October 2026

NORTHERN HORIZONS

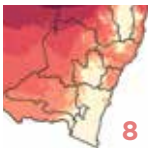
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Smarter Fertilisers, Healthier Waterways
Climate Smart Feedbase
Heat Stress and Cow Comfort
Skin cancer: Something more important to do
+ more









Seven dinners. Seven regions.

That's a wrap on the 2026 Subtropical Dairy Regional Dinners.

Across Kandanga, Beaudesert, Warwick, Oakey, Bellingen, Casino and Malanda, we were delighted to bring together around 333 farmers, dairy families and employees, service providers and industry colleagues throughout the region.

Each dinner had its own character, but the best part was the same everywhere: the networking and conversations. These evenings gave us the opportunity to catch up, hear what is happening on farm and what matters locally, share updates, exchange ideas and spend time together as dairy communities.

A huge thank you to every farmer, family member, employee and service provider, including our very generous sponsors, who joined us. We know how busy life can be, and we genuinely appreciate everyone who made the time to come along.

We are incredibly grateful to all of our sponsors who made the dinners possible.

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Thank you for supporting Subtropical Dairy and our regional dairy communities. We look forward to working with you all over the next 12 months, whatever that may bring!

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Northern Horizons Editorial SDP Chair



Welcome to the October edition of *Northern Horizons*.

I would like to welcome Howard Smith to the Subtropical Dairy team as our Extension and Engagement Advisor for Far North Queensland. Howard commenced on 28 September and will be familiar to many readers through his time on our Board and his previous role with Bega. We thank him for his contribution as a director and look forward to working with him in this new role, supporting farmers across Far North Queensland.

Thank you also to everyone who has attended our recent regional group meetings, and to those taking on roles within their groups. These meetings give farmers an opportunity to raise local issues and help guide Subtropical Dairy's work. The priorities in one part of our region can be quite different from those in another, so hearing directly from you is important. I appreciate the time people make for these discussions alongside their farm commitments.

Our Service Provider Forum was held at UQ Gatton on 18 September, with participants attending both in person and online. Topics ranged from animal health and genetics to feedbase, soils and artificial intelligence. Bringing researchers and advisers together helps them keep up with current work and consider how it can be applied on farm. Thank you to our speakers and everyone who contributed to the day.

The forum also gave our team an opportunity to test online participation. For farmers, attending an event can mean arranging cover for milking and spending several hours travelling. We are exploring ways to make suitable activities available remotely, alongside our local workshops and farm visits, so more people can access the information.

Brad Granzin and the team are continuing work with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries through the Farm Business Resilience Program and the Climate Smart Feedbase project. Under Climate Smart Feedbase, twelve farmer interviews have been completed to understand the lasting benefits and lessons from the Dairy Grains Mentoring Project. That information is now being analysed to help inform the work ahead.

Further work is planned on sorghum varieties, harvesting and processing, diet formulation and managing supplementary feed costs during drought. These are decisions that affect both feed availability and the cost of producing milk. Involving farmers in the work will help ensure the questions being investigated reflect what is needed on farm.

Our Annual General Meeting will be held online on Thursday 19 November. It provides an opportunity to review the past year and look ahead, with our regional groups representing their members.

If there is a topic you would like us to address, or an area where you need assistance, please speak with your regional group or contact the team. Your input helps us decide where to put our effort.

I hope you enjoy this edition and find information you can use in your own business.

Luke Stock, Chairman,
Subtropical Dairy Programme Ltd.
P 0474 800 245

continued from page 1 ▶



Sunshine Coast dairy farmers Ashleigh Kahler, Nat Wheeler, Zac Wheeler with Maleny Dairies' Sally and Ross Hopper.



Dairy farmers Lincoln, Rosalind and John Schoder with Cameron Whitson, Bega.



Sunshine Coast dairy farmer Gary Rozynski with Mark Payne from Daviesway Dasco



Belinda Haddow, Regional Extension & Engagement Lead, presenting the upcoming Subtropical Dairy activities for the Southern Darling Downs region at the Warwick regional dinner.



Maree Searle, Regional Extension & Engagement Adviser, presenting the upcoming Subtropical Dairy activities for the Far North Coast region at the Casino regional dinner.



Subtropical Dairy's new Executive Officer/Regional Manager, Michela Secci, hard at work at the BBQ in Far North Qld. No one gets out of a job when the regional dinners roll around.



Subtropical Dairy's new Extension & Engagement Adviser in Far North Qld, Howard Smith, stepping up into the new role!

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Photo 1. Gatton Plot Trial site

Smarter Fertilisers, Healthier Waterways

Qld DPI partners with MRCCC on an Exciting New Project

Queensland's Department of Primary Industries (QDPI) Dairy Group is teaming up with the Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee (MRCCC) on an important project exploring how protected fertilisers can boost productivity on farms while reducing impacts on our waterways and the Great Barrier Reef.

This work forms part of the Mary River Integrated Project, funded through the Queensland Government's Queensland Reef and Catchment Water Quality Program. The trial also has funding support from Seqwater's source protection program – Upper Mary Rivercare.

DPI-run plot trials are testing how these fertilisers behave under controlled conditions. The results will help build a clearer picture of how protected fertilisers could benefit dairy farmers and intensive grazing enterprises, which rely heavily on nitrogen to grow high quality feed.

The QDPI and MRCCC will share findings with local dairy farmers and help the community understand what the results might mean for our region.

Why Nitrogen Efficiency Matters

Dairy and intensive grazing systems rely heavily on nitrogen to grow high quality feed but traditional urea fertiliser can lose a significant portion of its nitrogen to the air or through leaching. This means farmers may not get the full value of what they apply, and some of that lost nitrogen can end up in local waterways.

The More Profit from Nitrogen (MPfN) Report 2019 highlighted that improving nitrogen use efficiency is one of the biggest opportunities for boosting productivity in pasture based systems. It also found that enhanced efficiency fertilisers (EEFs) like Entec Urea – a nitrification inhibitor - can help reduce nitrogen losses, especially in subtropical regions.

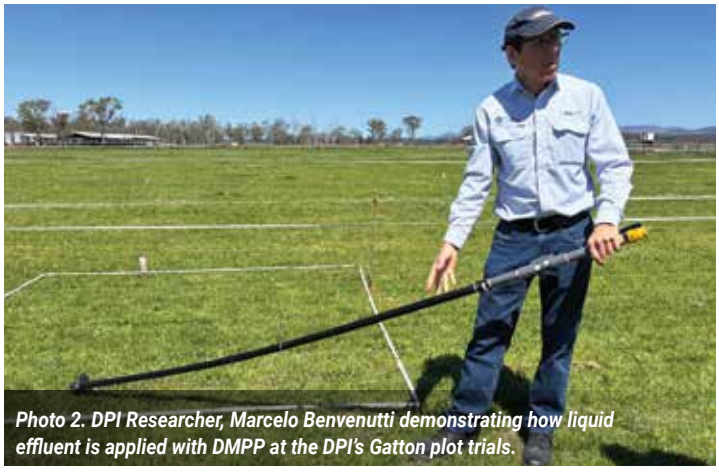


Photo 2. DPI Researcher, Marcelo Benvenutti demonstrating how liquid effluent is applied with DMPP at the DPI's Gatton plot trials.

What the QDPI Trials Are Looking At

The QDPI plot trials will combine DMPP (3,4 dimethylpyrazole-phosphate) - a nitrification inhibitor - with standard urea to see how it performs in terms of nitrogen retention, plant uptake and overall productivity.

DMPP slows the conversion of ammonium into nitrate, the form of nitrogen most easily washed into waterways. By keeping nitrogen in the soil longer, DMPP can help:

- Improve nitrogen uptake
- Reduce losses during heavy rain
- Support more consistent pasture growth

Importantly, DMPP has been found to significantly reduce nitrogen losses in high rainfall and irrigated systems, conditions familiar to many subtropical producers.

Reusing on farm effluent combined with DMPP

Another innovative treatment being tested is the use of effluent

produced on farm, paired with DMPP to improve its nutrient value. This approach has the potential to:

- Make better use of nutrients already available on the farm
- Reduce the need for purchased fertiliser
- Improve nitrogen retention in effluent based applications
- Recycle farm waste in a productive, environmentally friendly way

For dairy and grazing enterprises that generate significant effluent, this could offer a practical and cost saving alternative to relying solely on synthetic fertilisers.

Benefits for the Great Barrier Reef

When nitrogen washes off farms, it eventually reaches the ocean as dissolved inorganic nitrogen (DIN). High DIN levels can fuel algal blooms and crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks, both of which threaten the health of the Great Barrier Reef.

By improving nitrogen use efficiency on farms, protected fertilisers have the potential to:

- Reduce nutrient runoff
- Improve water quality in local waterways
- Contribute to better outcomes for the Reef

This project highlights the potential for farm productivity gains to align directly with positive environmental outcomes.

