

# WestVic Dairy News

May 2026

## From drought to recovery: reflections & lessons

Swan Marsh dairy farmer Jason Smith knows firsthand the toll the drought beginning in 2024 has taken on South-west Victorian farms.

As conditions worsened during what many describe as the region's worst drought in living memory, Jason chose to share his story to help highlight the challenges being faced by farming families across the region.

"It was the hardest 18 months to two years of my farming career," Jason admits.

The drought impacted his mental health and his farm business, forcing him to lay off his two full-time staff, leaving him to work seven long days a week. He also had to borrow money to keep the cows fed and move a lot of his herd interstate.

During the toughest times, it was Jason's community connections that kept him afloat and a Dairy Australia Colac Discussion Group session was the turning point to get him back on track.

"We had a wonderful debrief session with the Colac Discussion Group after the worst of the drought," Jason said.

"It was almost cathartic because we'd all been through a traumatic event. When we explained what we felt, what we did right and what we did wrong, there was understanding, commiserating and no-one beating their chest claiming they'd done everything right."

Discussion groups offer dairy farmers a valuable opportunity to get together with other farmers to share experiences, discuss ideas and explore new technologies. Topics are based on whatever is of interest to those in the group and range from farm business, to feed and herd productivity.

A fifth-generation dairy farmer originally from northern Victoria, Jason was no stranger to drought. Ironically, he sold his farm at Horfield in 2013 to move south to a leased property at Simpson in search of more reliable rainfall. He moved to his current leased farm at Swan Marsh five years ago.



Jason Smith's farm in the drought 2025



Jason Smith's farm in April 2026

While Jason spoke to the media both locally and nationally about the prolonged drought conditions – determined to present an accurate picture of conditions and the challenges – he admits he also shut himself off personally during some of the toughest periods.

“I laid off the staff so I couldn’t go anywhere. It was only after the drought that I re-employed people and had the ability to go out.”

As president of the Simpson Lions Club, Jason helped to facilitate a Need for Feed hay run to the region, helping to reconnect him with the community.

“While coordinating the hay run, I spoke to a lot of people who were in a really bad way, far worse than myself,” he said.

“The hay run was a coping mechanism – it gave me something to think about and helping others made me feel better.”

Jason appreciated one-on-one support from Rural Financial Counsellors, vets, field officers and WestVic Dairy staff who visited his farm to help with a Federal Government grant application and with HR when he started re-employing people, eliminating a lot of headaches.

“In the worst of the drought, WestVic Dairy aimed to touch base with every dairy farm, which helps just to know someone cares”, explains Jason. “When I let the staff go and was living at home on my own, it was very isolating. Having Lions Club members dropping meals in and WestVic Dairy checking in really helped.”

Months on, Jason has emerged with a few scars and some key learnings – many obtained from the Discussion Group debrief session and follow-ups – that he knows will help him through the next crisis.

“You need to be forward planning but be more flexible with your plans,” he said.

“I parked cows in Queensland. I had limited options and made a decision, but it didn’t work because the cows didn’t acclimatise to the tropical heat. It’s a learning curve. I’ve never parked cows before and if I do it again, it will be much closer to home.”

Communication and keeping debt manageable are further priorities.

“You need to sit down with someone and work out your best options,” says Jason.

“Communication is really important, including with creditors. I still have ongoing debt from the drought, as I’m sure everyone has, but I give what I can when I can and I talk to the bank and maintain that relationship.”

Jason also urges farmers not to be judgemental of others and to look after their mental health.

“We never turn off when we live on the farm. You need to get off the farm – you don’t have to spend a lot of money, just go and have a picnic in the park.”

While Jason is doing better financially and mentally with a record cut of hay and silage last spring, he has decided to downsize his herd, mostly due to problems finding reliable staff.

But he is determined and will continue farming.

“I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t love it. You don’t get up at four o’clock in the morning unless you enjoy it. The drought was really tough, it made me re-think and change my priorities to spend more quality time with family and friends instead of solely the farm, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

#### Find out more

To find out more about local Discussion Groups or other events, contact the Western Victoria team by calling **5557 1000**, email [info@westvicdairy.com.au](mailto:info@westvicdairy.com.au) or visit [dairyaustralia.com.au/westvic-dairy](http://dairyaustralia.com.au/westvic-dairy)



## How portable solar is reshaping farm power

On a dairy farm in Swan Marsh, Victoria, innovation isn't coming in the form of bigger machinery or new sheds – it's arriving in a shipping container.

Inside, a transportable solar microgrid is being integrated into a working dairy operation – offering a glimpse into how Australian farmers are rethinking energy, risk and resilience in an increasingly uncertain environment.

For dairy farmers Peter and Trish Mulheron, the shift began with a familiar pressure: rising costs and unreliable power.

"We first looked at solar to try and cut costs," Peter explains. "But traditional systems didn't really suit dairy. You're milking in the dark, so it's not always cost-effective."

