

Good health plays a key role



It was conference time for the dairy industry last week with the two-day Dairy '09 Victorian Dairy Conference in Warrnambool on Monday and Tuesday followed by dairy genetics at the Herd '09 Conference in Bendigo. *Stock & Land* dairy editor Peter J Austin prepared these reports.

THE first requirement for a healthy farm business is to ensure the people running it are physically up to the task, so breakfast for delegates to the Dairy '09 conference on the Tuesday morning was preceded by health checks and the opportunity for individual assessment by health professionals and GPs from South West Healthcare.

This was a continuation of a program that started at the Victorian Dairy Conference in Warrnambool in 2002 and since then the Sustainable Farm Families program has extended across the country to include more than 1600 farm men and women.

The emphasis is on preventative health strategies that aim to help farmers and their families enjoy their business and their chosen lifestyle.

With the average age of farmers on the increase and farmers working harder and for longer, good health is vital to farm business success.

Forage in home-grown feed

Perennial ryegrass was still the mainstay of the dairy industry but "complementary forages" also had a role to boost total feed output and assist in managing the pasture base, says Department of Primary Industries (DPI) forage specialist Dr Joe Jacobs (pictured, right).

Dr Jacobs has been working with the dairy industry's 30/30 program that aims to lift profits by 30 per cent through a 30pc lift in

Trials at Demo Dairy at Terang showed winter cereals had performed well so far, providing both high quality winter grazing and a bulk of feed to cut as silage in spring.

These trials showed that total yields of 12 to 18 tonnes (dry matter - DM) could be achieved with high quality grazing in winter (12 ME, 20pc crude protein - CP) followed by moderate quality silage (8-10 ME, 10pc CP).

That assumed a single grazing before growth stage 30.

Additional trials had looked at peas planted with the cereals to help boost silage quality and that work was continuing with other species such as vetch also being considered.

DPI fodder specialist Frank Mickan said where cereals were being considered for milker feed they were best cut at the flag leaf stage to maximise both yield and quality, with later cut crops producing higher overall tonnages but lower crude protein. Energy levels generally remained stable through the different stages of maturity.

Attention to detail was important to silage quality and Mr Mickan said better results were achieved with a precision chopper and silage additives to enhance fermentation and limit spoilage.

Cereal silage harvested at the soft dough stage should be precision chopped with a direct cutting front machine and aerobic



First principles in profits

Harsh seasons and the sudden cut in milk prices made it vital for dairy farmers to understand what drives their business and how that might be manipulated to produce profit, DPI dairy extension specialist Phil Shannon told conference delegates.

Mr Shannon said the trend over the last decade had seen farmers turn increasingly to purchased feed to manage seasonal risk, an approach that left many businesses severely exposed when feed prices jumped in 2006/07.

Farmers had to choose between

options, from high input and high stocking rate systems to low cost, low input systems, and there was no 'correct' system.

Rather each farmer had to settle on a system they felt comfortable with.

A significant problem over recent years, he said, had been the incremental investment in higher production without really understanding the difference between higher income and higher profit.

"If you understand the principles, then you can avoid tweaking your system to the point that it

Business principles meant ensuring you consistently hit budget targets, something that Mr Shannon said many dairy farmers failed to do.

He said it was easy for farmers to find one-off reasons to fall short of overly ambitious budget targets.

But rather than look for excuses, he said it was important to set targets that would more accurately show what the business could hope to achieve.

"It is about understanding and applying business principles - what balance of resources do I