

Sustainability vital for Gippsland family farm

Jelbart Dairy

Region: Gippsland, Victoria

Topic: Sustainability Index, heifer genomics

Ask Tim Jelbart for his definition of sustainability and he doesn't skip a beat. "It means less waste. Producing more with less, or more with the same," the Gippsland dairy and beef farmer explained.

Evidence of 'sustainable' practices are everywhere throughout Jelbart Dairy, an operation milking 1,100 cows and running 1,500 dairy replacement and beef cattle in South Gippsland.

From rearing all calves on-farm and disbudding under anaesthetic, to breeding the bottom-end of the dairy herd to Wagyu and the top to sexed semen, and using genomics to make better and easier breeding decisions, sustainability is at the heart of the entire business.

For Tim, wife Trish, his brother George and his wife Sally sustainability is central to operating a family business. "Profit is important, but it is not the be all and end all, it is probably about being a good citizen and doing your bit for the community," Tim said.

"The sustainability part comes out of good business practice and maximising the returns from the resources you've got."

With this ongoing focus on sustainability, it was almost fitting that Jelbart Dairy is home to Australia's number one Sustainability Index female '14116'.

DataGene's Sustainability Index was launched in August with a focus on reducing the emissions intensity of female dairy animals by increasing their production and feed efficiency.

Tim is a Director of DataGene, an independent organisation responsible for driving herd improvement and genetic gain in the Australian dairy industry.



Tim and farm manager Mike Kilkenny have concentrated on breeding for increased production, fertility, and feed efficiency, using genomics to fine-tune genetics.

This specific focus meant that, by default, they created a sustainable cow.

“She (cow 14116) has a number of daughters and pretty much got pregnant to the first service in all lactations,” Tim said. “She’s been an 11,000 litre a year-plus cow, in the last year over her 305-day lactation she produced 960 kilograms of milk solids. I also don’t think she’s had mastitis.”

As a four-year-old, at the last herd test 1 November 2022, she had an average Production Index of 132 and produced 346 kg/MS in 106 days.

Breeding the inaugural Sustainability Index top female was just the tip of the iceberg for the Jelbart business.

The 1,100-strong herd was ranked number 13 in Australia on the Sustainability Index and the Balanced Performance Index (BPI) in DataGene’s December release of Australian Breeding Values (ABVs).

The Jelbarts also have nearly 11% (19) of the top 174 genotyped cows with a Sustainability Index of 900 or more.

Breeding strategy

Tim attributed a lot of the herd’s genetic gain to using genomics to select replacements and targeted use of sexed semen and Wagyu.

He said “terminating” poorer genetics by using beef sires ensures genetic improvement in the herd, diversifies the businesses income, while also contributing to the industry’s sustainability story by eliminating bobby calves.

Jelbart Dairy started genomic testing in 2017. Back then, heifers with a BPI of less than 100 were sold. Now, this cut-off point has risen to 250-300 BPI in line with their genetic improvement.

“Every year it seems like the heifers have slightly better conception rates and they are coming into the dairy milking well,” Tim said.

“The genetic progress is incremental, and the genetic data is showing we are making improvements. The BPI is an economic index, if you look at it that way in five years, we are generating another \$160 income over feed per cow per lactation. This can be up to \$176,000 across the milking herd.”

This level of genetic improvement didn’t come with a hefty price tag, nor a huge time commitment, according to Tim.

“I would spend less than a day a year focusing on our breeding program with our adviser selecting bulls and Mike, our farm manager, would spend about four days a year,” Tim said.

“These bulls aren’t \$100 a straw bulls; they are selected from the Good Bulls Guide and we probably average \$20-\$25 for conventional semen and \$50-\$60 for sexed.”

Mike said there’s been a measurable difference in the herd’s appearance during the past three-to-four years.

“Watching the cows getting off the shed, we have a lot more stylish cows than we used to have,” he said. “A lot of cows with really good udders, they walk better, and they look really good and there’s much more consistency now.”

This year, for the first time, Jelbart Dairy has introduced embryo transfer into its breeding program.

Tim said their number one Sustainability Index cow and other stand-out females will be flushed to preserve and expand the superior genetics.

He said ET served as a risk management tool, creating a small gene bank to protect against diseases such as foot and mouth, as well as a sustainable way to grow the existing business.

“It’s how we value-add to the years of work and genetics that we have created,” Tim said. “We get it day-in-day-out through milk production and fertility, but we also have a big market for selling surplus stock. If we create a good name for ourselves and the export market crashes, some farmers might come to us to buy our genetics because they are industry-leading genetics.”

Jelbart Dairy will continue its concentration on sustainability for the benefits it delivers the business, the message it sends the broader public about the responsibility of the dairy industry and for its role in risk management.

“Milking is our core game but the more we can spread our risk by creating a good name for ourselves and being sustainable, the better,” Tim said.

“I guess it is a legacy of Dad (Max); he was happy to be the face of the industry, saying we are comfortable with what we are doing. We could open the doors and let people in and there’s nothing we need to hide.”

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