

Pastures for prosperity — Dairy forum.

2. Using a good block of land to best advantage

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We had been growing crops such as soybean and barley on our land, but it wasn't proving successful. Floods, soil erosion, the occasional storm and poor prices meant we moved towards fat cattle. Our soils are heavy clay, ideal for poona chicory and clover, and we had all the infrastructure for dairying. We did not need any change in our irrigation bays or layout. There are also some very good dairymen around us and they gave us plenty of advice and help. The regular cash flow of dairying was very attractive, so in 1991, we built a dairy, bought a herd of cows and began milking.

The herd was small to start, but we always plan well ahead and made provision for growth. We are building a mixing shed this year so we can mix our own feeds, and will probably use silage once the herd is too big to walk around the paddocks. The right number of cows to walk around the farm is the number the place can carry dryland. Above this, we will start developing a feedlot for a separate herd, probably Jerseys.

The costs to produce milk from irrigation are critical. We like to clean up each paddock before moving on; it costs money to grow it. As we got better at it, we moved from kikuyu to ryegrass-clover and to lucerne. We put lucerne with everything, and we are growing better lucerne every year. A good mix is fescue, poona, lucerne and ryegrass. This is oversown with ryegrass in Year 3, then replanted in Year 4. Milk production is 90% feeding and 10% genetics.

The grain is the same all year round, about 4 kg/cow/d. We grow our own grain, barley and

corn, but would buy it and grow other crops, if the cost went back to \$120/t. A bit of meat meal is always in the grain mix, and it is increased during wet weather or when protein in pasture is low.

The heifers are reared on the farm. This way you get better animals and they are cheaper than bought heifers.

Over the next few years, we will probably increase the silage. It is good in wet weather, and in very hot weather we can keep the cows in the shade shed. We lost 6 cows in the heat of 1991.

Our present herd is 135 milkers, producing almost 1 MI per year. They are Holstein Friesian cows, some with a bit of Jersey, and the test average is 3.7% fat and 3.25% protein. AI is used for 3–4 services and a Hereford bull cleans up. The local veterinarian runs our herd health program and the DPI analyse our cost figures in QDAS. Our quota is 730 l/d, and we are not prepared to borrow money to buy more, with deregulation coming up.

We have planned for deregulation. Our feed costs are 9.8 c/L and increased by less than half a cent over the last 2 years. If we can produce milk without much quota, then we are competitive. It is best to keep the costs down and aim for a medium level of production. Cows are more content, there is a low turnover, less stress on the cow and managing is easier.

Our home farm of 100 ha carries the milkers and grows crops. A separate 40 ha block is used to grow heifers and grain. The land is very good, and we sold off 12 ha of corn silage this year. In the future, we will probably use more of this silage ourselves. If we do feedlot, it will be a separate unit of 50–60 Jerseys. So we will have 150 Holstein Friesians on pasture and 50 Jerseys in a feedlot. The key is to use the farm to its best advantage and this farm can produce more feed than 150 grazing cows can use.

Finally, you need good neighbours and good advice. We took 3 of our neighbours with us to buy our first herd of cows, and they have helped us a lot in plenty of other plans. We try to do the same. We traded cartage of

gravel for a neighbour's irrigation motor and pump. The DPI has been a big help; our first herd recording we will remember forever. It is a good industry to be in and it has a good future.