Focus FARMS - AN EXTENSION SUCCESS IN TASMANIA

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As part of its grazing management programme, the Dairy Branch of the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry has successfully implemented a project of privately owned demonstration farms termed Focus Farms. The Focus Farms are an extension of the Elliott Dairy Research establishment and are fundamental in overcoming the isolation from research experienced by many farmers. Additionally, the farms are invaluable in the training of newly appointed extension staff and the maintenance of practicality for more experienced staff.

INTEGRATED EXTENSION

Since the late 1970's the Dairy Branch of the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry recognised the need for major research and extension in grazing management.

This recognition led to the evaluation and adoption, with modifications, of the New Zealand ‘block’ grazing system. The system was tested on a farmlet at the State’s only Dairy research institution at Elliott in North Western Tasmania. The technique, designed to fully feed cows on pasture, proved to be capable of giving significant gains in productivity at low cost.

To market the modified system, and to overcome the expected time-lag in farmer adoption, the Dairy Branch developed an integrated, three-pronged, extension programme based on;

(i) the use of the Elliott farmlet as the basic model with field days and monthly reports in the rural press,

(ii) detailed farmer instruction at regional intensive, three-day, grazing management courses backed up by discussion group involvement,

(iii) the establishment of regionalised Focus Farms.

The Focus Farms were recognised as an important element in the programme in overcoming adoption reluctance by farmers in the more isolated regions of the state. This feeling of isolation has several aspects that the Focus Farms could readily adjust.

OVERCOMING FARMER ISOLATION: REAL AND PERCEIVED

Although Tasmania is a small state many of its dairy farmers live over three hours drive from the Research station at Elliott and are unlikely to attend its field days. This isolation is often further reinforced by regional climatic and soil-type differences that exist.

Furthermore, in common with farmers world-wide, there is a perceived isolation from research results engendered by the farmers consideration of research institutions as ‘glass-house’ experiments without on-farm application.

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OVERCOMING EXTENSION-AGENT ISOLATION

It is no secret, of course, that rural extension is a two-way communication process. The farmer is not the only partner that may feel, or indeed be, isolated. The lack of 'hands-on' experience can lead to an overly theoretical approach by extension staff. This can quickly result in reduced farmer confidence in the agent and the extension message.

Additionally, and more importantly, new extension staff need to quickly experience as many practical aspects of farming as possible soon after their appointment. This is essential to gain their self confidence and earn credibility in the farming community.

FOCUS FARM PHILOSOPHY

While the concept of such demonstration farms is not necessarily new the integration of them into a specific extension effort, together with some unique characteristics, is new.

The properties clearly need to have the many attributes sought in any rural demonstration project such as accessibility, centralised location, being typical of the region, owner respectability etc.

The farms are existing commercial properties which have the potential for increases in productivity by the adoption of the Elliott model of 'block' grazing management. By this definition they are therefore more likely to be underdeveloped, compared with similar farms in the region, in such areas as fencing, laneways, water points and more significantly in pasture grazing management. The farms receive no financial input by the Dairy Branch other than the time of the extension agent.

The projects are for a five year term with the farm being closely monitored particularly in the first year to allow a benchmark to assess future gains and to identify major limitations to productivity.

The extension adviser assists the farmer in budgeting available pasture by regularly walking the farm with the owner to assess pasture availability - He is also available for general management consultation. He gathers a data set of the farms' pasture growth rates, milk production, soil fertility and response to fertilizers, stock growth rates, reproductive efficiency and other areas where records may be required. Such feedback data is invaluable for regional reference.

The local farming community is informed of the progress of the project by means of discussion group visits, regular field days and seasonal updates in the local press. Additionally, the farm is entered in the annual Dairy Farmer of the Year Award to assess its progress compared with similar properties in the region.

To further enhance the attraction of the farm, topical demonstration and trial plots are established and field days are held with the plots creating a ready audience for the grazing management message.

UNIQUE ATTRIBUTES

Because the Focus Farm is applying the grazing system on a 'whole-farm' basis, with the financial and social needs of the farmer being necessarily considered alongside the grazing management theory, the demonstration has a special appeal to otherwise 'cautious' farmers. Additionally, as the property is privately
owned, there is inevitably a 'mix' of the extension technique application with a dash of the farmers own ideas which gives a realistic, applied, blend. Naturally, if the farmer insists on applying mostly his own ideas the original extension model is diluted too greatly and the basic aim of the farm is threatened. Alternatively, if the extension model is applied unquestioningly by the farmer without the application of his own theories, the attraction of the demonstration to those 'cautious' farmers is also lost.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND SUCCESS

The Dairy Branch established its first pilot Focus Farm project in the 1986/87 season on a spring calving farm at Legerwood in the far North West. The region has 120 registered dairies each milking around 110 cows with a typical milk-fat production of 180 kg/ha. There are four well supported dairy discussion groups and an annual dairy farmer competition which activates a strong regional level of competitiveness.

As a measure of the success of the application of the grazing management model to the farm, Table 1 outlines the productivity gains made by the farm in its first three years in its focus role. The comparison is between the 1988/89 season and the average for the four seasons from 1984 to 1988. These gains were made primarily by the application of improved grazing management and increased stocking rate without any significant additional 'farm inputs such as fertiliser, grain supplements or pasture resowing. During the 1989/90 season 140 cows will be milked which, together with the development of the present run-off block of 15 hectares, will maintain the stocking rate at around 1.8 DCE/ha (dairy cow equivalents).

The farm is a dryland property with the potential for future irrigation development. Four demonstration plots (two lime trials, a prairie grass plot and a pasture weed control demonstration) have been established on the property which have been a major attraction. There have been over 100 farmer and rural agent visitors to the farm in the 1988/89 season. The seasonal production figures are keenly sought in the press by local dairy farmers to compare with their own efforts. The farm is particularly well sited at the intersection of two major access roads enabling passing farmers to readily assess the state of the pasture and the stock condition.

Table 1 Production comparison 1984 to 1988 (average) and 1988/89 season, North East Focus Farm, Legerwood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective grazing area = 85 ha.</th>
<th>1984/85-87/88</th>
<th>1988/89</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cows calved</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total milk-fat production (kg)</td>
<td>15,215</td>
<td>16,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milk-fat/ave. no. cows carried (kg/cow)</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk-fat/effective milking hectare (kg/ha)</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stocking rate (dairy cow equivalent/ha)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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ADDITIONAL FOCUS FARMS

Due to the success of the pilot project the Dairy Branch has established two more Focus Farms in the State. One is located in the far North West on the Togari swamps while the other is situated in the Deloraine district at Weegeena in the Central North.