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Farmer meetings during COVID-19 response

The TIA dairy extension team would like to provide an update on our extension activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As you would have noticed, there are a lot of procedures being implemented around the country to minimise the spread of coronavirus through our communities. Based on the advice being provided by the government, the University of Tasmania (UTAS) and the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) have put in place a number of measures to protect staff and the people we work with.

These include:

- Staff working from home
- Only conducting essential research
- No international travel
- Moving to online lectures for students
- No face-to-face meetings – including farmer group meetings

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Because of these procedures, it means we need to re-think how we are going to conduct our discussion groups, pasture coaching groups and other face-to-face extension activities.

This includes trialling a virtual discussion group which people can join online as we walk and talk with a Tasmanian dairy farmer as well as the more standard webinar style events. If you have any suggestions for activities you would like to see (that don't involve face-to-face group meetings) or topics we can cover in an online environment, please share your ideas with us.

We acknowledge this isn't the ideal way to conduct extension activities. However it does offer an opportunity to have some broader industry discussion than we might see in our regional, face-to-face discussion group meetings.

We also recognise some of these measures might seem extreme but we do believe it is best to follow government advice to reduce the spread of coronavirus in our communities. It is also challenging as no-one knows how long these restrictions will be in place.

We hope you understand and will support our first virtual discussion group – we will send details soon – and please feel free to contact us with any questions or feedback you have.

Kind regards

The TIA dairy extension team

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Keep disease out

Lesley Irvine, TIA

Just as we are currently taking measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 in our human population, there are practices we can implement to prevent disease in our cattle population.

Towards the end of 2019, the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers (TFGA) conducted a very informative and comprehensive session on farm biosecurity. Below are some of the key points provided by the guest speakers.

Why is biosecurity important

Biosecurity can prevent or minimise the negative impact of weeds, pests and diseases on your business. It can also help reduce production costs and maintain or gain access to markets.

Biosecurity follows the adage 'prevention is better than cure' by aiming to put in place procedures that will prevent weeds, pests and diseases entering the farm gate.

The highest biosecurity risk comes from the introduction of new plants or animals to a farm. There are a few practices which can effectively reduce this risk:

- Obtain a cattle health declaration with your new stock.
- Drench and let the animals empty out in the yards before putting them in a paddock.
- Isolate the new animals for as long as practical – preferably 21 days. Being transported can be stressful for animals and this stress can precipitate a disease event. Keeping the animals quarantined for 21 days allows time for the disease to incubate. If animals are checked frequently for disease, this can be dealt with before they are introduced to the rest of the herd, preventing spread of the disease.

However, not all diseases will be symptomatic within this time frame so this does not eliminate risk but does reduce risk.

- Check and treat for lice if necessary.

Early reaction if you notice any unusual signs of disease in your animals, is an important tool in reducing the potential spread. If you do notice something unusual, isolate the affected group and talk to a trusted animal health adviser. Take and send photos if you can.

Weed management

Weeds can have a severe impact on production. The footwell on the driver's side of a vehicle is one of the most common places for transport of weed seed. Other entry points for weed seeds are:

- Manure
- Contaminated grain or hay
- Attached to stock hair and wool
- Contaminated seed
- Attached to or lying in produce containers
- Soil attached to plants

The Weed Management Act 1999 lists 147 species of weeds for which import, sale, purchase, propagation and use is prohibited. Approximately one-third of these weeds are not naturalised in Tasmania – and the aim is to keep it that way by having good biosecurity practices that keep them out and by identifying and controlling strange weeds if they occur on your farm. "See it, secure it, report it!"

More information about weeds and weed management is available at www.dpipwe.tas.gov.au/invasive-species.

Watch out for the second round of the Weed Action Funding offered by

the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment to help manage weeds on farms.

Cats can spread disease

One of the most often not-mentioned biosecurity risks in Tasmania is cats. Cats can act as hosts for the protozoan parasite *Toxoplasma gondii* which causes the disease toxoplasmosis. Toxoplasmosis causes abortions and stillbirths in sheep. Luckily for dairy farmers, while cattle can be infected with toxoplasmosis, it has not been associated with either abortions or calf mortality. However, toxoplasmosis is a risk to human health, particularly pregnant women.

Cats also have a negative impact through their active predation on wildlife – on average, one domestic cat kills 75 animals per year.

The Australian government has an initiative to reduce cat numbers by two million by the end of this year.