A Positive Step for Farms and the Environment

Protected fertilisers like DMPP—and innovative approaches such as pairing DMPP with on farm effluent—offer promising opportunities to improve nitrogen efficiency, reduce losses and support healthier waterways. As the QDPI's trials progress, MRCCC looks forward to sharing what the results mean for our region and how they might help both our farming community and local waterways to thrive.



Photo 3. Mark Bauer (QDPI), Marcelo Benvenutti (QDPI), Alana Ebert (MRCCC) and Elke Watson (Sunshine Coast Dairy Farmer)



Photo 4. DMPP-coated urea and standard urea



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Climate Smart Feedbase

Building resilient dairy farms that deliver more profit, long-term sustainability, and thriving landscapes.

Dr Brad Granzin
Senior Program Manager
Subtropical Dairy

Australian Government Future Drought Fund: Scaling Success Program

A new project over the next couple of years will help dairy businesses strengthen feedbase performance, manage climate risk and improve long-term profitability across Queensland, New South Wales and northern Victoria.

Led by Subtropical Dairy, in partnership with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (QDPI) and with the support of Dairy NSW and Murray Dairy, Climate Smart Feedbase responds to a rapid shift towards grain-based forages as dairy businesses manage reduced irrigation water availability, more frequent drought, volatile purchased-feed prices and the need to maintain cow performance during heat stress. Internal modelling indicates that by 2030 more than half of Australia's milk could be produced by about 1,300 businesses using grain-based forages as a core part of their feedbase.

Climate Smart Feedbase will connect farmers, agronomists, nutrition advisers, researchers and agribusinesses through communities of practice, facilitated discussion groups, demonstrations and extension resources.

Building on the Dairy Grains Mentor project

Delivered from 2021 to 2023, Dairy Grains Mentor reached 400 northern Australian dairy businesses with contemporary information on soil fertility, soil health, composting, crop nutrition and forage production. Fifty participating businesses improved agronomic practices across 1,500 hectares. Climate Smart Feedbase will review what those farms adopted, the benefits achieved and the barriers that remain, then use those lessons to support a wider eastern Australian audience.

The project will also provide an extension pathway for C4Milk research, particularly winter-forage fungicide management, improved forage sorghum genetics and high-forage nutrition strategies that increase margin over feed costs.



Project activities

1. Review Dairy Grains Mentor farms

Former participant farms will be revisited to identify practices adopted, benefits achieved, barriers to uptake and unforeseen outcomes. Findings will guide the promotion of high-benefit practices that currently have low adoption.

2. Establish an eastern Australian Community of Practice

A steering committee of farmers and service providers will guide recruitment and an online networking and extension framework. The expanded community will compare crop productivity and resource management across diverse dairy regions. Information on how to get involved in the Community of Practice will be available soon.

3. Use contemporary technology in online discussion groups

Ten Queensland dairy businesses will use satellite imagery, feed analysis and herd nutrition models to compare crop yields, production costs and milk-production potential. Groups will meet four times each year around critical farm decisions, with results shared across project channels.

4. Demonstrate fungicide best practice in winter forages

Farm-scale plots will demonstrate preventive fungicide use at stem elongation. Previous research indicates that this practice can lift yield and reduce growing costs by 30%, but adoption remains limited.

5. Maximise forage sorghum productivity

With an estimated 40% of northern Australian dairy businesses now growing sorghum forage, the project will assess new species and varieties under commercial conditions. Demonstrations will examine yield, quality, milk response, profitability and risk; harvesting stage and processing methods; and diet formulation for early-, mid- and late-lactation herds.

6. Control supplement costs during drought

An analysis of 30 dairy businesses will quantify exposure to volatile prices for grains, protein meals and by-products. A decision-support tool will help businesses test options to reduce or avoid margin losses when feed prices rise.





Climate Smart Feedbase page on Northern Australian Dairy Hub

The Northern Australian Dairy Hub now contains a collection of past Northern Horizons articles covering silage production from soil management through to feeding and diet formulation. These articles can be found here. As the project grows, we will expand these resources and publish relevant articles.

If you would like to know more about Climate Smart Feedbase, please contact

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brad@subtropicaldairy.com.au

Mark Bauer
Principal Extension Officer,
Queensland Department of Primary Industries
Ph 0488 095 754
Mark.Bauer@dpi.qld.gov.au

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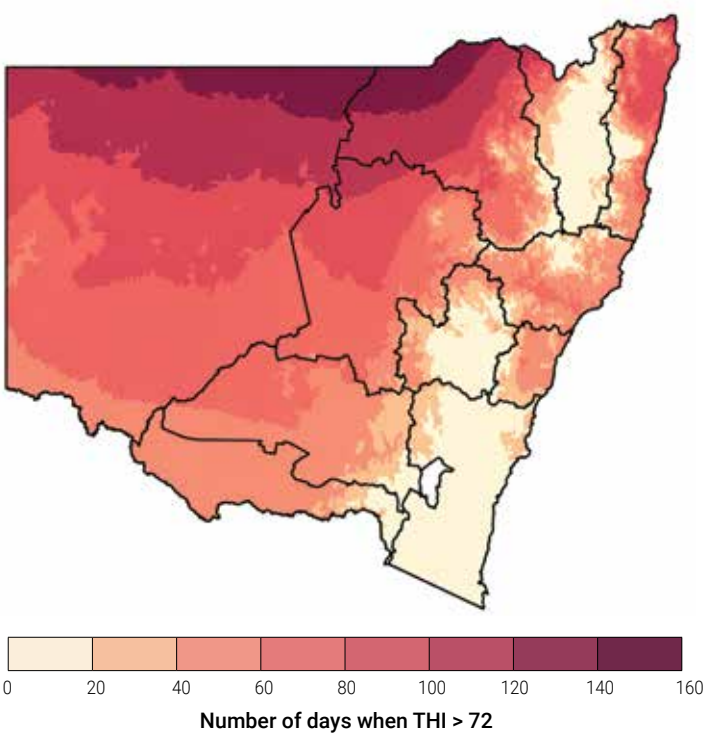
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Heat stress and cow comfort: Practical steps for the warmer months

Jane Kelley, Rachael Young, Ken Garner, Sheena Carter, and Juan Gargiulo
NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development.

Hot weather is already a challenge for dairy businesses across NSW, and reducing the impacts of heat stress has become increasingly important in recent years. New modelling by the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development's Climate Vulnerability Assessment and Dairy teams shows that heat stress is likely to increase during some months and is likely to extend further into spring and autumn in some regions by 2050.



MAP Caption: All regions currently experience some days of moderate heat stress. This map shows the average number of days per year where Temperature Humidity Index (a measure of heat stress) values have exceeded 72 (moderate heat stress) in the recent past (2006-2025).

Climate risks vary between regions and seasons

The Climate Vulnerability Assessment examined how climate conditions for Holstein dairy cows are likely to change across NSW by 2050. It found that the number of months with highly suitable climate conditions is likely to decrease by up to approximately two months a year across most of the state under both emissions scenarios assessed. Increasing heat stress during these months is the main reason for the projected decline in climate suitability. This means some dairy businesses may need to begin heat-management practices earlier in the season and continue them for longer.

The timing and duration of these changes into the future differ between regions.

- The Inland, Riverina Murray and Hunter regions are likely to face increasing heat-stress challenges during parts of late spring, summer and early autumn.
- North Coast dairies will need to continue to manage the combined effects of heat and humidity during the warmer months.
- The South Coast region is expected to remain highly suitable overall, but some areas may experience an increase in heat stress during lactation in warmer months.

These regional differences mean that heat-management strategies will need to be tailored to local conditions and timed carefully. Planning for heat stress should remain a priority across all dairy businesses. It should be noted that when heat stress occurs, its effects often extend across the entire production system, from calves and replacement heifers to lactating and dry cows.

Heat stress affects the whole herd

Heat stress occurs when cows cannot lose enough of the heat they have gained from the environment and generated through eating and digestion. Hot, humid conditions are particularly challenging because humidity reduces the effectiveness of evaporative cooling, which is one of the main ways cows lose heat.

The way we calculate heat stress reflects this relationship between temperature and humidity. The Temperature Humidity Index, or THI, combines air temperature and humidity to help us understand the level of heat stress cattle may experience. The higher the THI, the greater the risk to cow comfort, health, production and reproductive performance.

During periods of heightened heat stress, farmers should consider using the heat stress reduction measures they may have on farm. Each heat stress event will be different and its impact on the herd will be determined by the combination of:

- **airflow** – is there a breeze or are fans available
- **overnight temperatures** – is it remaining hot and still or hot and breezy overnight and
- **duration of hot weather** – it is only a day or a run of hot days and nights.

All these factors and how they are experienced influence the **severity and accumulation** of heat stress and help guide which management strategies are needed.

The effects of heat stress extend beyond an immediate reduction in milk production. Heat stress can reduce feed intake and affect milk composition, fertility, body condition and overall animal health.

