establishment, also a key aim of a DAF/SDP Regional Group small research project being run on the host farm. Dr. Marcello Benvenutti from DAF has been running a trial on the farm assessing sward composition using ryegrass and legume mixes as well as establishment techniques. It was clear from the group's discussion and the replicated trial results that rotary hoeing as opposed to mulch planting produced a better ryegrass strike, and that personal experience suggested direct drilling provided an even better strike (not included in the Kandanga trial). The trial demonstrated that ryegrass establishment was assisted during warmer seasons by significantly damaging the kikuyu mat and runner system using the rotary hoe. Using chemicals to slow kikuyu growth was also discussed as an option. Farmers were also particularly impressed with the inclusion and persistence of chicory in the trials treatment groups, which has outperformed lucerne, clover and plantain in other treatments. The farmer commented that the cows grazed the chicory well and he felt it added additional nutritional benefits to their diet.

The following morning's farm visit continued the discussion on establishing and growing ryegrass in warmer autumns, with a visit to a farm on the fringe of Gympie where 12 varieties of ryegrass had been planted side-by-side and measured for yield across the current season. Allan Mudford from PGG Wrightson Seeds and Michael Christensen from Pasture Genetics provided a comprehensive overview of each of their varieties of ryegrass and answered questions on planting time, seed rates, treated seed, yields and quality. After three grazing's, little difference in total accumulated yield was observed, with a range of 4426 kg dry matter (DM)/ha through to 5227 kg DM/ha. It was discussed at length that different varieties are suited to varying climates and finding the right fit for your farm is important. However it was emphasised that if you choose to plant early, prior to the start of April and in warmer seasons, heavier planting rates and coated seed are recommended practices. Planting at rates of up to 60 kg/ha for early ryegrass was common. Allan explained that the seed coating treatment protects the seed from insect damage and insulates the seed if it's required to sit for a length of time until germination.

Since introducing the barn system, the farmer explained that cases of mastitis and hoof health issues have reduced significantly, cows are happier and pasture quality and persistence have improved.

Bus group from SEQ & southern Downs

At the final farm visit in Kenilworth, five DAF discussion groups came together to visit a current discussion group member's farm who had recently installed a composting barn, designed to house their 400-500 cow herd. As much as the barn was installed to assist in managing heat stress and herd health during the wetter months, the farmer also discussed that protecting his pastures during the wet weather was also a key motivating factor. The farmer talked about the damage that his pastures can suffer during wet weather with trampling and low utilisation rates. By allowing the cows to move freely between the pastures and shed, or being able to lock the cows in the shed, the farmer could ensure the growth and quality of his cheapest feed source during summer months. The shed design was inspired by a shed the farmer had seen in the Northern Territory, having a slopped curving roof which managed air flow, winds and rain, similar conditions that the farm in Kenilworth encountered. During our visit, the cows wandered up from the paddock to loaf in the barn, and the farmer commented that most of the cows would sit in the barn during the hottest part of the day. The farmer also talked the group through the set up and management of the barn, which requires running a set of rippers through the accumulated dairy manure two hrs per day to promote the composting process. Since introducing the barn system, the farmer explained that cases of mastitis and hoof health issues have reduced significantly, cows are happier and pasture quality and persistence have improved.

Feedback from those who attended the tour was positive, and many commented that the discussion which stretched over two days, and viewing different farm settings and systems was a great learning platform that had motivated change. Many of the farmers also commented that although it was difficult to get away from their farms, seeing different regions, talking to new farmers, and finding out that they all face similar challenges was very beneficial and provided comfort in these challenging times.