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# Inside Dairy

Your levy in action

## SCORING A FIVE

Conditioning cows pays dividends

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# SCORING A FIVE

## Conditioning cows pays dividends

**Focusing on body condition scoring has paid big dividends for corporate farmer Dairy Holdings Ltd, with improved peak production and more successful mating.**

In the past two years, the company targeted five of its farms near Rakaia, Canterbury, and worked with DairyNZ consulting officer Leighton Parker via the discussion group he ran there.

“We had a bus tour in March where we went around a lot of farms and everyone got involved with the condition scoring and discussing management options to set cows up for next season,” says Leighton.

“There definitely have been quite big gains made. They knew what the fundamentals were and the improvements that could be made. It’s not necessarily about throwing more money at it but managing things differently to achieve a better outcome.”

Dairy Holdings central Canterbury farm operations manager, Gary McGregor, says the company is always looking for opportunities to increase income and this was a way to do that without spending more money.

“At the end of the day we want to run a grass-based system and make it highly profitable. The whole business is focused on what comes out the other end and we believe there are opportunities to improve animal performance.”

In February 2010 the discussion group toured the five farms. “A lot of people talk about condition and they think it’s going

up or down but you need to actually get out there and score it, record it and measure it,” says Gary.

“What we noticed is there’s quite a wide range – sure there’s some cows in good order and the average in February 2010 (after a very tough winter) was around four which isn’t desirable. We obviously wanted to move that forward and tighten up the numbers that are below average before the next season.”

Having a fresh set of eyes from an outside person is beneficial for getting a real perspective on BCS. Also allowing enough feed and time to achieve their BCS goals – and doing reality checks along the way – has helped them succeed.

Leighton says putting lighter animals on once-a-day milking or drying them off earlier are good options to help improve cow condition. Although this may reduce production in the short term, it sets cows up for much improved performance in future seasons.

“With once-a-day, the cows are walking less and production may drop off slightly, which results in small savings in energy partitioned towards body condition gain. The key thing with once-a-day is you’ve got to do it early enough to have enough time to put on that condition and ensure you keep feeding the cows,” Leighton says.

“Generally, well fed dry cows will put on half a condition score a month, bar the month prior to calving because then they’re not able to eat enough to put on condition. Using that basis, the guys knew if they had cows at condition score four, they needed to be dried off three months ahead of calving to get them to five.”

*(cont'd pg 4)*

## Split mob

Among the farmers in the discussion group was contract milker Jason Baxter who manages 880 cows on the 276ha "Remna" farm at Bankside. Gary says Jason split the herd into three mobs.

"He had one mob that could milk to the end of the season just fine. There's another mob in the middle that they had to keep an eye on and a special treatment mob where they might milk once a day and then they might dry off early.

"These animals are light, probably not milking that well anyway – they gave a lot of them an extra four weeks of dry time. They can just eat, enjoy the scenery and have a pretty decent winter and that's how they moved that whole group forward."

The resulting loss of production in the short-term is more than made up for long-term, says Leighton.

"Some people look at, 'hey, if I'm getting a good milk price, I'll keep milking them on and try and capture the cash this season', but what they're actually doing is restricting their milk in the front end of next season.

"It's just trying to foster the view that we've got to look after next season and the economics of drying cows off and setting them up are actually stronger because they'll produce more milk in that front end and reproduction results will be better," Leighton says.

## Condition score five

Gary proudly points to graphs that show the average condition score on the five Dairy Holdings properties in Canterbury has risen from four to five.

"You can go to a discussion group and everyone will talk about the target is condition score five – well there it is. We got virtually all those cows, apart from a handful, through to condition score five and that's an actual fact."

Gary says improved production has been equally pleasing, though he admits a mild Canterbury 2010 winter and a favourable spring may have helped that too.

"We're peaking really well, getting to 2kg of milksolids, with a lot of cows around 1.8 to 2kg, which we're pretty happy with. If a cow peaks at 1.8kg, then she's going to do 360kg of solids, by the rule of thumb, and most of our budgets are built around that," he says.

"The upshot is we've had a really good mating but it is hard to compare one season with another. The animals are maybe 0.3 of a condition score or more better at mating than they were the year before. They've cycled really well and non return rates indicate they're in calf really well."



^ Local farmer Jason Baxter and Gary McGregor, of Dairy Holdings, both take set tactics to manage herd BCS.





## Top results

The results have also thrilled Leighton. “DairyNZ-wise, generally we’ll see some uptake but it was just fantastic how motivated the guys were to implement practices to ensure their cows got the condition required.

“We ended up condition scoring the cows just before dry-off and we saw quite significant improvements in condition and then scored them again close to the end of winter to see how they were positioned for calving and a couple of the herds had effectively met industry targets for body condition,” Leighton says.

“These guys have really had a big focus on some of these fundamentals and we’re seeing dividends in the results this year.”

If the results achieved on the Rakaia properties are also achieved on Dairy Holdings’ other farms, the increased production will be significant.

“Remember, we’ve got 58 dairy farms, we’re doing it on a very large scale so we want our system to be simple and repeatable and these are some of the ways that we’re trying to extract more from it,” says Gary.

“We’re not spending any more money to be 10 to 15 percent ahead of last year. We get to keep all of that because our costs haven’t changed.

“It’s not magic. To put condition on is going to cost you somewhere – putting in feed or stopping milking them. It’s about the energy they get. If we stop milking them there’s no demand for production and they do put that energy into body condition score and that’s the result,” says Gary.

“I’d recommend to any group of farmers to get round and start scoring their cows.”

## BCS results – Dairy Holdings’ Selwyn farm

- Cows gained 0.6 BCS (March 11 to June 15)
- Projected BCS at calving has 10 percent of herd < BCS 5
- No gap value found as herd is within calving target.

