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Dairying in the south

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I count it a privilege to have this opportunity to present to you something of what it is like to be dairy farming in the South. I must say I am rather surprised to be speaking on this topic at Invermay considering the centres better recognised role in research on sheep, beef and deer.

I guess the very title of my talk pre-supposes that there are differences between dairy farming in the more recognised dairying areas up north and here in the south. Dairying down here is not some phenomenon that has just happened in the last few years since corporate companies have come on the scene in a big way. I would like to take you back to the late 40's early 50's to where I spent the early years of my life to a small country area known as the Catlins in South East Otago. It is currently known for its natural scenic beauty but at that time within a radius of about 10 km, boasted three cheese and one butter factory. This situation was often repeated in many areas of Otago and Southland.

During the 50's and 60's when major advances were being made in management and breeding standards up north a fairly traditional style of farming was followed in the south. This was due in part to being so far from where the action was and also the lack of advisory officers bringing new ideas. Few farmers were prepared to change their methods and move away from winter crops to a more pasture orientated feeding system. In the 70's we forged ahead and were among the first in New Zealand mechanically feeding large amounts of good quality wilted silage to produce winter milk. This practice consisted of feed troughs fitted with tombstone style barriers on concrete pads and filled by means of front end loaders direct from silage bunkers built alongside the feedpads. I well remember the first year we did away with crops a very concerned neighbour asking how on earth we expected to see the winter through without any chou or turnips.

Our cool winters are still one of our main problems. You may recall we broke all records at the

Dunedin Airport last August with 3 consecutive frosts below -12 degrees Celsius and with many frosts down to -5 from May to August. As well as short daylight hours pasture growth rates are liable to drop to 5-10 kg/DM per day in June and July. This creates the need to be able to achieve rotation lengths of up to 200 days during winter in order to build up spring feed. The plus side to this is that most pasture pests cannot hack the pace and stay in warmer climates (grass grub being the exception) also facial eczema is non-existent. Of course as well we have some of the best ski-fields and powder snow in New Zealand at our back door.

The low winter pasture growth rates mean we need to feed large amounts of supplements on moderate to high stocked farms (that is 2.4 to 3 cows/ha). Fortunately the late spring early summer flush of grass generally makes up for this as our annual production from good dairy pasture is similar to other parts of New Zealand despite low winter growth.

Of course this means these large surpluses have to be harvested and stored. As winter feed is a very important part of the farming cycle here most farmers have a high degree of competence and good facilities for both operations. Wilted silage is the preferred way to conserve surplus pasture. We use, during an average winter, between 30-40 bales equivalent per cow but many particularly town milk farms, would be much higher than that figure. With the cooler weather we encounter we would generally consider maintenance for our cows to be between 7-8 kg/DM/day.

Because of the high peak in spring and low growth in midwinter of our pastures, pasture management has to be of a high standard to maintain optimum growth. This variation also creates the difficulty of achieving sufficient days in milk on well stocked seasonal dairy farms to obtain good per cow and per/ha production. For example in the past few years we have been averaging 240 days/cow. We would prefer this to be at least 270 days but are finding it

difficult to achieve our aim. Earlier calving has helped. We presently begin calving on 12th August but because of feed supply in late autumn the herd has been dry by the 1st May in the last few seasons. Most farmers expect high per cow production and many think anything less than 200 kg/cow is unsatisfactory. The average per cow production for the South is well above the New Zealand average. The Southland average is 160-165 compared to a national figure of 130-135. Our annual rainfall averages 28-30 inches and in most seasons is well spread usually giving us mild moist conditions through summer and autumn ideal for good dairy production.

We are fortunate to have some small but well performed dairy companies and although these are single product companies they have been among the top in butter fat payout in New Zealand in the past few years. Our own company at Stirling (Balclutha) produced about 5,500 tons of colby and cheddar cheese last season.

I have been involved in dairy farming on the Taieri Plain for about 27 years since giving up a trade as a Cash Register Technician and have found it a challenging and rewarding place to farm and even a close look at northern pastures could not tempt us to

move that way, though I must say attending conferences field days and discussion groups at leading areas up north was very rewarding and stimulating except for the number of times we were asked by many of our northern counterparts what we did with our head when snow was thick on the ground. It was interesting to see the amazement on their faces when it was suggested that most of our farming principles and problems were very similar to their own.

Dairying in the south is alive and well with more openings and opportunities than ever before for keen well trained young people to enter it as sharemilkers, contract milkers and the like. I would encourage all those thinking of making a career in dairying to go for it. Obtain as much training and qualifications as possible whether practical or financial as this makes progress so much easier. I say this because of the number of young people we have been involved with and helped over the years who have had less than adequate experience to make them competent and so have found it difficult to win through.

As we take up the challenges dairying offers in the 90's I feel sure there is plenty to be enthusiastic about in our part of New Zealand.