Heat-management plans should consider the whole herd, not only lactating cows. Dry cows, calves and replacement

heifers also need protection. Research has found that heat stress during the dry period can reduce milk production in the following lactation, lower calf birth weights and affect the future health and productivity of calves. It should be noted that high-production lactating cows are the most vulnerable to heat stress and heat management plans that support these cows will also support the rest of the herd.

These impacts highlight the importance of managing heat stress, dairy farmers today have access to many practical steps that can be taken before and during hot weather to reduce and protect cow comfort, health and production impacts.

High-production lactating cows are the most vulnerable to heat stress and heat management plans that support these cows will also support the rest of the herd.

Prepare, monitor and act early

Practical preparation should begin before hot weather arrives. Priorities include:

- checking that cows have reliable access to clean, cool, fast-flowing water,
- reviewing shade across the farm,
- ensuring sprinklers, fans and other cooling systems are working and ready to operate,
- providing high-quality, easier-to-digest forage and
- considering heat load reduction strategies such as adjusting milking times, feeding strategies and cow movements to cooler parts of the day.

Monitoring cows during times of heat stress remains essential. An increasing breath rate is often the first visible sign of heat stress. The *Cool Cows Manual* recommends checking at least 20 cows by counting flank movements for 20 seconds and multiplying the result by three. A breathing rate above 60 breaths per minute indicates that action is needed. Other warning signs include: bunching, seeking shade or water, reduced feed intake, drooling and open-mouth breathing.

While observing cows is essential, you also do not need to wait for signs of heat stress to occur before acting. Forecast tools can now provide several days' warning, allowing heat-management strategies to be put in place at the right time.

Use forecasts to get ahead of the heat

The success of heat-management strategies is highly dependent on the timing of their deployment. Leave it too late and their effectiveness can be compromised.

The Temperature Humidity Index Forecast allows you to find your farm and view forecast cattle thermal-stress conditions for up to a week ahead for your location. This provides valuable lead time to:

- check sprinklers and fans,
- adjust milking and feeding schedules,
- potentially move stock to shaded paddocks, and
- plan for reducing walking distances if possible.

For a broader view of conditions expected over the coming 1-3 months, the State Seasonal Update provides NSW climate outlooks, seasonal indicators, drought information and regional breakdowns. Using the seasonal outlook for forward planning, together with the cattle comfort forecast for short-term decisions, can help dairy businesses put heat-mitigation measures in place at the right time.

Take-home message

Every farm, season and heat stress event will be different, but the message is consistent: prepare early, monitor conditions and watch cows closely, and act before heat stress becomes severe.

Combining longer-term planning with timely management during hot weather can help protect the comfort, health and productivity of the whole herd.

Priority actions prior to and during a heat event include:

1. Review shade, water and cooling systems before summer heat begins
2. Use forecasts to identify higher-risk periods and act early.
3. Monitor cow breathing rates and behaviour during hot conditions.
4. Protect dry cows, calves and heifers as well as the milking herd.
5. Adjust milking, feeding and movements to avoid peak heat.
6. Review the effectiveness of management actions after each hot period.

Resources list:

Climate Vulnerability Assessment

THI forecast tool

State Seasonal Update

Cool Cows

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Dry cows and heat stress

Dry cows have received little attention when it comes to managing heat stress. Autumn and year-round calving farms that dry cows off over the hot months should be doing more to ensure their dry cows stay cool. Heat stress during pregnancy can have consequences on calf health and cause far-reaching health problems later in life.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that dry herds in heat stress have reduced milk yields during their next lactation, reduced calf weight and a greater risk of health problems.

Reduced milk in next lactation

Dry cows generate less metabolic heat than lactating cows and have a higher upper critical temperature. This may contribute to the belief around heat stress being a lesser concern. However, studies consistently show that when cows experience heat stress during late pregnancy they produce less milk in the next lactation. (See Figure 1).

Researchers believe milk yield reduction is due to impaired blood flow through the dry cow's udder over the last two months of pregnancy. The udder is rapidly growing over this period in preparation for the next lactation. The impaired blood flow stunts udder growth, which means they possess fewer functioning mammary cells with reduced secretory capacity. As a result, they will produce less milk and become disadvantaged while calving.

Smaller, lighter calves

Studies in many species of animals show the conditions that offspring are subjected to while still in the uterus affect their lifetime health and performance. When the foetal calf's body temperature is increased, as it is when its mother experiences heat stress during late pregnancy, it appears that this negatively affects the calf's metabolism and gene expression, pre-programming it for sub-optimal health and performance.

When cows suffer heat stress during their dry period, they have smaller placentas with reduced blood flow through the uterus and umbilical cord. The calves tend to be born several days earlier and a few kilograms lighter than calves of cows that kept cool during their dry period.

When cows experience heat stress during late pregnancy it suppresses their immune system for many weeks. Studies have shown the neutrophils of heat stressed cows become less aggressive against bacteria. Neutrophils are the white blood cells acting as the first line of defence against pathogens.

Cows that experience heat stress during late pregnancy may therefore be at greater risk of health problems such as mastitis and retained foetal membranes around calving when their immune function is already naturally suppressed.

Calves less productive and fertile

Calves born to cows heat stressed during the dry period go on to be less healthy, less fertile and less productive in their first lactation. Affected calves have been shown to be less able to absorb maternal antibodies from the first colostrum consumed soon after birth. This results in lower blood maternal antibody levels than in calves from dry cows that don't experience heat stress.

These calves' cell-mediated immune function may also be compromised. This results in them being more susceptible to infections that commonly occur preweaning. The ultimate outcome is poor growth rates, higher levels of illness and higher mortality rates.

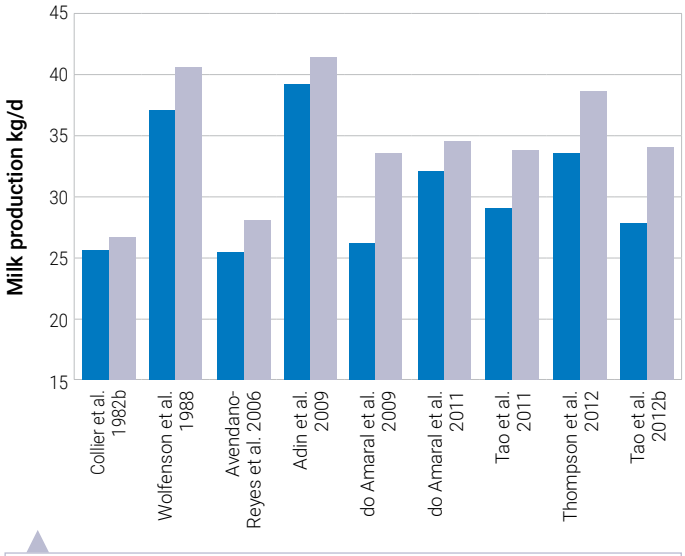


Figure 1 *Effect of heat stress and cooling during the dry period on milk production in the following lactation. Source: Tao and Dahl, 2013*

Researchers have recently found that calves whose dams are heat stressed during pregnancy go on to become maiden heifers that are less fertile. This means a heifer is produced that has both lower production and more difficulty getting in calf.

In the short term, to protect dry cows from heat stress:

- If existing natural shade on the home farm or support block can't provide four square metres of shade per cow at midday, then find alternative paddocks
- Portable paddock shade structures or a permanent shade structure are also options. In the longer term, the farm plan should be reviewed to:
- Establish more tree belts along dry cow paddocks and springer paddocks
- Adjust the farm's calving system to reduce the number of cows dried off over the hot months of the year.

Cool Cows

If you missed Subtropical Dairy's Cool Cows webinar on Monday, 12th October with Dr Neil Moss (Scibus), the recording is available to view here. Preparing for the hot, humid summer conditions early can help reduce the impacts on cow comfort, milk production, fertility and longer-term herd performance. From shade and cooling, and nutrition and genetics, there are a host of practical options that you can start putting in place to minimise the effect of hot conditions on your herd.

There are also Heat Stress and Hot Conditions resources available on the Dairy Australia webpage here.

Subtropical Dairy Service Provider Forum 2026

During September, Subtropical Dairy gave dairy related service providers the opportunity to come together to network and share dairy-specific project updates and research findings. The forum was held at the University of Qld, Gatton with representatives from approx. 20 businesses attending, either in person or online.

Presentations on the day included Subtropical Dairy, Qld Department of Primary Industries, NSW Department of Primary Industries, and a large cross-section of other dairy related service providers. Topics ranged from animal health and genetics to feedbase, soils and artificial intelligence (AI).

The forum gave Subtropical Dairy the opportunity to trial some hybrid meeting techniques which in turn may assist hosting other farmer-related activities in a hybrid format to help those who can't attend in person access the information and participate in the session.

The Subtropical Dairy Service Provider forum is an annual activity that we hope will continue to grow in coming years and provide a connection point for service providers in the industry.



