

Targeting low-cost production with the changing seasons

THE FARM

Norm, Lesley and Rob Frampton

Gawler, near Ulverstone, Tasmania

The Framptons have been farming on the same farm for six generations and more than 150 years.

The farm has grown from 320 cows on 120 effective hectares some five years ago, to 440 cows on 150 effective hectares.

Their philosophy has been – and still is – “targeting low-cost production”. They are determined to maintain more efficient use of resources, setting up the farm to make

milking, grazing, irrigation and labour more manageable.

The Framptons are usually one of the lowest-cost producers among the 40-odd entrants in the annual Dairy Farmer of the Year competition. This gives them a competitive advantage that they hope to maintain.

BUSINESS SNAPSHOT

- **Number of cows:**
440 cows
- **Seasonal milking**
- **Farm area: 150 ha**
- **Irrigation: 40%**
- **Irrigation water source: Spring-fed irrigation/farm dams**
- **Supplementary feeding:**
0.3-1 tonne grain/cow/year
- **Predominant pasture species:**
Rye and clover with some chicory and prairie grass



LESSONS LEARNED

- **Importance of shifting calving to make better use of changing pasture growth patterns.**
- **High cost of feeding in winter makes year-round production less profitable.**
- **A focus on more efficient use of resources lowers production costs.**



CHANGES TO THE FARMING SYSTEM

Earlier calving

Five years ago, the Framptons brought back calving to 1 July from 1 August, in line with the policy of maintaining low-cost production on-farm. Recent warmer winters have supported better grass growth and helped the transition to earlier calving.

Until 1992, the farm had been autumn calving. They now do not have to rely on, or chase, the autumn break, which has not been very reliable in this area, sometimes with no rain until May.

Feed and irrigation

Irrigation covers about 40% of the milking area, using a spring-fed winter storage dam of some 200 megalitres. They have to finish irrigating early in long, dry summers. Depending on the year, and milk and feed prices, cows are fed 0.3-1 tonnes of barley per head.

The pasture is predominantly rye and clover, with some prairie and chicory mix.

With more recent land purchases, the farm is now an 'F' shape of undulating terrain, with some 6 km of lanes, and a maximum distance from the dairy of around 2 km.

Winter rains usually saturate the flat areas, but the very wet 2009 winter affected the hilly areas as well. The benefit was that the springs have been rejuvenated.

Silage and hay are cut from a run-off block, and/or some ex-cropping paddocks in the region. They make 400-700 bales with an average of about 500 bales combined. They plan to move away from silage altogether due to the high cost.

The herd is usually dried off by the end of April, but it may be earlier if the weather is unfavourable. The cost of purchased feed and/or irrigation makes May and June milk too expensive.

The cows peak at near 22 litres/day/cow, and are dried off at 10 litres/day/cow, yielding around 320 to 350 kg MS. The cows are kept below 200 BSCC.

Nutrient reuse

With no current cropping, the farm effluent has been pumped onto about 5 ha.

The effluent management has been revamped to include extra storage and will be injected into the irrigation covering 40 ha. The solids are composted and used as fertiliser.

There is currently a maintenance fertiliser of single super over the whole farm, adding extra phosphorus and potassium to selected paddocks and certain areas of the paddocks.

The Framptons have found that it is better to add more fertiliser to the hillsides and not the flats, or at least the 'camping' areas.

They use minimal but regular soil testing, but tend to use 'nous' to determine the most proactive fertiliser application. For example, they usually set the night paddocks furthest away from the dairy, as there is more effluent applied overnight and so the distant paddocks get better fertilised.

Very little nitrogen fertiliser is used.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Norm and Rob Frampton have questions about climate change. They are uncertain whether it is man-made or just part of normal long-term weather patterns. The level of agricultural emissions is also questioned by the Framptons.

"Yes, we are having longer, drier periods, and yes we have just had one of the wettest winters, but could this be

just part of a normal cycle of weather instead?" Norm ponders. They are more concerned about the varying cost of oil and all its implications, as the world is now so reliant on it for energy, plastics, etc. Then, apart from the finite nature of oil and fertilisers, there is the increasing world population that needs more and more food from reduced areas of land.

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