

MILKING COWS ONCE A DAY – HOW IT STACKS UP?

Leo & Rebecca Vollebregt

What made us go once a day?

After buying our neighbour's farm three years before, we were increasing production significantly but were struggling with profitability, efficiency, staff turnover and high empty rates. We needed a simpler more sustainable system.

The end of the third season coincided with a discussion group trip to the Turner brothers' Rakaia Island farm where large numbers of cows were being milked once a day.

Our herd manager, Cory Wildman, and I were both there and could see the possibilities for our farm.

So new targets for our farm were developed over those couple of days and the next weeks:

- The same or more MS/Ha
- More profit
- Staff want to stay
- Lower cow wastage.

Changes we made

The following winter we carried more cows (4.1/Ha, currently we run 3.8), enlarged our milk pump to cope with the expected increase in flow, didn't replace the staff who had already given their notice and didn't milk the herd in the afternoon from then on.

We have also since moved the start-of calving date later by nine days to keep the mean calving date similar.

Notes:

What does our farm look like?

We have an effective milking area of 154 Ha split by a road and 118 Ha of runoff. 600 mainly Xbred cows are wintered to milk 580 through a 40 aside herringbone with a small yard. The longest walk for the cows is about 1.1 Km.

The farm is pretty much all flat with river silt soils. We get wet and dry so we are able to irrigate 55 ha at 5mm/day and 99 at 3.6mm/day and 100 Ha is subsurface drained.

Most of the pasture is less than 10 years old, the mix used for the last 5 years being Trojan and Bealey.

Emma Moffitt has been employed as a contract milker for the past three seasons.

How do we feed our cows?

220 cows are wintered on for part of the winter, while the rest go to a runoff where they are fed on a 50/50 diet of pasture silage and grass.

15 Ha of turnips are grown to supplement the irrigation in summer and pasture silage brought home from the runoffs extends our season. The silage has ranged from 90 to 150t pa.

Some PKE has been bought some seasons to fill gaps, 10 to 30t.

Nitrogen is applied every round from late August to the end of April.

This season; 16 Ha turnips, 90t silage, no PKE and 111kg N/Ha.

We irrigated for approximately 140 days this season and 15.8t DM/ha of pasture was eaten.

What does our day look like?

Spring;

- Very busy.
- 2 mobs once enough calved.
- Longish milking.
- Calvers brought in and milked in the afternoon.
- All AI heifer calves reared.
- Finish day at 5pm.
- Calvers checked in the evening.

Rest of season

- Mob 1 brought in and milked starting work at 5.15am.
- Mob 2 gate is opened around 7.30am and staff take a half hour breakfast break while the cows walk to the road.

- This mob and the hospital mob are then milked and the shed is cleaned up.
- The rest of the day is spent fence shifting, urea spreading, irrigation shifting, etc
- Staff always finish at 5pm.

How does OAD stack up? Production

In the 2004 and 2005 seasons, on TAD, our production had reached over 199,000 kgs of milk solids. The next season being the first on OAD this dropped to just over 170,000kgs gradually increasing to over 190,000 in the 2008 and 2009 seasons.

The 2011 season we produced over 203,000, the 2012 season 216,000 although that season started with my brothers and us calving and milking an extra 120 cows for the new farm until it got going in September.

The last 2 seasons we have produced 203,000 and 204,000 respectively.

How does profit stack up?

We have benchmarked our business on DairyBase for many years now. We have always been profitable through our change to OAD.

Last season (2014/15) we had an EFS/Ha of \$3,609. This seems to put us around the top 20% of owners with variable order/contract milker, North Island and above the top 20% of the owner operators, system 3.

We have a March balance date but this does not seem to affect our comparability year on year.

Cost of production – how does it stack up?

For this season (2015/16) the provisional figures, with operating costs/kg MS, are as follows:

- Pahautea (our farm) - \$3.68 – 196,000kg MS (still milking. Est. at 6/5/2016)
- Tahora (new, converted farm, OAD) - \$3.44 – 190,000kg MS (dried off 3/5/2016)
- This excludes depreciation
- The drought season particularly affected Tahora which is only 50% irrigated.

Notes:

How does staff required and workload stack up?

Emma employs two fulltime staff, so the roster sees two people at work every day except Mondays and Thursday when there are 3 on.

There are always two milkers, so they average 290 cuppings per person per day.

The weeks average 45 hours and the afternoons are flexible. Generally in the weekends all work is done as soon as possible so that staff can have a long break.

There is plenty of work for staff and staff retention is good.

How does cow performance and health stack up?

Production now sits around 350 – 360 kg MS/ cow in a normal year which equates to 1330/Ha.

Empty rates are between 3% and 9% while the 6 week in calf rates are in the high 70%^s to low 80%^s. There is no intervention, we just metricheck and cure if necessary at risk cows and identify and draft at milking. We do mate for 12 to 13 weeks though to give us options at culling time.

We have a low incidence of lameness.

Our cell count averages 130,000 but we do have a peppering of mastitis throughout the season. This year 26 cows were treated more than once although some of them were treated twice for the same event.

Black mastitis can be an issue if milking management and observation is not as it should be. We only see cows once a day.

How does cow quality stack up?

Our herd BW is 128 and our PW 151. We use Premier Sires and herd test 4 ties a year.

Three percent of the herd is Friesian, 16% Jersey and the balance Xbred. We are aiming for a Kiwi X herd, keeping enough Jerseys to breed bulls for the heifers. When we changed to OAD we had approximately 300 Friesians and 300 Jerseys.

I hear some have had a lower drop in production by changing their breed before changing to OAD.

While we cull less on empty rates we do cull more heavily on udders and mastitis and cell count.

We aim for a 20% replacement rate and sell the remaining heifers. This year we sold 70 out of 192 reared.

For the last three years we have mated our yearlings to Premier Sires as we value being able to rear and sell surplus heifers and it helps utilise the runoff land.

Our rate of BW gain is helped by being able to pick who we put in the herd and by mating the heifers but it is hindered by our low replacement rate.

How does the management stack up? What's different?

Not a lot is different really. We try to keep up with industry benchmarks just like everyone else.

All we do is milk a **few more cows only once** between growing the same amount of feed and sending the same milk out the gate.

And we have been able to grow our business enough to satisfy us and raise our family.

Why did we buy and convert another farm and operate it Once a Day right from the start?

Because the location was convenient, we knew the system worked, we did not want too much more work and hassles, we needed a quick conversion (purchase 2/7, shed operating 22/9) and the maths stacked up.

Notes: