New CEO reconnecting with Australian farmers

After nearly 10 years in the US, Dr Emily Piper is looking forward to reconnecting with Australian farmers.

As DataGene's new CEO, Dr Piper believes the organisation is well placed to continue providing genetic evaluation and herd improvement services that make Australian dairy farm businesses more profitable.

And she thinks the sky's the limit in developing additional data insights to help all agricultural industries.

Based with Zoetis in Kalamazoo Michigan for the past nine years, most recently heading its Business Process and Strategic Programs for its Precision Animal Health group, Dr Piper's career has centred on developing and commercialising genomic and precision technologies for livestock producers.

She started as a pioneer in the commercial delivery of genomics in Australia. With a PhD in veterinary science, she went on to lead the Animal Genetics Laboratory at the University of Queensland and in 2014 joined Zoetis Australia as Technical Services Manager for Genetics which led to her US role.

Now she's looking forward to being back in front of the Australian dairy industry, listening to what farmers want and need and determining how DataGene can help.

"It has been wonderful working in the US but it is not where my heart is," Dr Piper said. "I'm looking forward to coming home and working with Australian farmers."

Dr Piper's interest in the field stems back to her university studies. "I had a professor at Sydney Uni, Chris Moran, who in our third-year biotech classes started talking about molecular genetic markers and the GeneStar technology which was new at the time. I ended up doing more studies in genetics and that was that."

Her grandparents were fine wool Merino producers and her father's family are still on sheep, cattle and cotton farms. "That's a large part of why I was inspired by agriculture and wanted to spend my career in it," she said. "My parents moved to the city and never looked back but I've always had a passion for the land and agricultural production."

Dr Piper has been working alongside DataGene since its transition from ADHIS in 2015. In her role with Zoetis Australia, she teamed up with DataGene to launch genomic evaluation for female dairy cattle. "DataGene had been evaluating bulls and young sires but we believed there was an opportunity to take the technology and apply it for female selection and management purposes," she said.

This was the start of a fruitful connection. "I have had a long relationship with DataGene and know the incredible impact it has had on the industry over the past 10 years and the value that has been given back to farms from genetic gain and improvements in herd management services. It has always been a great leader in the industry, applying data sciences and genetic technologies for the benefit of Australian agriculture."

Dr Piper said both the prospect of leading DataGene and wanting to return to Australia led her to the role. "The stars aligned," she said. "It has been a fantastic nearly 10 years; I learnt a lot, met a lot of great people and had some great experiences with Zoetis. My husband and I weren't in a huge hurry to return to Australia but the plan was never to be in the USA forever."

"One of the reasons I was keen to work with DataGene is the loyalty, trust and recognition it has in the industry. In my career, I've always looked to people in the DataGene team for advice. I'm genuinely excited to work these well-respected experts in their fields, applying and extending technology that is underpinned by the world class research we have in Australia. I believe that's why farmers and customers also want to work with DataGene."

Dr Piper says DataGene is uniquely positioned to continue to provide value to the Australian dairy industry from its provision of genetic evaluation and herd improvement services. "The foundation work done in the data aggregation space has set the stage to provide other data insights to Australian dairy farmers that will make their operations more profitable into the future," she said.

Dr Piper sees science and farming continuing to work hand-in-hand and says there are opportunities for DataGene to apply expertise in data aggregation and software development, to facilitate the development of tools that bring together capabilities to benefit farmers not just in dairy but in broader livestock and agricultural industries.

"As an industry, we have been doing genomic testing for about 15 years, but I would offer we're still not as good as we could be at making that data accessible and usable for farmers in the software that they use every day on farm to manage their animals," she said.

"There are significant opportunities – not just in dairy genomics – but in the way data is collected, transformed and used across agriculture to become an enabler and value-add."

A common thread throughout Dr Piper's career has been making technology work at scale and she hopes to apply that at DataGene. "I have a background in scaling data-driven companies and I've been involved in translating research and development outcomes in genetics and genomics into customer-usable tools my entire career," she said.

As a leader, she aims to "empower talented people to do what they do best, remove obstacles, rally the team around the company vision and ensure the voice of our customers is at the centre of what we do".

Dr Piper is married to Justin and, along with their two Australian Kelpies, she looks forward to returning to the Australian bush for camping and hiking.

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DataGene is an initiative of Dairy Australia and the herd improvement industry.