

Dairy families milk the benefits of good health

Victoria's dairy industry has set a staggering benchmark – in on-farm health and wellbeing.

Last week more than 85 pc of families who took part in the first project – six years ago – turned out for a review of Sustainable Dairy Farm Families.

National Centre for Farmer Health director Sue Brumby says allowing for retirement, death, change of career and sale of properties since 2005, the return rate was a “spectacular endorsement” for the value of the program.

Associate clinical professor Brumby says with funding from the Gardiner Foundation and Colac Community Enterprise, follow-up workshops were held in Melbourne, Warrnambool, Cobden, Colac, Kerang, Shepparton and last week Leongatha, Warragul and Trafalgar in Gippsland.

Wodonga and Corryong are scheduled for the 27th and 28th of July 2011.

She says it has been a long, but rewarding, journey since developing and implementing this proven, hands-on support system, not just to the dairy industry but in rural and regional centres across the country.

“In this case dairy farmers have a lot of fights on their hands – from seasons, milk prices and rising costs let alone every day health and wellbeing issues ” Professor Brumby says.

“But Sustainable Dairy Farm Families has ensured many of them are better equipped than ever to deal with that daily grind and helped lay the foundation of the national SFF programs we are now effectively delivering.” she says.

“Sustainable Dairy Farm Families – Future Directions offered the original 211 dairy farmers the chance to attend a one-day workshop focusing on agri-chemicals and respiratory health.

“It also provided a comprehensive health check, with results compared to their original health assessments conducted in 2005, giving farmers a longitudinal glimpse at their health and wellbeing changes over time.”

Leongatha dairy farmers Tracey and Shawn Hollingworth said they were delighted for the “overhaul” opportunity.

A former Kerang UDV regional extension committee member, Shawn says when the program was first offered he did some heavy canvassing in his region to get people registered.

“We got more than 20 families along, and today every one of them is glad they made the effort,” Shawn says.

“Unfortunately men’s health was the big issue at the core of the program but all of us who took part went away with a new awareness of what that meant and how to deal with it,” he says.

“I had spent 13 years off farm, in Sydney, which I know gave me a different perspective on how to look after myself.

But when I came home in 2002 I found the same old attitude. My dad could have an arm hanging off and would still think he did not need a doctor.”

Shawn says while people his age – 40s and under – are better at recognising medical needs, “there were a lot of wives’ heads nodding in the audience”.

He says the manual he took home from the workshops contained a lot of essential information and the follow-ups allowed for in-depth questions.

“At Kerang we were hit by years of drought, and as a result Tracey and I have relocated to Leongatha, where we currently run 500 milkers,” he says.

“What being part of SDFP taught us was when we made the change we also needed support, mentally, emotionally, and we accessed that and it made such a difference to how successful our move has been.

“Farmers have to view this just like a field day where they take all the vital data on board.

“I know I want to live a long life, and this is really going to help me do it.”

La Trobe University’s Professor John Martin – who was chair of the original SFF advisory group while at RMIT – says one of the crucial outcomes of the SFF program is supplying evidence-based data.

Professor Martin, who took part in the latest round of workshops, says he is also amazed at the high retention rate of the program.

With a doctorate in public policy, he says the information he is seeing emerge from these programs is providing enormous value for the future health and wellbeing of rural and agricultural Australia.

“Apart from farming families themselves, so many rural nurses, facilitators and key people in the delivery of health and support services are also taking part,” Professor Martin says.

“Farming families are not just getting guidelines, they are getting actual checkups, which provide benchmarks for their future health management, and explanations along with it,” he says.

“They are also learning they are not alone, there are plenty of others out there doing the same things, dealing with the same issues, and there is a real sense of camaraderie, the social network aspect is crucial.

“And SFF is the key.”

Professor Brumby added many participants also commented it was just as rewarding for them to see the original team of John Martin and herself at this year’s events.

She says she was “surprised, and delighted” how many told her it was “comforting” to see people who cared enough to keep coming back and building consistency for the project.

Further details are available from Hannah Simkin at NCFH 5551 8533.