

# Tackling mastitis with teamwork and training



**Sam Tonge likens mastitis management within his dairy herd to a brick wall. The more bricks in the wall – the more resilient the wall and to him this makes sense.**

Milking 250 cows year-round at Casino in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, Sam and his wife Fleur have battled their fair share of extreme weather events.

The couple believe the more tools – or bricks – in their mastitis management kit, the better they can retain optimum herd health and top-quality milk production, no matter what nature dishes-out.

The Subtropical Dairy Mastitis Management and Prevention course as part of the Cups On Cups Off program has been central to their, and their staff's, mastitis management education.

Sam has completed six courses as he likes to attend them with new staff.

All his staff have completed at least one of the courses run over two days.

"The course has an external expert presenting the material who is always an experienced dairy veterinarian," he said.

"This means everyone is getting the best, and most up-to-date, advice and learning best practice from an independent expert. It's a unifying exercise for the whole milking team and it means we are milking the cows and managing mastitis using the best principles and practice. That should translate into better milk quality and less clinical cases of mastitis."

These courses also underpin Sam and Fleur's strategies for ensuring their grazing herd can manage "difficult" weather conditions.

Removing mastitis "risk factors" from their business has also been crucial to managing wet and hot weather.

"One of the other things the course highlights is that in extremely wet conditions it takes about an hour for the teat end to close," Sam said.

"Under very wet conditions one of other strategies we now use is to provide some hay or silage for the milkers so they go out and eat immediately after milking, ensuring they are standing up while their teat ends are closing. Without this feed they might lay in the mud where there's a higher risk of environmental bacteria getting in."



Another practice picked up from the course has been routine checking of teat dipping efficiency – ensuring each teat is coated and sanitised correctly.

"It can be a repetitive process. It's easy to get a little blasé dipping four teats from each cow, but the course reinforced the importance of teat dipping and showed us ways to check to make sure the process is as good as it can be," Sam said.

"For example, a little test we use is to put paper towel around the teat to check that each teat has been completely covered in iodine."

Mastitis prevention underpins the Cups On Cups Off program's key messages and Sam said learning about the true cost of mastitis cases on his farm further justified the investment in staff milk harvesting training and mastitis prevention.

"At the course, they gave us a little spreadsheet that allows us to put in our own figures and we ended up with what it costs us for a clinical case of mastitis," he said.

"For us, it was about \$500 per clinical case and that included everything from a certain number of cows dying from it, the milk withheld from the vat, the cost of antibiotics and much more. Then we looked at our number of clinical cases and multiplied it by \$500 to give us the cost of mastitis and it made us realise that preventative measures such as teat seal and iodine were fairly insignificant compared to the cost of clinical cases."

The Cups On Cups Off courses have also become part of the staff training regime

at the Tonge farm.

"We have a new herd manager, who has been with us 18 months now, and the courses run under the Cups On Cups Off Program are one way of reinforcing the milking and herd management practices on our farm and to help me understand where I'm coming from – where the farm practices originated," Sam said.

"It is a great way for everyone to get on the same page and ensure we are working towards the same things."

Sam and Fleur use the Mastitis Management Countdown 2020 guideline book as a reference tool regularly on-farm, but Sam acknowledges not everyone can, or wants to, read a 200 page book.

"That's where the course is good. We took six people to the course - all with different skill levels – and they were told about the principles covered in the book in a way that was easy to understand," Sam said.

"It helped get the whole milking team working together and that's what I see as the real strength of the Cups On Cups Off program."

"Each time we have participated in the courses, we've had very positive discussions of what we have seen and learnt. It's a team building and education process in a non-confrontational and comfortable way." ■ ■ ■

**For more information about managing mastitis, please visit the [website](#).**