

The Rigney Family

Allen, George and Robert Rigney

In October 2008, the Rigney family started turning their grazing and cropping farm ‘Newham Park’ in Cressy into a large scale dairy farm. The intense 7-month conversion started with farm mapping and involved grading laneways, changing fence lines, redesigning irrigation, renovating pastures, building up the site for the new dairy and digging a settling pond effluent system. The Rigney family became dairy farmers overnight when 1200 cows entered the system six lactations ago. They now own and efficiently manage over 2000 cows over two converted (and one purchased) dairy farms, and share why and how they carried out the conversions.

Table 1. Snapshot of the converted dairy farms, ‘Newham Park’ and ‘Delmont’, both in Cressy.

	Newham Park	Delmont
First season	2009-10	2012-13
No. Cows	950	900
Milking area (ha)	240	270
Pastures	Late flowering perennial ryegrass and white clover	
Irrigation	216 ha (4 pivots) & 21 ha (hard hose traveller)	250 ha (8 pivots)

Reasons for undertaking the conversion

The Rigney family initially carried out business plans and sensitivity analyses for different farming enterprises. Their calculations showed that dairy farming could provide the optimum return on investment, as well as the opportunity to increase their economy of scale – particularly if two dairy farms could be established. George explains that their decision rested on being able to increase their return on assets, “utilising the land, or the asset available, in a much more efficient and economical way. So that was really our driving factor to do the conversion; it wasn’t about whether we wanted to milk cows or not.” Another key driver was improving the sustainability of the operation, “being able to grow grass year in year out, you don’t have to give the soil a break and it makes the soil better.....a long term sustainable production system.”

The planning and conversion process

The Rigney family used drought assistance funding from the government to have a whole farm business plan drawn up by a consultant. The consultant walked them through the conversion process and its budgeting, but also the day to day basics of dairy farming. Other sources of information and support during the planning and conversion process were a well-respected dairy farmer who had successfully carried out a conversion, and a second consultant who organised a trip to New Zealand to look at high performing dairy farms, conversions and the Lincoln University Dairy Farm. George and Robert particularly focused on pasture management during this trip, and returned with an “imprint in our head of what a residual was supposed to look like, so you know, when we were starting off and grazing a paddock, ‘it’s got to look like that residual that was left over at Lincoln’.”

Spreadsheets and cash flow budgets were particularly important at the beginning of the first conversion, but George described how the focus then changed to the immediate operation of the farm, “We obviously had a budget we set ourselves, but once we got into the thick of it, it was just getting from day to day....we still had to pay our bills and all that sort of stuff, but I suppose going from doing your spreadsheets and cash flow budgets and ‘this is how it’s going to work’, to actually putting it into practice was a whole other thing.”



Despite thorough planning of the conversion timeline, the 7 month turnaround from cropping to dairying involved some overlap with milking starting before paddocks were ready for grazing (cows were agisted within walking distance until calving). The first season was unusually wet, which delayed pasture establishment, and when combined with new cows from multiple sources, also resulted in a high incidence of mastitis. Despite these and other challenges, the Rigney family did not look back, and directed their efforts into problem solving to improve the management of their system.

The steep learning curve of the first conversion allowed George and Rob to develop a more refined, detailed budget for the second conversion. The second conversion was also a more gradual process of physically developing the farm for dairying – waiting longer than initially planned to maximise use of their own genetics.

A Rigney view of efficient dairy farming

The efficiency of the system has improved greatly since the Rigneys milked their first cows, but they are not stopping there. By looking back on past production figures and graphs and using spreadsheets, they continue to refine the system each year.

With the view that pasture is the driver of their system, pasture walks occur weekly at Newham Park and Delmont, and data is entered into a pasture wedge program. The program shows which paddock should be grazed next, based on which has the highest pre-grazing residual. George and Rob calculate how many kilograms of dry matter the cows need, set up paddock breaks accordingly, and target post-grazing residuals to ensure their rotation length maximises pasture utilisation.

Their focus is now building greater use of supplements into the shoulder seasons (while keeping it at a minimum during the rest of the season) to maximise cow condition coming in and out of calving. Feeding to condition score is another recent change that has helped increase production and profitability. George and Rob also focus on maintaining new pasture as a key driver of profitability. While they renovated all their pasture when they first converted Newham Park, George says they are “still doing 40 or 50 hectares of pasture renovation a year, just because...you’ve only got to get pugged 25% of your paddock, and that’s 25% of your paddock you haven’t got anymore, it’s gone.”

Advice for farmers considering a conversion

- If you are not comfortable doing your own budgeting, the Rigney brothers advise you to get someone to help with this, whether it’s an accountant or a consultant or someone else who you trust;
- If you are new to milking cows, go and do a week in a shed somewhere, or preferably 6 months;
- Go and have a look at what works for other people – go to local dairy farmers, the mainland, New Zealand! And then go back to your own place and try to get your head around what might work there. “There’s a system to suit everyone, and there’s a system to suit everyone’s budget” (George)
- In an ideal situation, with the time and land available, you should take 2 or 3 years and lead into a conversion, so you can still run your existing enterprises. You could buy rising one year old heifers, and try and convert the farm or build your dairy to suit their calving pattern.
- If you have to buy a large herd of cows, try to match what you pay for the information available, as knowing about their herd/AI/pregnancy history and production/cell count figures is advantageous;
- Be flexible with managing your staff, work around their preferences, don’t work them long hours and pay them well if they’re worth hanging onto;
- Back yourselves! Listen to others, but sift the information to take what you need and leave the rest.

“So I suppose the biggest thrill...we’ve had as a group, is the fact that... we did a business plan and we all worked together to achieve it, and we did, and we’re still here at the other end... We’ve ridden the highs and the lows of the commodity prices, which has also been very testing on all of us, and now we’re in a really good spot where the milk prices are good and they look like they’re going to stay that way for a little while, and...I suppose the decision that we made at the time has now been justified.” (George Rigney in June 2014).



Jointly funded by Dairy Australia,
Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture
and DairyTas

This case study has been produced by Lydia Turner and Alison Hall (TIA) as part of the Dairy Smart project. March 2015. More case studies are available at www.utas.edu.au/tia