

Productivity is what matters

**Laura
Richards**



FOOD, mating and mastitis are three key factors in dairy farming and all were hot topics at a recent on-farm discussion group.

Two dozen farmers and consultants attended an Allfarm dairy discussion group at Brad and Kelly Powell's dairy farm in the Manawatu late last month.

Productivity was what all farmers wanted, Allfarm director Andres Reidel said. He opened up the session by asking farmers what they wanted from their farms.

He led the way for AllFarm mastitis consultant and scientist Kiro Petrovski who talked through a low-tech slide presentation as Allfarm's Jacinta Robertson held up the information.

Mr Petrovski said there were two types of mastitis - visible or clinical mastitis and non-visible or sub-clinical mastitis.

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Cows gather around the troughs behind Brad and Kelly Powell as construction of an effluent system is underway.

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Dr Kiro Petrovski talked through his low-tech presentation held and flipped through by AllFarm's Jacinta Robertson to farmers at the Powell farm.

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Mastitis can cause the loss of a functional quarter and lowers milk production. In extreme cases a cow can die.

For humans, drinking the milk from a cow infected with mastitis, there are three concerns: poor quality milk, antibiotic residue in the milk and the spread of resistance.

Mr Petrovski said farmers needed to change their management styles to prevent and eliminate mastitis if already on the farm.

"One farmer I spoke with did not know how to put the cups on properly," he said.

The sources of mastitis bugs include one's hands, the udders of other cows, other body parts, the environment along with contaminated equipment and insects.

Mr Petrovski said milk companies would rather that farmers worked with their vets to help them reduce the occurrence of mastitis proactively.

"The ideal means of dealing with mastitis is to prevent it from happening," he said.

While production had increased farmers had found that they spent less time with the individual cows, he said.

Farmers need to establish goals for udder health to prevent it and eliminate what is happening in their herd. This means monitoring udder health by keeping records and reviewing the information on a regular basis.

Once there was a routine, this would make for happier cows, and the farmers would be happy too, making the farm profitable and sustainable, he said.

NUTRIMIX New Zealand's representative Karen McNamara discussed nutritional factors around mating.

"Energy intake may be the most important nutritional factor affecting reproduction on most New Zealand dairy farms," Ms McNamara said. "Inadequate energy intake in heifers and early lactation cows reduces reproductive performance."

Many cows are in negative energy balance during early lactation as they do not eat enough feed to produce milk. Optimising feed intake in the early stages will help to avoid negative energy balance and maintain "acceptable fertility".

It has been reported that cows' diets low in energy have an increased incidence of silent estrus while other research indicate lower conception rates and longer calving intervals can be associated with severe weight loss during early lactation.

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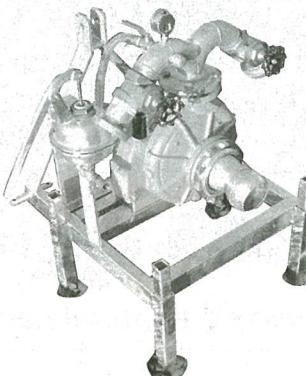
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Construction of an effluent system tanks ahead at Brad and Kelly Powell's dairy farm near Tangimoana in Manawatu.

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"In one study, conception rate was 67 per cent in cows that were gaining weight at the time of breeding while conception rate was 44 per cent in cows that were losing weight."

Ms McNamara said to be sure that cows were in a positive nutritional energy balance at mating, complement the pasture with energy sources.

Good pasture management was necessary to obtain good fertility results during mating season.

"It has been found that reproductive performance may be impaired if protein is fed in amounts that greatly exceed the cow's requirements," she said.

University research indicates cows fed excess protein required more services per conception and had longer calving intervals. A Lincoln University study suggested cows with high urea in blood in an intensive managed pasture were below average embryo survival.

Advice is to maximise grass consumption and complement it with starch or sugar to give energy to the rumen bags to use grass efficiently.

Looking at minerals in cows' diets, she said deficiencies and imbalances might

cause poor reproduction too. Minerals like phosphorus, calcium, selenium, iodine and other minerals like copper, manganese and cobalt all had their own impacts depending on whether they were in balance.

She advised testing cows to be sure there were no mineral deficiencies and balance minerals in diet according to the results.

Andrew Powell, of Pioneer Brand Products, spoke about growing crops for sources of starch and protein.

Mr Powell said farmers needed to understand their farm to produce a feed profile which would feed cows better, produce milk cheaper and produce less environmental damage. He advised farmers to work backwards from what they envision their pastures or crops to be like to create the opportunities to get the property there.

Several types of crops were discussed like maize silage for starch, cereal silage, grains like barley, wheat and oats, along with protein feeds including grass and grass silage, lucerne, chicory and plantain and brassicas.

Farmers needed to ask themselves questions before growing their own crops about labour, their soils, feed pinches along with if they have the skill and time.

All were factors to be looked at and every farm was different, Mr Powell said.

Derek Ferguson, of Agricom, looked at pasture renewals and summer crop options.

He said pasture was the cheapest source of quality feed on the farm and farmers needed to identify poor performance paddocks along with the ones which had suffered winter and spring damage.

Growing summer crops, he said, was a way to improve feed supply and quality during the summer. Crops like turnips are relatively easy to grow and provide feed in a single graze allowing paddock to be grassed.

Mr Ferguson said rape could provide up to two grazings and like turnip was relatively easy to grow and seedbed was relatively clean after crop was grazed off.

Chicory, a high quality feed with increased mineral content, could take two to four grazes.

Mr Ferguson said it was not susceptible to brassica pests post-establishment.

Tonic plantain, like chicory, can provide a summer feed with two to four grazes and also has an increased mineral content. It can provide year round production.

This was the first of three Allfarm on farm discussion groups for the spring. Two others were late last month in Waikato and Waipawa.

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