

Southern Heifers, Subtropical Success



Roslyn D'Addona
Dairy Extension Officer
Department of Primary Industries, Queensland



While they can keep their beer, milk price and football code – not sorry, AFL supporters – there are times when the southern dairy industry has something valuable to offer subtropical dairy farmers. This article tells a dairy stock purchasing success story and provides practical evidence that, with intentional planning, careful animal health management and the right class of cattle, southern dairy heifers can be successfully integrated into a Queensland farming system. For dairy farmers looking to increase herd numbers faster than their own replacement rates will allow, casting the purchasing net further south may be worth serious consideration, especially when local purchasing options are limited.

Why buy?

For the Roderick family at Harrisville, the decision to consider purchased heifers was driven by timing, cash flow and risk management. Financial planning for the construction of their compost shed began in the second half of 2024 using the QDAS scenario tool. The farm's QDAS results were used as the baseline for multiple cash flow and profit scenarios across the next three financial years. These scenarios tested the impact of changes in milking cow numbers, production per cow, milk price, purchased and homegrown feed costs, herd and shed costs, additional

labour requirements and finance costs associated with shed construction.

Across the scenarios evaluated, one consistent theme emerged: increasing cow numbers as soon as possible after the shed was commissioned was critical to providing the cash flow security needed to service the loan. Relying on production-per-cow gains alone was considered too risky, particularly in the early years while the business was still learning to optimise the compost shed within its broader farming system.

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During the 2024 mating season, the Rodericks increased sexed semen usage in their 400-cow dairy herd, aiming to lift the number of replacement heifers born in 2025 from about 130 to 180. However, with shed construction scheduled for the second half of 2025, those extra 50 replacement heifers would not enter the milking herd until autumn 2027 – around a year later than required to align with the expected completion of the compost shed. As a result, the DPI extension team recommended exploring other options to increase milking herd numbers as quickly as possible once the shed was complete.

With limited success purchasing dairy cattle in the past, buying stock was not initially an option the Rodericks were keen to revisit. However, in spring 2024, dry conditions across southern Australia and a slowing Chinese export market for dairy heifers combined to increase the domestic supply of favourably priced, quality dairy heifers. This created an opportunity for the Rodericks to purchase a line of mating-age heifers within a budget and timeline that suited the farm's expansion plans.

Who from?

With this plan in mind, Paul began the process of sourcing heifers that ticked the boxes he was looking for. "I wanted to maintain the genetic standards in our herd, especially since we were targeting higher milk production once the shed was built, so I was prepared to go as far as necessary and pay a bit more than the market rate," said Paul. He eventually found what he was looking for in South Australia: a group of 51 genomically tested heifers, 12–13 months old, all sourced from one farm with a long record of good genetics and a breeding program using similar AI bulls.

Buying from one farm was an important part of reducing risk. It provided more consistency across the group especially around genetics, health history and management background. It also simplified communication and made the planning of transport, vaccination and arrival management more straightforward.

From south to north

Once purchasing terms were finalised, the next phase involved planning the transport and arrival of the heifers on farm. With more experience in long-distance transport, the vendor advised on and arranged the movement of the heifers. The trip was split into two legs: Mount Gambier to Dubbo with one carrier, followed by several hours off the truck before being loaded onto a second carrier for the Dubbo to Harrisville leg. The heifers

Image 2 – Heifers grazing in South Australia



arrived at Harrisville on 11 February 2025 and were unloaded into the old dairy concrete holding yard, where they could be closely observed while they settled in (see Image 1). Adequate rest, careful loading and unloading, and clear communication between vendor, carrier and purchaser all contributed to the heifers arriving in good order.

Vaccination and quarantine period

Tick fever was considered the biggest disease risk, particularly because the heifers arrived in mid-summer at the height of tick season. Paul said, "We discussed vaccinating them before transport with the vendor, but after considering many things decided to do it ourselves as soon as they arrived on farm. We followed our vet's advice to vaccinate for tick fever alone, the day after arrival." Periodic ivermectin pour-on treatments were administered to ensure the heifers remained tick free during the eight weeks post-vaccination required for full immunity to develop.

Once settled and vaccinated, the heifers were transferred as one mob to a paddock where they were quarantined away from all other cattle for six weeks. During quarantine, they were monitored daily. Only one heifer required treatment for a reaction to the tick fever vaccine. Other vaccinations, including 7-in-1, botulism and pestivirus, were administered once full immunity to tick fever had developed.



Image 1 – Heifers arriving on farm



Image 3 – Heifers in dairy yard pre milking

This staged approach to vaccination helped avoid overloading the heifers' immune systems during a period when they were already dealing with transport stress, a new climate, new feed and a new management system. It also highlights the importance of involving the farm vet early when purchased cattle are moving between regions with different disease risks.

Diet

The diet change for the heifers on arrival at the Rodericks' farm was substantial. On the farm they came from, the heifers were grazing temperate grasses (see Image 2 Page 3). On arrival, they changed to a PMR silage-based diet which included some grazing of tropical grasses. Despite this significant change, there were minimal issues associated with the transition. Their age and stage of development likely helped. They were old enough to handle the move and adapt to a new system, but young enough that they were not also managing the demands of pregnancy or lactation. After their initial quarantine period, the heifers progressed through the Rodericks' homegrown replacement heifer program before entering the milking herd.

Where are they now?

Most of the purchased heifers have now calved and entered the milking herd (see Images 3 & 4). "So far the heifers that are in the milking herd are definitely showing the genetic potential I was aiming to purchase, with their milk production and type just as good, if not better, than our own replacements," said Paul. The addition of the purchased heifers to the herd in the first half of the Rodericks seasonal calving period has allowed the milking herd to build up to peak numbers faster than previous years. Paul said "We usually reach peak milking herd numbers in October, however, this year we expect to peak at around 500 milking cows around August. This will help us get the most out of the ryegrass season in our PMR system and allow most cows to reach peak lactation before the heat and humidity arrives."

The keys to success

Two factors were critical to the overall success of the purchase. The first was the willingness to pay more and cast the net wider to secure the right type of cattle. "If I had compromised on this, it would have been a real let down to go through the whole purchase and integration process successfully only to have the heifers enter the herd with disappointing production or type," Paul said.

The second, and arguably most important, factor was the age of the heifers at purchase. At 12–13 months old, they were

about half the price of milking cows or point-of-calving heifers, meaning any losses would have been less costly. They were also smaller and lighter, which reduced transport cost per head and made the long trip easier on the animals. Most importantly, they were not dealing with the added demands of lactation or pregnancy, leaving their immune systems better placed to cope with vaccination, transport stress and significant changes to their diet and environment.

A planned purchase, not a lucky one

The Rodericks' experience shows that buying dairy heifers from outside the local region does not need to be viewed as too risky or a last resort. In this case, the purchase worked because it was linked to a clear business need, supported by financial planning, and managed with careful attention to genetics, age, transport, vaccination and quarantine. While not every southern heifer will suit a subtropical system, this example demonstrates that well-selected young stock can adapt successfully when the purchase is planned properly from the beginning. For farms needing to grow, finding the right animals from the right source may provide a practical pathway to expansion. Ironically, the Rodericks may even have an excess of replacement heifers to sell in the future as culling rates are likely to decline, due to fewer health issues with the addition of the compost shed. ■ ■



Figure 4 – Heifer udder in dairy