

# *Mid-Coast Adaptable Dairy Farming Systems Project*

## **Progress report**

### **On farm meeting 3 – January 2017**

The Adaptable Dairy Farming Systems project support group gathered for the third on-farm group day on January 24<sup>th</sup> 2017. The main topics for discussion were:

- An update on the current farm position and changes since the last meeting.
- Discuss plans for the development of the new block of land and progress to this stage.
- Discuss achieving a better work-life balance for Pat and Louise into the future

The meeting was held on what could only be described as an extremely hot day, with the weather forecast for a top temperature of 42 degrees. In response to this the group met on farm early for a quick farm inspection, and then retreated to the cooler conditions at a meeting room in town.

Unfortunately, since the last time the group met the dry conditions have continued and this will mean a further drop in potential farm profit. The business feed costs will need to increase again to replace the pasture that hasn't grown. It is frustrating as there is nothing wrong with the management decisions – it is just the harsh reality of dealing with weather variability.

Pat has held production by increasing concentrate use, and is eating into the silage reserves. The herd is producing around 1.5 kilograms of milk solids per day (approximately 20 litres per cow per day). There is still hope that the summer rains will arrive and the kikuyu pastures will take off. Pat has been very careful with management of the rotation and the grazing residuals so that when the rain arrives the quality of the pasture will be optimal.

Pat and Louise have invested in self-feeders for the replacement stock in order to address one of the identified business weaknesses. These are portable units that aim to dispense a controlled amount of concentrate feed to the stock each day. Although it hasn't all been smooth sailing, this equipment has delivered labour savings, and an inspection of the young stock would indicate that they are helping achieve better replacement growth. The support group members were impressed with the look of the young stock. There were a few offers to purchase them....

The Neal's took position of the new block of land (approximately 40 acres adjoining the dairy farm) and have rapidly knocked it into shape. The main task has been to remove a large number of older internal fences and set the block up into 4 larger grazing areas. Lime has been applied and access to drinking water is last main development job to be completed. The block has been soil tested and it is expected that soil fertility will be low. A Fert\$mart plan will be generated to guide building soil fertility over time. This process will be commenced next week by local agronomist, Matt Thompson.

Like many dairy farmers, Pat and Louise commit an incredible amount of time to their business. Dairying is a 24/7 business and there are rarely times when they, as managers, don't need to be 'on-call' to make decisions or do important jobs. The support group had a healthy discussion on the challenges of running a dairy business while achieving a healthy work-life balance.

Pat and Louise were asked to consider setting a few tangible goals towards achieving a better work-life balance. The group discussed a number of ways to make that possible. The approaches included putting simple systems in place so that Pat doesn't need to be called on for decision making. Another option is to have a '2IC' (second in command) that can confidently make the decisions if Pat is away. It's not easy to hand over management responsibility in a business that operates at the high end of the performance scale.

The next meeting will focus on managing the transition to the autumn pastures (transitioning from Kikuyu to ryegrass), understanding the benefits of a Fert\$mart plan and following up on the aim to achieve a better work-life balance.

We all hope that the rain starts to arrive in the meantime.

*Make sure you keep up to date on the project by following:*

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[www.hunter.lis.nsw.gov.au/our-region/projects-and-programs/mid-coast-adaptable-dairy-farming-systems-project](http://www.hunter.lis.nsw.gov.au/our-region/projects-and-programs/mid-coast-adaptable-dairy-farming-systems-project)

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**Top:** Morning inspection of the farm where dry conditions have impacted upon kikuyu availability.

**Right:** The newly purchased 40ha block has been fenced into 4 larger grazing areas.





**Indoors:** In the heat of the 42 degree day, the discussion session was held off farm where addressing ways to improving a better work-life balance were broached.