Photo 6 *Teah Keen (Norco AgriSolutions), Elke Watson (Sunshine Coast dairy farmer and Subtropical Dairy Board member), Cameron Whitson (Bega Food & Drinks)*







Photo 1 *Dr Brad Granzin, Subtropical Dairy's Senior Program Manager, discussing the new Climate Smart Feedbase program which is funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund and will be delivered to help dairy businesses strengthen feedbase performance, manage climate risk and improve long-term profitability across Queensland, New South Wales and northern Victoria. See the Climate Smart Feedbase article on page 6.*
Photo 2 *Mark Bauer updating the group about recent findings and upcoming research priorities within the C4Milk project.* **Photo 3** *Dr Brad Granzin and Alana Ebert from Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee (MRCCC). Read more about the MRCCC and DPI joint project on page 4.*





Photo 4 *Carl Hockey (Rural Vet) and Damien Tessmann (DFMC) enjoying a chat over lunch. Carl presented information on his connected data and AI tool, AgriStreams which he has been trialling with his dairy farmer clients.* **Photo 5** *Alex Kades (Nutrien), Julia Harkin (Zoetis) and Michela Secci, Executive Officer/Regional Manager – Subtropical Dairy*



Photo 7 *Pat O'Connor (Healthy Land & Water), SEQ dairy farmers Luke Stock and Ruth Chalk (SDP Board members), Ros D'Addona (Qld DPI) and Brian Coe (QRIDA)*

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At 65, dairy farmer Clinton is outgoing and positive, with a lifetime of farming behind him. He took over the dairy from his mum and dad in his thirties, and there were always cows to milk, jobs to finish and something more important to do. His experience with skin cancer has made him rethink where his own health belongs on that list.

Growing up and during his early working life, Clinton often ran around the farm without a hat or shirt. After leaving school, time working outdoors was coupled with trips to the beach, swimming and baking in the sun. He remembers his mother giving him a dressing-down when he came home sunburnt. He does not recall sunscreen being part of their routine.

At 26, a spot on his leg prompted his mother to send him to the doctor. It was diagnosed as a basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and removed.

Clinton says from that point he didn't go without his broad brimmed hat or shirt outdoors. Over time he started to adopt wearing long-sleeved shirts and longer shorts while working. He also grew a beard, thinking it might help protect his face. However, further skin cancers followed.

Over the years, Clinton had a number of basal cell carcinomas treated at his local surgery. Then at age 47, a spot near his shoulder blade kept returning and would not heal. It was diagnosed as a squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). After repeated procedures in the same area, his doctor recommended radiation therapy.

The treatment meant significant changes for Clinton and his family. The nearest treatment centre was two and a half hours away. With a dairy to run, it might as well have been in another country. Clinton and his family reduced the number of cows so they could manage while he was away.

Although each individual treatment was quick, the preparation, travel and time away from the farm added up. He was fortunate to be able to stay in accommodation provided by the Cancer Council and attended treatment Monday to Friday over several weeks. Clinton says the treatment centre staff were amazing and did their best to schedule his Monday appointments late in the day and his Friday appointments earlier so he could return home for weekends. Clinton speaks warmly of their care, but by about halfway through the treatment, he really started to go downhill.

"It really hit me," he recalls. "I just needed to sleep and had no energy. The burning sensation in my back was intense."

After the 36 radiation treatments targeting the cancer on his back, Clinton was given the 'all clear'. Regular skin checks every three months became the norm and he began to feel more confident that further treatment was behind him.

Then he found a lump beneath his beard.

He couldn't get to the surgery quick enough where they diagnosed a stage 1 melanoma on his face. Two operations were needed to remove it completely. Clinton was deeply grateful it had been caught at stage 1, but the diagnosis shook him.

"The squamous cell carcinoma and radiation worried me, but finding the melanoma really knocked me. Seems like I'm going to have to live with the potential of more cancers for my whole life. This one could have been really bad if it hadn't been caught."

A greater risk

Machinery, chemicals, and animals are familiar hazards on dairy farms, but the sun's invisible ultraviolet radiation (UVR) also needs attention. Given the nature of their work, farmers and agricultural workers experience chronic occupational exposure to solar UV radiation, at levels estimated to be six to eight times greater than indoor workers.1

This increased exposure to UV radiation increases the risk of skin cancer, including melanoma - one of the most serious forms of skin cancer leading to Australian farmers having a 60% higher mortality rate from melanoma than other Australians. 1

Sun exposure and skin cancer: key facts

- UV radiation cannot be seen or felt. Skin damage can occur without sunburn, including on cool or cloudy days.
- UV damage builds up over time. Repeated exposure during everyday farm work adds to your lifetime risk of skin cancer.
- The UV Index measures the strength of UV radiation, from low (0–2) to extreme (11+). UV levels vary with location, time of day, season, altitude and cloud cover. Reflective surfaces, such as water, can also increase exposure.
- Sun protection is recommended when the UV Index reaches 3 or above. Outdoor workers should use protection year-round, even when UV levels are below 3.
- Anyone can develop skin cancer. Risk is higher for those people with fair skin that burns easily, freckles, many or unusual moles, or a personal or family history of skin cancer. There is still risk however, if you have a darker skin tone.
- Most skin cancers can be prevented by reducing UV exposure.
- Early detection improves treatment outcomes. Get to know your skin, have new or changing spots checked promptly, and discuss your individual risk and skin-check needs with your doctor.

- It is never too late to protect your skin. Sun protection still matters, even after years of exposure or a previous skin cancer diagnosis.

Knowing the risks is one thing; protecting your skin through a busy day on the farm is another. Long sleeves feel hot, sunscreen attracts dust, shade can be hard to find—and there's always something else demanding attention. Australian research shows these practical frustrations, along with forgetting, can get in the way of sun protection. Many farmers understand why it matters. The challenge is making it comfortable, convenient and as automatic as pulling on your work boots.

What's getting in the way?	What can help
"Long sleeves and trousers are too hot."	Trial lightweight, breathable work clothing with a sun-protection rating of UPF 50 or 50+ that allows movement. Involve the team in choosing it, and support its use with shade, drinking water and breaks.
"Sunscreen feels greasy, has a strong fragrance and attracts dust."	Trial different SPF50+ broad-spectrum, water-resistant types to find one employees will use. Cover more skin with suitable clothing, and use sunscreen on exposed areas.
"I forgot" "I was busy"	Make sun protection part of getting dressed for work. Provide supplies where work starts and breaks happen. Place sunscreen at different points, such as the sign-in and PPE areas. Carry sunscreen to outlying jobs and store it according to the label, away from excessive heat. Build reapplication opportunities into the working day. Put your hat with your boots at the end of the day.
"The hat blows off or gets in the way."	Trial well-fitting broad-brimmed or legionnaire-style hats suited to the task. Check that protection works with required helmets, hearing protection and other safety equipment.
"Sunglasses fog up, slip down or make it harder to see."	Trial comfortable, well-fitting, wraparound UV-protective sunglasses with lenses suited to the task and light conditions. Where eye protection is required, choose safety-rated eyewear with UV protection. Keep them clean and store them with your hat so they're ready to wear.
"The work has to happen"	Move flexible tasks to lower-UV periods and use covered areas for suitable jobs. Provide shade at frequently used work and rest areas, while keeping other protection in place.
"It's cloudy and cool, I don't need it."	Include the UV forecast in daily planning. Download an app that monitors the UV index at your location. Reinforce that temperature does not indicate UV strength and outdoor workers need protection year-round.
Sun protection is not routine.	Owners and supervisors can set the example, provide suitable products and make sun protection an everyday expectation for everyone.

Making sun protection a habit takes more than telling your employees (and yourself) to cover up. It means choosing clothing that is comfortable to work in, keeping sunscreen within reach, providing shade where practical and allowing time to use protection properly. Ask your team what gets in the way, then work together to address it. The easier sun protection is to fit into the job, the more likely it is to become part of everyday farm life.

Get to know your skin, including areas that are difficult to see. Ask someone to help check your back and scalp, and see your doctor promptly about any new, changing or non-healing spot. Don't wait for your next scheduled skin check. Your doctor can advise how often checks are needed based on your individual risk.

Clinton still grows a beard but now shaves it off completely on the day of his skin check so the skin underneath can be examined. He cannot change the sun exposure of his younger years, but he hopes his story will encourage others to act sooner. On a farm, there will always be another job waiting. His experience is a reminder that looking after yourself deserves a place on that list.

I asked Clinton what he would tell his teenage self if he had the chance. His message was simple: start protecting your skin early and make your health a priority.

"The more people that realise, the better. Start young and take the time to not only cover up but go and get your skin checked. There's nothing more important to do."

