

Making every cow count



The Chalk herd is producing 33 per cent more now than it did when the farm started herd testing three years ago. When Geoffrey and Ruth Chalk restarted herd testing, they discovered cows that weren't even covering their costs of production. Herd testing adds about half an hour to the milking time, but Geoffrey and Ruth Chalk say this is not a deterrent to doing it.

When Queensland dairy farmers Geoffrey and Ruth Chalk took over management of the family farm, they had a priority list. On top of the list was to get their line of Holsteins back into herd testing so they could fine-tune their operation.



In the past financial year, the couple milked an average of 132 cows and produced 944,919 litres, testing at 3.97 per cent fat and 3.27pc protein.

That performance, Geoffrey said, was 33pc higher than when they first started herd testing and while not all of this gain can be attributed to monitoring, some certainly could be attributed to it. This was enough to vindicate their decision to re-introduce herd testing to their farm enterprise.

The Chalks took over the Carneys Creek, Queensland, property from Geoffrey's parents John and Carol Chalk officially a year ago but have been taking an active management role since 2013. The herd calves year-round, with a peak in autumn, and is run as a partial mixed ration system in 1000-millimetre rainfall country close to Boonah, Queensland. Due to the climate variability, there has been a switch to include more conserved fodder in the ration to get through dry periods when pastures are poor.

Geoffrey and Ruth began herd testing under the ImProving Herds project in March 2015, choosing a time when they knew most of their cows would be freshly in milk. While the herd had been herd tested in the past, Geoffrey said it was less detailed than the current method.

"I was only a teenager when my parents were herd testing, so I didn't really take much notice," he said.

"But I also had some experience when I worked as a relief milker on another farm. They seemed to always schedule herd testing for my shift, so I saw what was being done."

Ruth and Geoffrey had been talking about herd testing, but ImProving Herds gave them an incentive to get started.

The first challenge was finding meters. They run one of only two dairy farms remaining in their district, and in the past, there were meters that had been bought and shared between a bigger group of farmers.

Fortunately, this equipment is still available and was able to be borrowed for their testing sessions every six to eight weeks.

But Geoffrey said this could be an issue for other farmers considering herd testing, as the access to meters and the outlay might be a deterrent for those looking to start herd testing. However, he thinks that it is a crucial practice especially when feed costs are high and dairy margins are very tight.

The initial herd test was a challenge to complete but not impossible. Cows had ear tags but were not used to them being read, so the herd testing took extra time to complete.

"It was a bit of a shock to both us and the cows," Geoffrey said. "As the cows walked in, we read the numbers off their ear tags and clearly there are better ways of doing this than the manual reading."

Herd testing adds about half an hour to the milking time, but Geoffrey said this was by no means a deterrent to doing it.

The initial herd testing saw, in Geoffrey's words, "a big change around in our herd".

"We had some cows that were not even covering their costs of production," he said.

"It's hard to tell by just looking at a cow, clearly, but if you don't measure, you can't monitor. We were really surprised by the results of some of the cows and the herd testing is a great way to break down the herd into those that are performing and those that aren't.

Herd Size	135
Breed	Holstein
Farm size	238ha
Dairy	12-a-side swing-over herringbone
Staff	One full-time with two part-time (owner operated)
Feeding system	Partial Mixed Ration
Herd testing	Lapsed but had done in the past history

Table 1 –
Geoffrey and Ruth Chalk, Carneys Creek, Southern Queensland farm stats (August 2018)



"When you think about what you pay for feed, cows need to be performing."

The Chalks feed about six kilograms of grain a day, four kilograms in the bail over two milkings and another two kilograms in a feed mix fed on a feed pad. They also use corn silage that is grown on contract on a nearby farm, and in four out of five years, grow their own hay.

And while their system is mainly pasture-based with a mix of ryegrass and kikuyu, those supplements do not come without a cost, so cows need to be performing to not only cover those costs but make a profit for the business.

End results

When the first herd testing results came in, the Chalks were able to look at their herd to pick out those cows that were under-performing.

But Geoffrey said it was important to look at a full lactation of herd test results or at least a number of tests before making culling decisions.

"This is all about putting together a history of the cow's performance rather than judging her on just one test result," he said.

"We will look at herd test results from a 12-month period or a lactation and then make decisions."

They have also used the herd testing information to monitor cows for individual cell counts.

Prior to herd testing, cows were monitored for mastitis by physical signs.

"We knew there were a few problem cows and we could cull those but being able to monitor is a lot more objective," Geoffrey said.

"Cell counts are a big thing for us. When the herd testing comes in, we know which cows are bumping this up.

"When we supply our milk company, Dairy Farmers Milk Co-operative, we have to have a bulk cell count of less than 200,000 to get the maximum quality bonus. That incentive is nearly your profit, so we need to make sure that we are gaining this bonus.

"We will definitely cull cows based on herd test results if they have a high somatic cell count, but we also cull if they are barren."

Cost benefits

The Chalks have now settled into a pattern of herd testing every six to eight weeks. It comes at an annual cost of about \$2000, or less than \$15 a cow.

It has allowed Geoffrey and Ruth to make good business decisions about their herd.

"We are farming smarter not harder and knowing objective information is key to that," Geoffrey said. "When margins are tight, you need to monitor each input in your business and each output."

With three years history of herd testing under their belt, there are cows in the herds that have in-depth records.

"We have got some long term information and know the life history of some of our herd. At a cost of \$2000, it's pretty much a no-brainer," Geoffrey said. ■■



For more information, contact DataGene, phone (03) 9032 7191 or email abv@datagene.com.au.

ImProving Herds was a Gardiner Dairy Foundation project in collaboration with Dairy Australia, DataGene, the Victorian Government, Holstein Australia and the National Herd Improvement Association of Australia (NHIA).