More information about cat management can be found at www.tassiecat.com.

20 BIOSECURITY STEPS TO PROTECT YOUR FARM

The TFGA has prepared a checklist of biosecurity practices that can help protect your farm. How many of these practices do you have in place?

- I have a property Identification Code (PIC)
- I have a visitor log for my farm
- I inspect all plant/animals coming onto my farm for pest and diseases
- I and my farm team follow hygiene protocols
- I and my farm team are trained to recognise signs of pest and diseases in plants/animals on-farm
- My livestock are registered on the National Livestock Identification System (NLIS)
- I have designated farm boots and wash/disinfect my boots if they leave the farm
- Plants/animals leaving the farm are inspected for signs of pests or disease before leaving the farm
- I clean/disinfect equipment coming on to my farm
- I do not feed swill to pigs or Restricted Animal Materials (RAM) to ruminants
- I have biosecurity signs at farm entrances
- I restrict access to my farm
- I have designated parking areas on my farm
- I quarantine all plants/animals coming on to my farm for a minimum of 2 days but ideally 21 days
- I maintain fences on my property
- I routinely monitor my plants/animals for signs of pests and diseases
- I inspect cars/machinery coming on my farm and clean them in designated wash-down areas
- I regularly monitor my farm for rodents and other pests and have a pest control program in place
- Livestock coming on to my farm are accompanied by a Livestock Health Declaration
- I monitor and control weeds on my farm

The above list has been adapted from "20 biosecurity steps to protect your farm!" produced by the TFGA.

The TFGA has a multitude of biosecurity resources including on-farm biosecurity planners. Visit www.tfga.com.au to find out more.

The path to better cow flow



Lesley Irvine, TIA

Have you ever felt frustrated with the way a cow is behaving? Just like frustration with your kids, parents or pets when they do something you don't want them to do, or won't do something you do want them to do.

I am sure everyone working with cows has felt some degree of frustration at some (or many) times. Is there anything we can do to minimise these frustrating events? There certainly is! This was the topic of discussion when Dr Mike Paros visited Tasmania at the start of March.

Dr Mike Paros is a vet from the USA. He lectures at The Evergreen State College in Washington State, where he teaches students about animal welfare science, animal behaviour and ethics of animal production systems. Mike continues to be a practicing vet as well as consults on animal health and welfare at Columbia River Dairy where over 30,000 cows are milked. Columbia River Dairy is one enterprise of Three Mile Canyon Farms which are over 37,000 hectares in size.

Each of the three discussion groups held in Tasmania with Mike as the guest speaker provided varying discussion points based on the differing experiences of the host farm

and group attendees. However, there were some common points discussed at each of the meetings that focused on how to improve cow flow through the dairy and dairy welfare.

Better cow flow

The most common issue raised regarding challenges with cow flow was getting cows off a rotary platform with other challenges mentioned such as the entrance to the dairy yard, stepping on to a rotary platform and training heifers.

Mike discussed three methods for training cows (or kids!)

- Punishment
- Reward
- Negative reinforcement

Punishment, for example yelling at a cow when it does something wrong, is the least effective method of training. Punishment can have a negative impact on cow behaviour as it can increase fear levels and make cow flow worse.

Reward is a positive method for training cows. For example, feeding heifers when they step on the rotary platform is a reward that encourages them to repeat the behaviour. There was discussion about how a reward

(e.g. feed) might be given to cows when they step-off (and stay-off) the rotary platform. No super-practical solution was identified at the discussion groups, as giving a reward at the exit has the potential to slow cow flow away from the dairy. This doesn't mean it isn't possible though so don't dismiss it completely – it just might need some creative thinking.

A common method used by farmers to encourage cows to step off the platform is spraying water in their face. This is using water as a punishment.

Mike encouraged farmers to think about how they could turn this into negative reinforcement which is a more effective method of training animals to repeat a behaviour, like stepping off the platform. Negative reinforcement is a method used extensively in horse training. It involves doing something that makes the animal uncomfortable until they do the behaviour you want, then IMMEDIATELY stopping what you are doing.

For example, if you are trying to load a horse on to a float and it doesn't want to step onto the loading ramp, you might keep a lot of pressure on the halter encouraging it to step forward. As soon as the horse steps forward, you reward it by releasing the pressure.

You then repeat. With cows stepping off the platform, this means you would still spray with water but as soon as it starts to move backwards you IMMEDIATELY stop spraying rather than continuing to spray it until it is totally off the platform. If the cow stops moving backwards, you would spray it again until it starts to move backwards again and then IMMEDIATELY stop spraying again.