Keep it Simple

Being SunSmart and following these five sun protection steps can help reduce your risk of developing skin cancer:

- ✓ Slip on a long sleeve shirt and long pants
- ✓ Slop on SPF 50+ sunscreen to all skin not protected by clothing
- ✓ Slap on a broad brim hat
- ✓ Seek shade between 11am – 3pm
- ✓ Slide on 100% UV protective sunglasses[2]

The facts about Melanoma

Melanoma is particularly dangerous because it can grow deeper into the skin and spread to lymph nodes and vital organs, including the lungs, liver and brain. Once it spreads, treatment becomes more complex and the cancer can be life-threatening. When detected and treated early, melanoma can often be removed successfully with surgery—making prompt attention to new or changing skin spots essential. 3

- 1 Australian is diagnosed with melanoma every 30 minutes
- It is estimated 1300 Australians will die from melanoma this year
- Melanoma is the third most common cancer in Australia
- Melanoma is the most common cancer for Australians aged 20 to 39
- Melanomas are caused by overexposure to UV radiation from the sun
- If caught early, 90% of melanomas can be cured by surgery[4]



The ABCDE of Melanoma Identification (Image credit: Melanoma Patients Association)

References *1. Fletcher, C.M.E., Trenerry, C., Wilson, C. and Gunn, K.M. (2024) "Being a farmer, I mostly always think there is something more important to do": A mixed methods analysis of the skin cancer detection practices of Australian farmers', Health Promotion Journal of Australia, 35(3), pp. 672–682. Available at: doi.org/10.1002/hpja.796 (Accessed: 28 September 2026). 2. National Centre for Farmer Health (2026) Skin cancer – risks and early signs. Available at: farmerhealth.org.au/skin-cancer-risks-and-early-signs/ (Accessed: 29 September 2026). 3. Cancer Council Australia (n.d.) Melanoma: Your guide to best cancer care. Available at: www.cancer.org.au/cancercareguides/melanoma (Accessed: 5 October 2026). 4. Melanoma Institute Australia (2025) Melanoma facts. Available at: melanoma.org.au/about-melanoma/melanoma-facts/ (Accessed: 5 October 2026).*

Heading into summer

Managing three day sickness in dairy herds

Three Day Sickness, also known as Bovine Ephemeral Fever (BEF), is a viral disease of cattle with the potential to cause economic losses to dairy producers through cattle deaths, loss of condition, weight loss, reduced fertility in bulls and decreased milk production. It can affect cattle of all ages and is more prevalent after summer rainfall periods as it is spread through biting insects. The impact can be worse after prolonged dry periods as herd immunity is reduced.

Symptoms to watch for

Dairy farmers are urged to monitor their cattle daily for signs of BEF, which include:

- Lethargy and a dull appearance
- Drooling and difficulty swallowing
- Lameness and stiffness
- High fever and muscle pain, causing cattle to separate from the herd, go off their feed, and seek shade and water.
- A sudden drop in milk production and reduced rumination may be the first signs of sickness in lactating cows where individual cow monitoring is in place.

Most affected animals recover but lactating cows may not return to peak lactation. Death losses are typically around 1%, but losses as high as 5-10% have been reported in some mobs. In some cases, the virus can cause pregnant cows to abort, and bulls may experience temporary infertility for up to six months. The virus can also cause nervous system damage, leaving some cattle paralysed and unable to stand or result in a staggery gait.

Managing Three Day Sickness in dairy herds

Young, lighter cattle usually show mild symptoms lasting 1-3 days, while heavier cattle, including bulls and cows, may require additional care. If cattle remain down for an extended period, veterinary assistance should be sought. Anti-inflammatory and fever-reducing medications, available through your private veterinarian, can aid in recovery. Calcium injections also aid recovery as hypocalcaemia can occur due to fever and inflammation.

Steps to support affected cattle:

- Provide shade, water, and hay but do not force them to eat or drink.
- If cattle are unable to stand, roll or lift them twice daily to prevent muscle damage.
- Cattle may bloat and have difficulty swallowing. Position down cattle so that their head is uphill of their abdomen to reduce risk of inhalation pneumonia.

Farmers are also advised not to send recently recovered cattle to abattoirs for several weeks to allow muscle recovery and avoid potential downgrades. If medications have been administered, ensure withholding periods are observed.

Preventative actions

Working with a trusted veterinarian or adviser, producers should have a BEF strategy for their herd to decide the best ways to manage the BEF risk to their animals. Herds can be vaccinated prior to higher risk times with the BEF vaccination with calves vaccinated from 6 months of age.

BEF Vaccination		
1st Dose	**2nd Dose**	**Booster**
Heifers and Steers	2 weeks to 6 months after the 1st dose	Prior to risk period every year
Bulls more than 6 months old	2 weeks to 6 months after the 1st dose	Prior to risk period every year
Dairy Cows	2 weeks to 6 months after the 1st dose	Prior to risk period every year

BEF vaccination guide. Source Zoetis Australia Nov 2016



Resources and further assistance

For additional information, dairy farmers can access resources from:

Local Land Services: Bovine Ephemeral Fever (Three Day Sickness)-

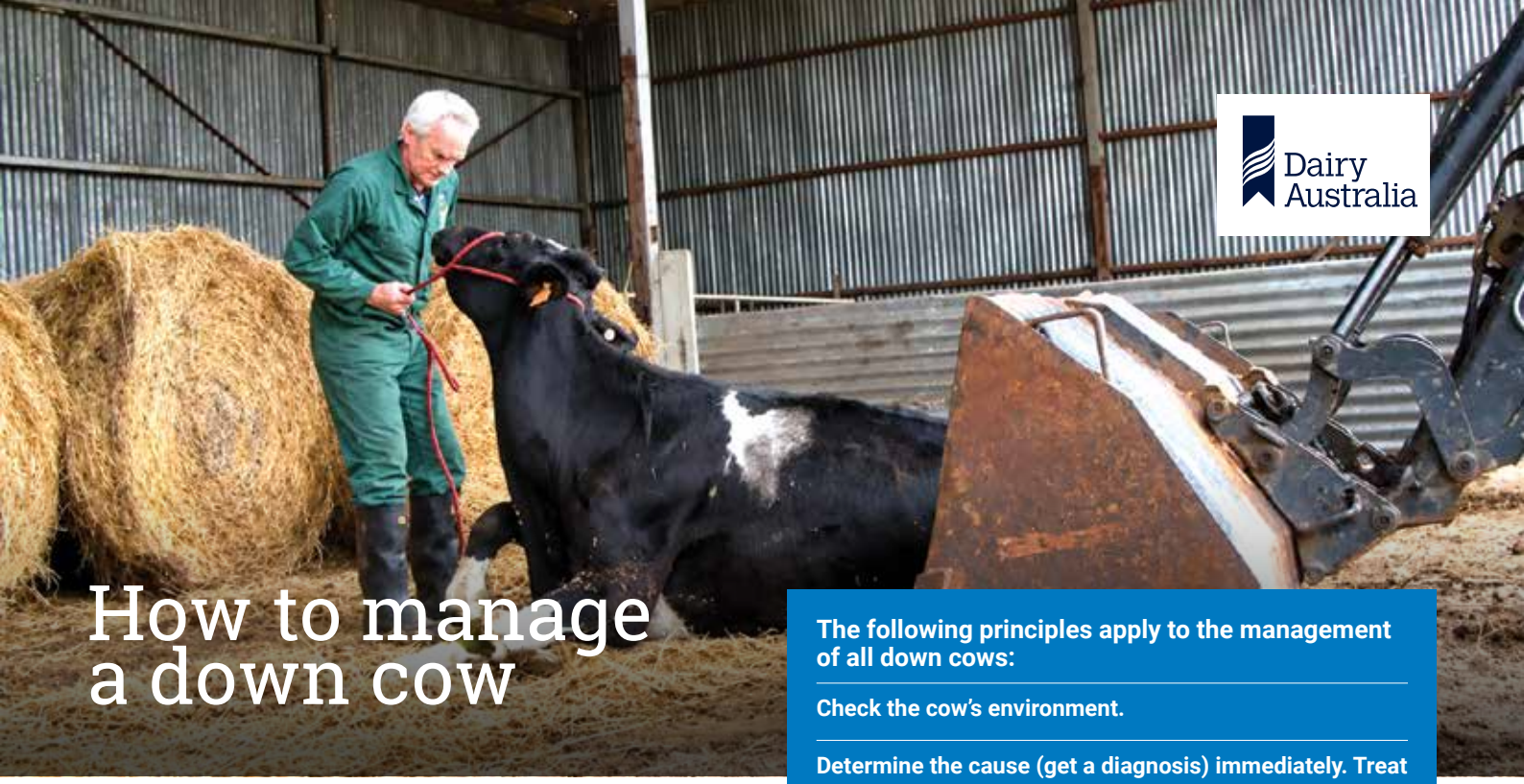
Business Queensland

Flyboss

Dairy Australia: Nursing Down Cattle



Hard Working Protection for Cattle – Zoetis Australia



How to manage a down cow

The following principles apply to the management of all down cows:

Check the cow's environment.

Determine the cause (get a diagnosis) immediately. Treat the problem appropriately and promptly.

Early treatment promotes early recovery.

If possible, get her back on her feet quickly to avoid secondary damage.

