



Cool Cows farmer case study

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HEAD: Cool cows pay, even in mild climate (770 words)

Lee and Jill McKenzie dairy in a seemingly ‘mild climate’ at Mt Compass, SA, just 10km from the coast, but they’ve taken simple and cheap steps to manage heat stress in their herd after being caught off guard when an unseasonal heat wave hit last November.

And they have already seen the benefits from managing heat stress, despite average temperatures for the rest of the summer.

With help from their sons, Heath and Nicholas, and up to 12 employees (full time and part time), the McKenzies milk 1000 cows year round at their Tooperang property. It’s a pasture-based system with grain being the only purchased feed.

“Our hot months are usually January and February but we generally get a sea breeze by early afternoon, so we’d never thought much about heat stress... until last November,” said Mr McKenzie.

An unseasonal heat wave in November 2009 brought 10 days straight of temperatures over 35 degrees C with overnight temperatures staying above 25 degrees C. Milk production dropped 3-4L/cow, clinical cases of mastitis increased, cell count doubled to 300,000 and three cows had to be euthanized; they were already on medication and could not cope with the extra stress.

The McKenzies may have been caught off guard but they were determined to do something to improve cow comfort. A quick and cheap option made a world of difference. In the middle of the heat wave they installed a sprinkler system at the dairy yard, to cool cows as they wait to be milked.

“It took about four hours effort and cost less than \$300 but the benefits were instant. The cows stopped panting and started eating in the bail. And although milk production didn’t recover instantly, at least we stopped the decline,” said Mr McKenzie.

“The rest of the summer has been normal but we’ve used the sprinklers heaps of times and I’m wondering why we didn’t do it years ago!”

Mr McKenzie subscribed to the Cool Cows alert service which sends a message when the weather forecast indicates heat stress conditions in the coming days.

“The alert system allows us to be better prepared for heat stress conditions, especially when it comes at unusual times of the year,” he said.

In February, the McKenzies hosted a Cool Cows farm workshop.

“One of the things they do at the workshop is score the host farm in terms of heat stress management. I was keen to see how we scored and what else we might be able to do,” he said.

Although the McKenzies scored well, they picked up more ideas to improve heat stress

management at little or no cost.

“The Cool Cows workshop made us much more conscious of giving the cows plenty of access to water in hot weather, and the importance of having a water trough after the dairy exit,” said Mr McKenzie.

When they built their 50-unit rotary several years ago the McKenzies decided not to have a water trough at the dairy exit in case the cows lingered there and slowed down cow flow.

“But we installed one after the Cool Cows workshop day and cow flow is just the same. It was a very cheap way to improve cow comfort in hot weather,” he said.

The workshop also highlighted the importance of giving the cows access to shade in hot weather.

Although the McKenzies were selecting paddocks with shade for hot days they picked up the idea to position silage stacks near shade. It won’t cost a cent; it’s just a simple change to make at harvest.

“We are feeling much better prepared to manage heat stress next summer,” said Mr McKenzie.

Xhead: Plan ahead

Dr Steve Little, who manages the Cool Cows program for Dairy Australia, said now is a good time to think about what can be done during the cooler months to better manage heat stress in dairy herds next summer.

And a good place to begin is the *Cool Cows* website. It guides farmers through the process of reviewing how cows coped in the last hot season and identifying improvements to help cows cope better next year.

“You can use local weather data and your herd records to look at what impact heat stress had on your herd’s milk production and reproductive performance,” Dr Little said.

Management options such as better placement of troughs, improving trough flow rates, providing shade in the dairy yard or installing sprinklers are not necessarily expensive but they need to be done well in advance.

“A little effort now will save you getting caught out when the hot weather returns,” said Dr Little.

For more information visit www.coolcows.com.au or phone Steve Little 0400 004 841

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Caption: Sprinklers installed at Lee McKenzie’s dairy yard drastically reduced heat stress and cost less than \$300.

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About Grains2Milk (background information for media)

The Grains2milk program provides dairy farmers with the training, resources and support they need to make better decisions about using grains and concentrates in their businesses. The program is funded by dairy farmers through Dairy Australia.