As with anything to do with training animals, consistency is critical. If one person is trying to train cows using negative reinforcement (spray, stop, repeat if needed) but someone else just uses punishment (spray continuously until the cow gets off the platform), it will just confuse the cow and she won't learn anything.

Creating a culture of positive animal welfare

While facility design does have an impact on cow flow, by far the biggest influence is people behaviour. People with the right attitude and stock handling skills will be able to achieve good cow flow even in poorly designed/kept facilities. People with the wrong attitude or a low skill level in stock handling will struggle even in the best facilities.

Mike explained, in the dairies he works with, part of the induction for new staff is training in stock handling. This involves teaching staff about key characteristics of cow behaviour such as the flight zone and how it is used to get cows to move in a particular



direction, understanding their herd instinct, and how to identify normal and abnormal behaviour. New staff work with an experienced stock handler to develop their skills.

Standard operating procedures relating to animal health and handling can be an effective tool to make sure practices are carried out in the right way and ensure there is consistency in how practices are done.

Because of the large size of Columbia River Dairy, it has a specific animal welfare committee that meets regularly. While this is not practical for the average dairy farm, Mike did encourage Tasmanian dairy farms to include animal welfare as a regular discussion item at team meetings. This would include discussion about any challenges being experienced and opportunities for improving welfare. It also highlights the importance of

good animal welfare practices to the business.

The leadership demonstrated by farm owners and managers regarding animal welfare is critically important in creating a positive animal welfare culture on the farm. It isn't just what staff are told to do, it is how the farm leaders behave and speak about the animals on their farm.

One thing Mike mentioned that might sound a bit 'out-there' but really made me think, is how we handle dead animals on the farm. No matter how good our procedures might be, there will be animals that die. Mike encourages staff to treat dead animals with dignity and has established procedures on how to do this. If we can create a culture where every animal, either dead or alive, is treated with respect it will surely lead to positive, proactive animal welfare practices.



Dairies in the Central North region performing strongly

Lesley Irvine, TIA

Congratulations to the three finalists in the 2020 ANZ Dairy Business of the Year Award. These finalists were selected from participants in the Tasmanian benchmarking program based on their Earnings Before Interest and Tax (EBIT) per hectare and their Return on Assets for the 2018-19 season.

ACTIVE DAIRIES PTY LTD

Active Dairies Pty Ltd is owned by Grant and Kim Archer. They milk 1200 cows on their Mountain Vale Dairy at Bracknell. The farm is managed by Wayne French.

Grant's farming philosophy is to:

- Keep it simple
- Have a system that suits the farm and cows that suit the system
- Grow and use as much pasture as possible



DALMORE DAIRY

Dalmore Dairy is owned by the Dalmore Group (a group of investors). 750 cows are milked on the farm at Dairy Plains. In the Award year the farm was being managed by Paul Loader but during the year management was transitioned to the current manager, Luke Davey-Baldock.

Animal welfare is the number one priority on the farm. This requires having a good team of skilled people. Luke works to ensure the team is happy and involved in training opportunities. This is part of the continuous improvement culture on the farm – always look for what can be done better and how to achieve it.



ROSEMOUNT DAIRY

Rosemount Dairy is owned by an equity partnership between Rob and Jo Bradley and James and Sophie Greenacre. The dairy farm is located at Cressy and is managed by James Greenacre. 1250 cows are milked on the farm. The aim of the partners is to run a profitable business that is:

- Sustainable for the environment
- Sustainable for staff
- Looks after the cows



The winner of the Award was scheduled to be revealed at the 2020 Dairy Awards dinner in March but this was postponed due to COVID-19. The 2020 ANZ Dairy Business of the Year Award winner will now be announced online on 15 April, 2020. Details will be available soon.



The situation with COVID-19 changes on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis. We will keep you as up-to-date as possible with regards to our activities. This is easiest through electronic media. If you aren't already a member, join our TIA Dairy Discussions Facebook group. If you do not use Facebook, we are also communicating through our regional discussion group email lists. If you don't receive these emails from us and would like to be added to the list, please contact one of the TIA dairy extension team.

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For more information, please contact a TIA Dairy extension officer, phone 6430 4953 or email tas.dairynews@utas.edu.au.

Electronic copies of this newsletter are available at www.utas.edu.au/tia/dairy.

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