Like many farmers, their operation depends on consistent, high-energy processes – particularly hot water systems, one of the largest power demands on farm. At the same time, their location on the edge of the power grid, combined with increasingly frequent weather events, meant outages were becoming more common and longer-lasting. That increased the risk of milk spoilage and costly disruptions.

"We can have up to 10,000 litres of milk stored at any time. If the power goes out, that's a significant loss."

The solution didn't come from a supplier – it started with Peter's son, Matthew.

While studying electrical engineering at the University of Melbourne, Matthew became involved with a company developing modular, off-grid renewable systems. They needed a real-world site to test their technology. The Mulheron farm became that proving ground.

What began as a small pilot quickly evolved.

"We started by running just our hot water systems for a few months," Peter says. "From there, they gathered data, refined the design, and built it up."

After being trialled across other farms and even a winery, the system was eventually tailored specifically to suit the Mulherons' operation.

Unlike traditional fixed solar, the system is designed with farming realities in mind.

The solar panels fold out on-site and can be deployed in hours. It's modular – meaning it can be expanded – and critically, it's portable.

"If we don't need it here in the future, we can move it or even on-sell it," Peter says.

"That flexibility makes a big difference when you're thinking about capital investment."

The system charges batteries during the day, which then run the dairy – providing stable, consistent power regardless of grid conditions.

Today, the Mulherons are operating completely off-grid.

"Grid prices just keep increasing. With the battery, we've got stable power. It takes away that vulnerability."

While cost savings were part of the equation, the bigger shift has been in how the Mulherons think about risk.

Reliable, independent power reduces exposure not just to price volatility, but to operational disruption – a critical factor in a sector where production is continuous and perishable.

It's also why interest in the system is growing well beyond dairy.

"We've had a lot of interest from other industries – even shellfish – especially with the fuel challenges at the moment," Peter says.

"It would work really well on irrigation farms, where you might need power in different locations."

This kind of innovation is increasingly representative of Australian dairy – practical, adaptive and grounded in real on-farm challenges.

Rather than waiting for perfect solutions, farmers are working with researchers, industry and technology providers to test, refine and implement new approaches that suit their operations.

For Peter, that hands-on involvement has been critical.

"It's important to be part of the design process if you can – to make sure it actually works for your farm."

Despite the success, Peter is clear that adopting new technology isn't without its challenges.

"The biggest hurdle is trust – there are plenty of people selling solar, and not all of it stacks up," he says. "You've got to do your research and understand what you actually need."

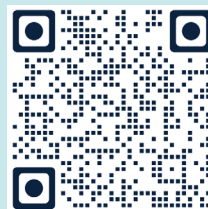
As energy markets shift, solutions like this are giving farmers more control over how they power their operations and manage risk.

For the Australian dairy industry, that's increasingly important – supporting day-to-day reliability on farm and helping ensure consistent supply to both domestic and export markets.



### Find out more

Reducing energy use on farm is one of the quickest and easiest ways to reduce farm emissions and costs. Dairy Australia has worked with energy experts to develop resources to support dairy farmers with deciding when and where to target their efforts:



# Rearing healthy calves: if you're not tracking the numbers, you're guessing

By Debbie Twiss, Extension Advisor – Animal Health and Performance

Autumn is a popular time to calve in Western Victoria for good reason. Compared with early spring, conditions are often more settled, nights are cool rather than cold, yards are generally drier, and calves face less environmental stress. These favourable conditions give calves a strong start, and they also make it easier to see when outcomes are drifting away from where they should be. That's where monitoring calf mortality and morbidity becomes a valuable management tool.

Dairy Australia's national guidelines recommend aiming for less than 3% calf mortality and less than 10% calf illness from birth to weaning. These benchmarks are designed as trigger points, not targets to tolerate. When illness or deaths rise above these levels, it's a signal to review calf rearing practices and, where appropriate, involve an animal health professional such as your local veterinarian. A cluster of deaths or illness within a week is also a red flag to seek support to manage a problem as efficiently as possible.

These national guideline figures are calculated across a specific calf rearing period. Mortality is the total number of calves that die before weaning divided by the total number reared, expressed as a percentage. That is, 3% mortality means three calves in every 100 calves born died before weaning. Morbidity is measured by the number of calves treated for illness (e.g. scours or pneumonia) with electrolytes, antibiotics or other medications, divided by the total number of calves reared in the calving period of interest. Simple, consistent records allow you to detect issues early and compare performance between seasons.



Across Western Victoria, we are seeing farms using data to tighten systems and protect margins. At a recent Rearing Healthy Calves workshop in the Colac region, participants visited a batch calving farm that calves around 1,100 Holstein Friesian cows across three calving periods each year. About 36% of farms in Western Victoria use batch calving, close to the national average of 38% recorded in 2022. On the farm visited, around 35% of calves are reared as heifer replacements, while the remainder are dairy beef calves sold at approximately one week of age. This makes early calf health critical—not only for future milking cows, but also for meeting buyer expectations for strong and healthy sale calves.

