



## Take another look at ryegrass management

Dairy is back operating in a low milk price environment requiring low cost production options. "For dairy farmers in temperate regions, it is an ideal time to revisit ryegrass management and look for opportunities to get more from their existing ryegrass pasture", says Greg O'Brien, extension leader with Project 3030. "Fortunately, there is still potential to get more from ryegrass. For the majority of south eastern Australian rainfed farms, it is still likely to be the easiest and most efficient way to improve the bottom line".

Over the last three years, dairy research Project 3030 recorded between 7.5 and 20% return on assets from a perennial ryegrass-based dairy farmlet operating at DemoDairy, Terang, SW Victoria. Profit is obviously affected by milk price and feed price. But even at \$4/kg milk solids, the 3030 ryegrass system still returned 4% on assets during the drought year in 2006/07. In 2007/08, the return was 6% using the same milk price and the actual feed prices paid. A 10% return was achieved where grain was costed at \$225 per tonne, pasture hay at \$150 and lucerne hay at \$200.

"The ryegrass-based production system can stand up to seasonal and price shocks very well," says David Chapman, project leader for 3030. "The good news for farmers is that pasture management used on the 3030 ryegrass farmlet can readily be applied on commercial farms".

A key principle behind making more money from perennial ryegrass pasture is to convert extra growth into milk at lower cost than the feed it replaces (eg concentrates or purchased fodder). This is not to say supplements weren't important in achieving the result in the 3030 farmlet: around 1.4 tonne of concentrate and 0.6 tonne of home-grown silage was fed per cow along with some purchased hay.

"Profit doesn't automatically come from growing ryegrass pastures, says David Chapman. "Timely decision making and the right management plan is required".

A series of four articles will track the seasonal ryegrass farmlet management throughout this year. The following focuses on summer management.



## ***Summer***

Pasture management in summer is about protecting the pasture as much as possible. Heat and moisture stress weaken ryegrass. Combining this with frequent and/or hard grazing will reduce plant growth and plant survival. This in turn affects pasture renovation costs and decreases summer and autumn growth rates.

1. *Use long rotations* Long rotations aid survival. Rotations of ~60 days can be used, unless good summer rains warrant a quicker round.
2. *Consider a sacrifice paddock or two.* While pastures in a sacrifice paddock will be further weakened, those not grazed will be further strengthened. So the majority of the pastures will grow faster compared to paddocks that are grazed before the ideal cover is achieved. To limit any downside from using a sacrifice paddock, choose ones that are relatively unproductive and/or due for renovation.
3. *Feed supplements to manage pasture residuals and milk production.* In the 3030 system, the 5-6 cm pasture residual target is used in summer, the same as for other times of year. Supplement feeding dictates how hard cows graze. Supplements are adjusted to achieve the target grazing residuals.
4. *Balancing the diet is important to achieving milk production targets.* Dietary energy, protein and fibre are monitored and cost-effective supplement feeding strategies developed. These are reviewed approximately monthly. The high quality (11 ME, 18% protein) silage made in spring is an important part of the annual plan.

Project 3030 seeks to increase the return on assets in dryland dairying regions by 30%, through a 30% increase in the consumption of home-grown forage.

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