If her chances of recovery are low, arrange for the cow to be euthanased on site without delay.

A 'down' cow is any cow that is unable to stand unassisted. Cows may go down for many reasons, and at any stage of their lactation cycle, although it most commonly occurs around calving time.

Down cows need to be treated appropriately and nursed at a high standard to maximise their chance of recovery. Poor nursing makes them very susceptible to secondary damage, which will delay or prevent their recovery.

This information is designed to guide your decisions when you find a down cow, and should be used in conjunction with the Dairy Australia 'Down cow decision tree' wall chart. Additional information can be found in the series of short videos on the Dairy Australia YouTube page.

What to do when a cow goes down

Alert or Non-Alert?

When you first discover a down cow, it is important to assess her outward behaviour. If the cow is non-alert (drowsy, depressed and non-responsive) she is gravely ill and needs immediate assistance. If she is still alert (bright, aware of her surroundings and responsive), treatment is not as urgent, but should commence as soon as possible.

A safe environment

Physical danger Move the cow immediately if her environment poses risks to her or to others e.g. lying on the edge of a dam or creek, under an electric fence, or in a situation that may cause danger to other cattle, such as in a walkway.

Posture If she is lying on her side put her up onto her chest and support her if necessary. If left on her side, especially if her head is facing downhill, there is a danger of regurgitation and aspiration of her rumen contents, which can be fatal.

Surfaces Lying on hard surfaces, such as concrete and gravel, can cause damage to the skin, muscles and nerves of the legs, even within an hour or two, so the cow must be moved off such a surface immediately.

Weather The cow will require shelter if the weather conditions are wet or extremely cold or hot.

Why is she down?

An accurate diagnosis must be made immediately to ensure she is managed correctly. Seek veterinary advice if you are unsure. The diagnosis will determine the cow's management plan which consists of either treatment and nursing, or euthanasia. Euthanasia should be considered if treatment is not a viable option (e.g. if the cow has a broken leg) and should be performed as soon as possible to minimise suffering. Cows with serious illness or injuries, and hence low chances of recovery, must not be left to suffer and must be destroyed on site. You will also need to consider how to dispose of the carcass afterwards.

Treatment

Begin treatment of the primary condition with the appropriate medications promptly to maximise the cow's chances of a quick recovery. If the cow is down with a condition where she is unlikely to recover on the same day, she should be moved to a suitable nursing area.

Nursing the down cow

Nursing of a down cow should only be undertaken if the cow has a reasonable chance of recovery and a competent stockperson is on hand, who is prepared to invest the time and energy required to provide adequate nursing care of the cow.

Good nursing of the down cow will maximise her chances of making a full recovery, but it can be labour intensive and time consuming. If you are not able to provide good nursing care then consider euthanasia of the cow without delay. If you require any professional advice on the management of a down cow contact your veterinarian.

"Every farm needs a dedicated area for nursing down cows." Dr Phil Poulton

Why good nursing is important

Regardless of the initial cause, all down cows are at risk of nerve damage and other complications if they remain down for two hours or more, particularly on hard surfaces such as concrete. A cow needs to be got back on her feet quickly or managed appropriately to prevent this secondary damage.

Research conducted on dairy farms in Gippsland found that the quality of the nursing care had a profound effect on the cow's chances of recovery. The graph below shows that there is very little benefit in nursing a down cow unless you can provide high quality care.

The complications that arise from prolonged lying include:

- Nerve damage in the lower areas of the back, hind limb or forelimb
- Muscle damage from compression of the major muscle groups
- 'Bed sores'
- Mastitis
- Pneumonia
- Hip dislocations

Cow comfort

Nursing the down cow in the paddock may be more convenient, however the ground is often too hard or too cold and the environment may also be cold, windy and wet. Lying out in cold and wet paddocks affects the circulation to the limbs, making it less likely that the cow will be able to rise. It can also depress the cow's appetite. Leaving a down cow sitting in a paddock exposed to hot conditions will also affect her recovery.

The down cow should be nursed in a shed with at least 300mm of soft, dry bedding consisting of heaped straw or hay, rice hulls, sawdust or some other soft material.

Providing the cow with feed with sufficient energy and fibre is important, along with free access to water.

Regularly hand strip the cow's udder to relieve pressure and apply teat disinfectant to reduce the risk of mastitis.

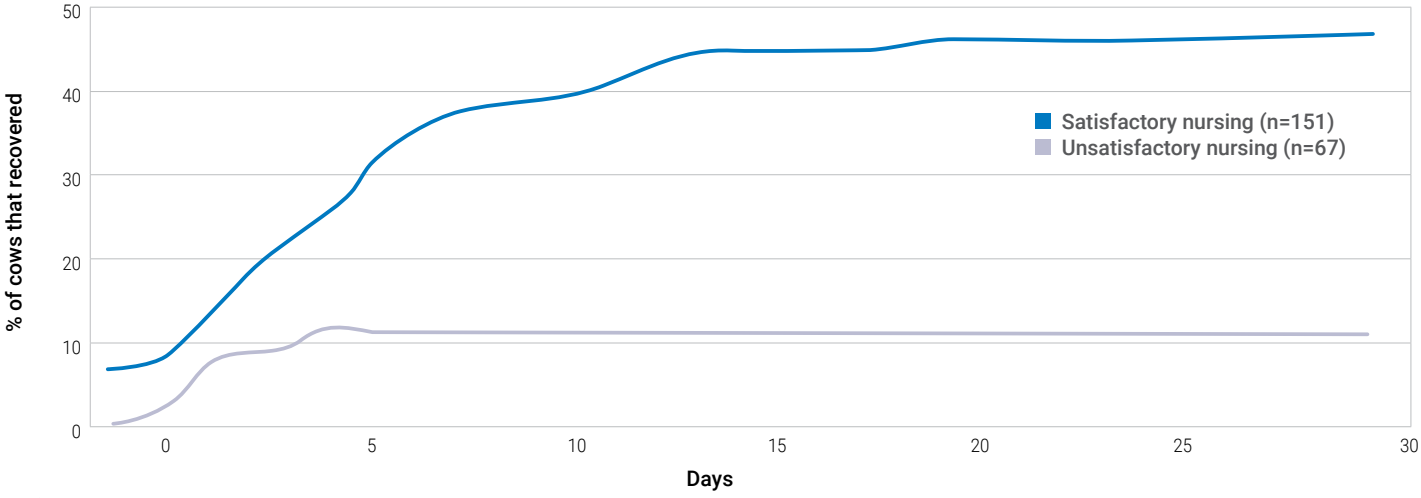


Figure 1 *A comparison of recovery rates of 218 according to their nursing care*

Rules for nursing a down cow

Provide clean, dry, soft bedding that provides a non-slip surface when the cow tries to stand.

Provide a continuous supply of clean water and good feed.

Move the cow from side to side every 3 hours to ensure her weight is not always to one side if she is unable to swap sides by herself, and flex and extend the hind limbs each time the cow is moved.

Regularly hand strip milk from the udder.

Regularly encourage the cow to rise.

Use lifting devices to get her to her feet only, never leave cows hanging in lifting devices.

Rolling

It is vital to note which leg the cow is sitting on each time she is checked. If the cow is unable to swap sides, one hind leg will take all of the pressure from her body weight. This compromises the circulation in that leg and can lead to nerve and muscle damage. If the cow tries to stand, the stronger leg will tend to push the cow onto her weaker leg, which will be the leg she always sits on, causing further damage to this weaker leg.

If the cow cannot swap sides by herself, she needs to be rolled frequently onto her other side, especially if she is trying to stand up.

Barriers

The cow should be nursed on a small area of bedding of suitable depth, with barriers used to keep her on the soft surface. The barriers will also prevent her from crawling, which often causes damage to the nerves of the lower back. The barriers need to be high enough to discourage her from trying to jump over them.

If the down cow is able to stand when lifted but falls over when trying to walk, she may need to be nursed in a small pen. This will allow her to stand but prevent her from walking. A pen can be built from large hay bales or gates, leaving a space that is small enough to stand in without walking or turning around in but large enough to be comfortable. The cow can be lifted within this pen by reaching over the top of the bales with the front-end loader.

Once she recovers to the point of being able to stand for most of the day she can be released from the pen and allowed to walk around, providing it is on a suitable non-slip surface.

It is important to be patient with down cows – before bringing a recovered down cow back into the milking herd, you will need to assess the likelihood of the cow slipping over and re-damaging herself.



Lifting

Lifting should only be done if it is effective and supervised. Cows that are lifted ineffectively or unsupervised have a poorer chance of recovery than those that are not lifted. Cows that are unable to stand 'effectively' or are unwilling to try to stand 'effectively' are best nursed without lifting, providing the bedding is suitable and they are rolled regularly, if needed.

Cow 'lifters' are not cow 'hangers'! Effective lifting means that the cow is able to stand in a natural position and take some of her own weight. If the cow is hanging from a hip clamp or slouching in a sling, without taking any weight on her legs, it can cause her more damage.