Colostrum management remains one of the most influential fundamentals. In Western Victoria 86% of dairy farms provide three to four litres of colostrum to each calf, reflecting a strong uptake of best practice. Colostrum is the calf's only source of antibodies at birth, because antibodies cannot pass through the cow's placenta. Adequate, timely delivery of high quality first milking colostrum reduces scours and other diseases, lowers mortality, improves growth rates and supports better lifetime milk production and fertility in heifer calves.

Milk feeding strategies also influence longer term outcomes. On the farm visited during the workshop, calves were consuming eight to ten litres of milk per day by four to five weeks of age.

According to the Dairy Australia National Dairy Farmer Survey (April 2023), 65% of Western Victorian farms feed more than five litres of milk per calf per day once calves are over five weeks old, slightly below the national average of 69%. Research shows that around 22% of the variation in first lactation milk yield is explained by pre weaning nutrition and growth rates, highlighting how influential this early period is for growth of both calf and udder development.

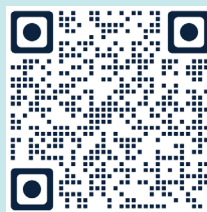
When loss thresholds are exceeded, the consequences add up—higher treatment costs, extra labour, reduced value of sale calves, fewer quality replacements and lower lifetime milk production. Even in a favourable autumn, those losses can quietly erode profitability if they aren't monitored.

This season, take time to review your own calf data from birth to weaning. If mortality is above 3% or illness exceeds 10%, use those numbers as a prompt to investigate where improvements could increase your farm profitability.

## Find out more

Contact Debbie Twiss, Extension Advisor call 0467 528 111 or email [debbie@westvicdairy.com.au](mailto:debbie@westvicdairy.com.au)

Scan QR code for Managing Calf Health resources



## Have you heard of Q fever?

### What is Q fever?

Q fever or birthing fluids is an infectious disease caused by the bacteria *Coxiella burnetii*. It can spread from infected animals to humans through direct and indirect contact, such as dust or contaminated animal products, animal urine or faeces or milk.

Q fever symptoms can vary – with some people experiencing severe flu-like symptoms and long-lasting, debilitating impacts of chronic Q fever.

Q fever vaccination is the most effective way to prevent Q fever in the workplace and reduce the risk of exposure to farmers and farm workers. You only need to be vaccinated for Q fever once for long term protection.

### Subsidised Q fever testing and vaccinations for Victorian dairy farmers

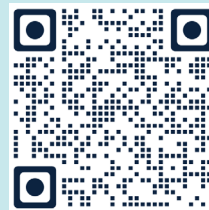
If you are a Victorian dairy farm owner, employee, or share or lease a dairy farm and are aged 15 years or over, you are eligible to access subsidised Q fever testing and vaccinations. This is available until May 2027.

Participating medical centres across South-west Victoria will run clinics requiring two appointments, scheduled one week apart, for Q fever testing and vaccination. The first round of clinics are planned to start in the region in mid-June.

This initiative is part of the Rethinking Q fever project led by GippsDairy and funded by WorkSafe Victoria and Dairy Australia.

Register to be notified when clinic dates and locations become available in South-west Victoria.

Scan QR code to register:



## WestVic Dairy Focus Farm report

### Bostocks Creek

Date	11/05/2026
Milking area	212 ha
<b>Production</b>	
Cow numbers	249
Milk solids/cow/day	1.88kg
Litres/cow/day	24.1L
Fat	4.62%
Protein	3.21%
<b>Grazing and supplement feeding (cow/day)</b>	
Barley costing 37c/kg DM (\$337/t)	4.0kg
Profeed costing 72c/kg DM (\$650/t)	2.0kg
Almonds 19c/kg DM (\$175/t)	5.5kg
Silage 26c/kg DM	2.0kg
Rape (kg DM)	0kg
Pasture (kg DM)	4kg
Area in rotation	113ha
Rotation Length	37 days
Grazing area (ha per 24 hours)	3.0ha
<b>Daily income over supplementary feed costs (IOSFC)</b>	
Mar Milk Price (\$/kgMS)	\$9.86
Income/cow	\$18.54
Supplementary feed cost/cow	\$5.50
<b>IOSFC/cow</b>	<b>\$13.04</b>
<b>IOSFC/ha</b>	<b>\$15.32</b>

### Notes

- The herd will peak at just over 300 cows this winter, currently milking 172 fresh cows and 77 carry over cows. We sold 50 cows this week.
- Currently rearing 110 calves including 60 Angus calves.
- Most new pastures are up but not likely to be in the grazing rotation until late June. Broadleaf weeds have been sprayed over some of the farm now.
- Urea has been applied to some paddocks; 50 kg/ha on newly sown paddocks, and 70 kg/ha on established pastures.
- At this week's meeting we will discuss the plan for joining. With the use of the data from the cow collars the non-cyclers will be identified and joined on the first day of calving. There will be five Angus bulls to run with the herd after AI. 106 yearling heifers were weighed recently aiming for 370 kg at joining.



Contact us if you would like know more about our services and resources

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