

Northern dairy feedbase 2001.

Proceedings of a DRDC workshop held at Cedar Lake, Nerang, March 29–31, 1993

This issue of *Tropical Grasslands* publishes papers presented at a workshop sponsored by the Dairy Research and Development Corporation (DRDC) to consider the priority issues for the northern Australian dairy industry in relation to sustainable and economically viable feeding systems for the remainder of this decade and beyond. This workshop was another in a series of regular reviews of research needs for the dairy industry and highlights this industry's desire to remain competitive in an increasingly challenging environment.

'Northern dairy feedbase 2001' was chosen as an appropriate theme to focus attention on the vital part that nutrition plays in the efficient operation of the modern dairy farm.

Dairy farmers in northern Australia face many technical problems which are different and require different research and development thrusts from those affecting their southern counterparts. The nature of many of these problems has been collated by the Northern Dairy Group (NDG) following studies by extension officers of the Department of Agriculture, New South Wales and the Queensland Department of Primary Industries. It was not surprising that a significant, and probably the major, area of concern was the production and utilisation of forages to ensure a biologically and economically viable dairy industry in this part of Australia.

Dairy cattle need high quality feed throughout the year and a key aspect of dairy cattle management is ensuring year-round continuity of feed supply of adequate quality. In coastal, northern New South Wales and Queensland, where dairying is practised, seasonal rainfall patterns result in a growing season which rarely exceeds 5–6 months. However, the availability of irrigation allows this time to be extended into the winter and early spring period by exploiting winter-growing species.

In 1991, the NDG conceived the idea of a workshop to examine the appropriate research and development strategies to identify feeding systems which would sustain a viable and productive dairy industry into the next century. Delegates to the workshop comprised representatives of dairy farmers, consultants, processors, DRDC and research providers.

In an opening address to the workshop, Mr Pat Rowley, President of the Australian Dairy Farmers' Federation, stressed the need for all Australian dairy farmers to be efficient. As a net exporter of dairy products, Australia did not have the privilege of setting its own price for its dairy produce. While the northern industry was not a significant exporter, it faced the constant threat of commercial intrusion of milk and milk products from neighbouring regions, states and countries.

Mr Ian Langdon, expressing a processor's view, said he believed there would be total deregulation of farm pricing and distribution of milk in all states. He considered there would be minimal physical flow of market milk across state borders after deregulation and the northern industry would not come under serious attack in either the short or medium term. Consequently, northern dairy farmers have a stable outlet for their milk, especially market milk, for a local population which is predicted to increase by ca. 2%/year until 2020.

The first five papers included in the proceedings were presented as introductory papers designed to review knowledge of major issues and make suggestions for R & D to stimulate discussion. The first four topics addressed by the workshop were the production and utilisation of summer- and winter-growing forages to provide an abundance of good quality fodder for dairy production. The final topic attempted to integrate the material from the previous sessions to develop management strategies for both plants and animals to ensure optimum productivity of the total farm system. Two additional papers, on the value of supplementary feeds for dairy cows and the rearing of dairy heifer replacements, were included as essential background material for the workshop.

The workshop format ensured that all attending the workshop actively participated in assessing the R & D needs of the industry and in prioritising these needs. The output was encapsulated in a series of prioritised research programs from each session. These programs are currently being considered by the various research organisations and DRDC, which has commissioned Palamere Pty Ltd to develop recommendations for a northern Australian Dairy Feedbase Research Program.

Since the workshop, all authors have revised their papers in the light of the outcome of the workshop discussions. As a result, the papers represent comprehensive reviews of the topics covered. The DRDC is aiming to publish a book, based on the output from the workshop, and designed for the commercial dairy farmer. These documents should be essential reading for those interested in dairy production in a tropical or subtropical environment.

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