Supervision by a competent stockperson is important because down cows tire easily and should then be immediately placed down. Over-lifting can also be a problem as the pressure from lifting devices can cause swellings and pain.

Watch the video on 'Rolling the down cow'

To see how this is best done view the online video 'Rolling the down cow' on the Dairy Australia webpage: dairyaustralia.com.au/down-cows.



Moving a down cow

It is important not to cause further damage to a down cow when moving her. There are several ways to safely move a down cow:

- Load her onto a carry-all on the back of a tractor and secure her effectively.
- Load her into a front-end loader bucket on the front of a tractor. To see how to do this safely, view the online video 'Moving the down cow'



- Carry her in a sling.
- Hip clamps can only be used to move a cow over a short distance and the cow must be supported with a belt or strap under her chest.

Methods to avoid are:

- Hip clamp alone.
- Dragging – only use if there are no alternatives and the cow needs to be urgently moved over a short distance. Use slow, steady pressure and avoid jerking movement. Dragging slowly by a halter or chain around the head is safe, if done correctly. Never drag a cow by her legs.

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When to consider euthanasia

Cows with a low chance of recovery must not be left to suffer and must be destroyed humanely on site.

Incurable conditions e.g. fractures, tendon ruptures.

Lack of response to treatment of the primary condition within a reasonable time period.

An alert down cow becoming non-alert, indicating further complications.

Pain and suffering.

Cow is lying on her side despite adequate treatment (unable or unwilling to maintain sternal recumbency).

Not willing to eat or drink despite adequate treatment.

Obvious 'bed sores' or swollen joints/limbs.

Insufficient facilities, labour or expertise available to provide adequate nursing care for the cow.

If a down cow cannot be nursed at a high standard of care it is better for the cow's welfare that she is euthanased within a short period of time as her chances of recovery are low. Correct nursing of down cows is important for the welfare of the affected animals and the reputation of the dairy industry. Dairy farmers, veterinarians and farm advisers all have responsibilities in this area.

Monitoring the down cow

The down cow's response to treatment needs to be assessed at regular intervals, which will depend on the severity and cause of the condition. A non-alert cow should be rechecked within 2–4 hours for signs of improvement and again in 6–8 hours' time. A cow with milk fever should be alert within a few hours of treatment. If not, she may have a different condition, e.g. an acute infection, so the diagnosis may need to be re-assessed and the treatment changed. Seek veterinary advice if you are unsure.

For alert down cows the period of time before re-assessment should be no longer than 8–12 hours from the initial treatment. If the cow is alert but unable to stand on her own after 8–12 hours, or perhaps sooner, then lifting should be tried. For detailed instructions on lifting, please refer to the online video 'Lifting the down cow'. Many cows will be able to walk away when lifted. If not, the cow should be moved to a suitable nursing environment.

Cows that are still down on the second and subsequent days need to be re-assessed at least once each day as part of the daily nursing cycle.

This involves making judgements about:

- The response to the treatment of the primary condition – if the results are not satisfactory the treatment may need to be changed.
- The original diagnosis – this may also need to be re-assessed if the response to treatment is not satisfactory.
- The need to treat secondary damage.
- Any further complications e.g. a dislocated hip, mastitis or pneumonia.
- The nursing protocols.



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- Lifting – providing it can be done effectively and competently supervised.
- Euthanasia – consider if the response is not satisfactory, if the cow's welfare has been compromised or if a competent stockperson is not available to nurse the cow adequately.

There is no time limit on nursing a down cow, providing her welfare is not compromised. Some cows can take 3-4 weeks to recover or even longer. However, the longer time the cow is down, the more likely it is that secondary problems will prevent her recovery and so the quality of the nursing care becomes more important.

Preventative measures

Many of the factors that cause cows to go down are preventable. After you have nursed or euthanised a down cow it is important to review your transition cow management, calving management and sire selection to see if improvements can be made. Seek professional advice if you are unsure.

Several methods may be used to lift cows



Hip clamps

The easiest method to use and the most common. They are ideal for a quick lift, but are not suitable for extended support due to the trauma they may cause to the hip bones and muscles. They are most useful if the cow can stand when lifted, such as simple milk fever cases.



Slings

There are a variety of sling designs on the market. Cows tend to hang in them rather than stand in them, so the straps may cut into them and compromise limb circulation and mobility. Slings can also be difficult to apply.



Pelvic lift

This is a hip clamp with a seat. It has the ease of use of the hip clamp with the superior support of the seat, which supports about 40 per cent of the cow's weight. When the lift is engaged, the seat swings under the pelvis of the cow. It is effective and easy to use.



'Upsi Daisy' cow lifter

A metal frame that supports the cow under the pelvic area used together with a chest strap. The weight of the cow is distributed over different parts of the skeletal frame so it is suitable to both lift and transport cows safely and humanely.



Flotation tanks/water baths

Used overseas and claim to have good success rates. They are available in Australia. The cow's natural buoyancy enables many cows to stand in the warm water, which improves blood circulation. This prevents many types of secondary damage to the limbs and speeds up her recovery. Cows are left in the water for 8–12 hours at a time and the treatment can be repeated over several days, if necessary.



Hobbles

Hobbles can be useful to reduce the risk of secondary damage, such as a dislocated hip, in cases where the hind leg(s) deviate greatly from their normal position. Hobbles can be purchased from saddlery stores or some rural retailers. They are applied either above the hocks or on the lower leg above the fetlock, and should be padded to avoid pressure sores. The rope or chain needs to be long enough to allow the cow to try to stand but short enough to stop over-reaching.

Further resources The information in this fact sheet should be used in conjunction with the Dairy Australia wall chart 'Down cow decision tree', a guide to decision making over the first few days when you are presented with a down cow.

Dairy Australia also has a series of six online videos available for viewing on YouTube.

For further information Please visit dairyaustralia.com.au



Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority

Prepare your dairy for drought with QRIDA

Visit QRIDA's website to see how Scenic Rim dairy farmers, Stewart and Dylan Conochie, are keeping their Jersey cows cool and producing 600 tonnes of extra silage with help of a Drought Preparedness Grant through QRIDA.

- Install centre pivot irrigation for growing fodder
- Build feed sheds to store fodder for long periods
- Construct compost feed sheds to improve animal welfare
- Improve on-farm water infrastructure including tanks, troughs and bores

Drought Preparedness Grants

- ✓ **$50,000 co-contribution grant to cover up to 25% of drought preparedness project costs.**
- ✓ **A QRIDA Sustainability Loan can be used as co-contribution.**

Talk to your local Regional Area Manager on **1800 623 946** or scan to find out how QRIDA could help you prepare your property for drought.

**Eligibility criteria applies. The information contained herein is for general information purposes only. You should not rely upon this information as a basis for making any business, legal or any other decisions.*

qrida.qld.gov.au 1800 623 946 contact_us@qrida.qld.gov.au

DELIVERING FOR QUEENSLAND | Queensland Government

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How well are Australian cows getting in calf?

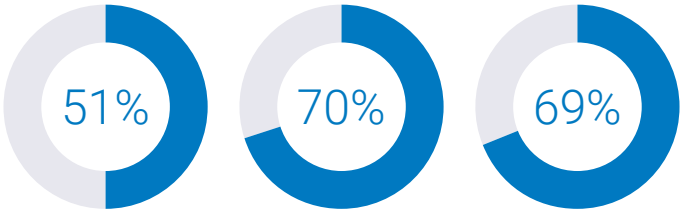
Dr Stephanie Bullen,
National Animal Health & Welfare Lead, Dairy Australia



The short answer: there's room for improvement.

Some herds have made big improvements over the past five to ten years. But nationally, Australia still trails New Zealand and Ireland. We also haven't made the gains seen in the US. The introduction of the daughter fertility Australian breeding value (ABV) has improved the fertility of our cows. But genetics alone will not fix the problem. Day-to-day herd management still matters.

In seasonal and split-calving herds, the average 6-week in-calf rates are:



Australia | **New Zealand** | **Ireland** (6-week calving rate)

Australian year-round herds perform at a similar level to US herds. However, US 21-day pregnancy rates have risen from 14% to 21% over the past 20 years. Australian year-round reproductive performance has barely changed.

What is holding us back?

Every herd is different. To identify the biggest opportunities, Dairy Australia and Dr John Morton analysed reproductive data from more than 1,200 Australian herds. The analysis identified four key areas for improvement:

1. Heat detection
2. Artificial insemination (AI) technique
3. Data recording practices
4. Heat stress

John's other recent work also identified two priorities: growing replacement heifers well and using high-fertility sires.

Heat detection

Submission rates quickly show whether enough eligible cows are being mated. Herds not meeting the targets below should urgently review their heat detection practices:

- **Seasonal and split-calving herds:** at least 60% of eligible cows mated in the first three weeks
- **Year-round herds**: at least 40% of eligible cows mated by 80 days in milk

Good heat detection remains essential on most Australian dairy farms. Dairy Australia's Heat Detection workshops help staff recognise heats and use detection aids correctly. During joining, an "all hands on deck" approach can also lift submission rates.

Many farmers are now investing in collars and other wearable heat detection technology. Several farmers I spoke to described the technology as "game changing." It can take pressure off milking staff, especially where confidence using heat detection aids, such as scratchies, is low.

Automated heat detection is most likely to lift reproductive performance where submission rates are poor. Herds that already detect heats well may save time and labour but may not get more cows in calf.

Fixed-time AI removes the need to detect heat before insemination. It is widely used in Wisconsin and is also being adopted by some Australian seasonal, split-calving and year-round herds. It must be carefully planned with your vet or reproductive adviser. Poorly managed programs can become expensive very quickly.

Artificial insemination technique

In some herds, conception rates varied between AI technicians. Herds using a professional AI technician should check that the technician is NHIA accredited. Farmers who inseminate their own cows should use Dairy Australia's semen handling and insemination checklists to regularly review practices.

Data recording practices

The causes of poor reproductive performance are not always obvious. Good records help identify where the problem is occurring. Use submission-rate targets above and check progress regularly.

Useful records include:

- birth and calving dates
- health events
- bull ID
- semen type (e.g. frozen, fresh, sexed)
- AI technician
- synchrony and non-cycling cow treatments

These records can show whether problems are linked to particular cows, treatments, semen types, technicians or times of year.

More herd management programs now have phone apps. This makes it easier to record information in the paddock, dairy or yards.

Heat stress

Farmers in northern dairy regions already knew heat stress was hurting fertility and John's analysis confirmed it. Some year-round herds are reconsidering whether joining during the hottest months is worthwhile. Others are shifting more joining into cooler periods. Herds that continue joining through summer will need strong heat-stress prevention to protect fertility.

Replacement heifers

First-lactation milk production suggests that heifers may not be reaching their growth potential on three-quarters of farms. Failure to get back in calf is also the main reason young cows leave the herd early. Farmers are often caught out by unexpectedly poor growth rates. Because heifers are smaller, they cannot eat as much as mature cows. This makes good-quality feed especially important. Poor growth can be difficult to see. Regular weighing is the best way to know whether heifers are on target.

Genetics

Farmers are using more high-fertility sires than they were 15 years ago. However, many replacement heifers are still bred from bulls with average or below-average daughter fertility. Farmers should aim to use sires with a daughter fertility ABV of 105 or higher. High-fertility bulls are readily available. A recent Good Bulls App search found 214 Holstein bulls and 49 Jersey bulls with a daughter fertility ABV of 105 or higher.



Next steps

Dairy Australia is using these findings to update its fertility tools, resources and training for farmers and advisers.

Dairy Australia thanks Dr John Morton for his ongoing work with Dairy Australia, and the farmers and advisers who contributed data and expertise to the project.



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New research to take aim at pinkeye

Dr Stephanie Bullen,
National Animal Health & Welfare Lead, Dairy Australia

A new Dairy Australia research project will examine the causes of pinkeye outbreaks and develop farm-ready guidance to support prevention and control.

The project will take a world-first approach to understanding why infectious bovine keratoconjunctivitis – known as IBK or pinkeye - outbreaks occur. It will investigate the multiple factors that contribute to the costly and debilitating disease on farm, and use genomics to identify the different strains of the bacteria Moraxella bovis that cause the disease and to determine whether some are linked to more severe outbreaks.

The project will deliver guidelines outlining key control strategies for farms across different regions. It is one of the initiatives in Dairy Australia's 2026-27 Annual Investment Plan.

The idea for the project came directly from dairy farmers.

"We were contacted by a couple of farmers who said they were having huge issues with this and just couldn't get a handle on it," said Dr Stephanie Bullen, National Animal Health & Welfare Lead at Dairy Australia.

Dairy Australia then validated the issue across the country using the 2025 Animal Husbandry and Genetics Survey, which asked farmers to identify their biggest animal health and welfare concerns. Pinkeye was ranked third, behind fertility and mastitis.

Discussion with farmers and vets confirmed it is a major issue. "A particular farmer I spoke to down in Tasmania said they are having such headaches with pinkeye on their farm, they're thinking about just buying in heifers, not rearing them anymore," Dr Bullen said. "And for me, that's major alarm bells. That's the tip of the iceberg."

Pinkeye is a problem on dairy farms across Australia and on beef farms in southern areas. It is less of an issue for beef farms in northern Australia, as Bos indicus breeds are less susceptible to it.

Dr Bullen said in severe outbreaks, up to 80% of calves on a farm can be impacted. The disease is extremely painful for the animals, causing ulcers on the eye while impacting growth and liveweight gain. In severe cases, the eye needs to be surgically removed.

It also creates a strain on farmers. Managing an outbreak is relentless and labour-intensive, requiring farmers to treat calves daily, often during high-pressure times of the year.

A vaccine is available, but it targets only some of the strains of Moraxella bovis present in Australia.

Dr Bullen said the project aligns with her focus on delivering research that farmers can put into practice. During her 15 years in the dairy industry, she has led ground-breaking research into drench resistance in cattle that ultimately contributed to the registration of multi-active drenches for Australian dairy farmers.

The project will be led by Dr Barbara Brito Rodriguez from New South Wales Department of Primary Industries and the Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute and Professor John House from the University of Sydney, with support from several other research partner organisations. Dr Bullen says the research team is currently finalising the study design and is exploring options to expand the project to include beef farms as well as dairy farms.

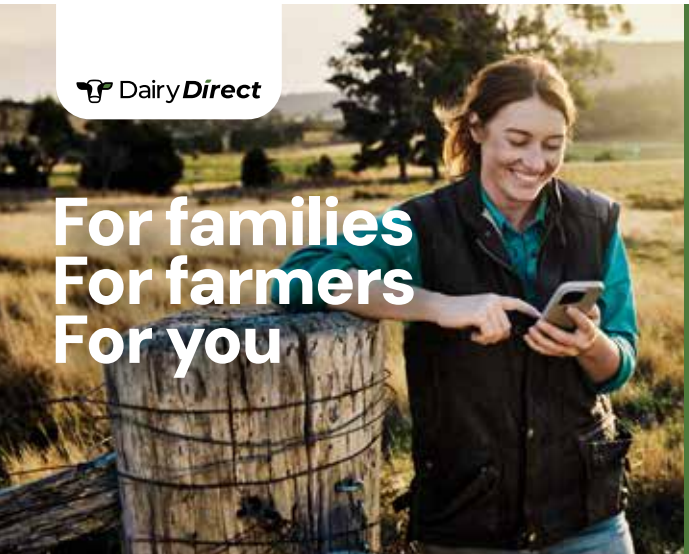
In the first year, the team will work with five to ten farms to pilot data collection, including bacterial samples and information about farm management practices, such as animal feeding regimes, fly loads and animal breeds. The team will also develop a system for scoring eye lesions.

In the second year, the project will expand to collect this information from dairy farms across Australia.

Throughout the course of the project, researchers will use genomic sequencing to analyse bacteria collected from the eyes.

The project team will share findings as they emerge so that farmers can benefit from the information as soon as possible.

Dairy Australia's 2026-27 annual investments are closely aligned with the strategic priorities identified in the Dairy Australia Strategic Plan 2030. This research falls under Strategic Priority 2: Innovating for Future Success, which includes building herd productivity through healthier cows with fewer disease issues.



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2026 Event Calendar

DATE	EVENT	REGION	LOCATION	CONTACT
November				
3- 4	**Top Fodder (2-day workshop)**	Mid North Coast NSW	Raleigh	Maree Searle
9	**Farm Business Fundamentals (Day 1)**	Sunshine Coast	Kandanga	Belinda Haddow
10	**Farm Business Fundamentals (Day 1)**	South East Qld	Boonah	Belinda Haddow
11	**Farm Business Fundamentals (Day 1)**	Darling Downs	Oakey	Belinda Haddow
19	**Subtropical Dairy Annual General Meeting**	All regions	Online	Michela Secci
20	**Cash, Costs & Margins**	Far North Qld	Malanda	Howard Smith
23	**Sponsoring and Retaining Overseas Employees**	All regions	Online	Melva Tyson
25	**Healthy Hooves**	Far North Coast NSW	Casino	Maree Searle
26	**Healthy Hooves**	Mid North Coast NSW	Bowraville	Maree Searle
27	**Dairy Australia Annual General Meeting**	National	Online	Carly Potts
December				
2	**Farm Business Fundamentals (Day 2)**	Sunshine Coast	Kandanga	Belinda Haddow
3	**Farm Business Fundamentals (Day 2)**	South East Qld	Boonah	Belinda Haddow
4	**Farm Business Fundamentals (Day 2)**	Darling Downs	Oakey	Belinda Haddow
TBC	**Healthy Hooves**	Darling Downs	TBC	Belinda Haddow

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Michela Secci	0484 525 588
Howard Smith	0409 965 948
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