

WestVic Dairy News

September 2026

Spring regional update

By Libby Swayn, Regional Manager – Western Victoria



Welcome to the spring edition of the WestVic Dairy News. Our newsletter will now be published quarterly, so keep an eye out for it in your mailbox at the beginning of each season.

As I write this on a cold, wet day in mid-August, the season is a stark contrast to what we were experiencing 12 months ago. Conditions have been very wet across much of the south, and it is encouraging to see dams full or filling. In the northern parts of our region, however, many farmers are still looking for more runoff.

After spending five months as Acting Regional Manager, I was pleased to accept the permanent position in June. It is a privilege to lead our local team and continue working alongside the broader Dairy Australia team to support dairy farmers across the region.

We were also excited to welcome our new Farm Engagement Lead, Jess Roberts, in mid-May.

Jess brings a strong agricultural background and was previously a lecturer at Marcus Oldham. She and her partner, Toby, run a beef property near Colac and are busy raising their two young boys.

Earlier this year, after consultation with dairy farmers in Western Victoria and other dairy regions in Australia, Dairy Australia released its Strategic Plan 2030.

The plan sets the direction and priorities for the industry over the next five years, focusing on three key areas that are all aimed at strengthening farm profitability:

- **Unlocking today's potential** – improving farm business performance through better decision-making, practical on-farm change, and people development.
- **Innovating for future success** – driving research and innovation that delivers productivity gains through both incremental improvements and emerging technologies.
- **Ensuring a sustainable industry** – bringing the industry together to deliver on dairy's sustainability commitments, strengthen competitiveness, and build community trust and support.

These priorities have helped shape our annual extension and engagement plan for Western Victoria. Over the next 12 months, we will be delivering a range of programs covering business management, animal performance, feed and pasture management, and sustainability. Each program is designed to help strengthen the profitability and resilience of your farm business.

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We greatly value your input and ideas as we plan and deliver these activities. Please reach out and let us know how we can best support the needs of your business and our dairy communities.

The next edition of *WestVic Dairy News* will arrive in December, after what we hope will be a productive and busy few months of harvest. As the workload ramps up, remember to look after both your physical and mental wellbeing. Managing fatigue, for yourself and your team, can be challenging when the days are long and the workload is high.

Taking the time to carry out machinery safety checks and having regular conversations about farm safety with staff, contractors and visitors can help prevent accidents and keep everyone safe throughout the season.

Wishing you all a safe and successful spring.

Five takeaways from SIDE 2026

By Sheeraz Ahmad, Extension Advisor – Farm Business Management

More cows, more milk,
more production – does it
always mean more profit?
Not necessarily.
Better business decisions
can make the real difference.

One of the strongest messages from the South Island Dairy Event (SIDE) 2026 was that profitable dairy businesses focus on making informed decisions that create long-term value.

During my recent visit to Christchurch for SIDE 2026, farmers, industry leaders and service providers came together under the theme 'turning knowledge into value'.

As part of Dairy Australia's Farm Business Management Co-Development Project, the visit was a great opportunity to share ideas, learn from successful New Zealand dairy businesses and explore practical approaches to farm business management.

Here are five key takeaways from SIDE 2026 that could strengthen your farm business.

1 Know your numbers

The highest-performing farms closely monitor both financial and physical performance. They regularly review budgets, monitor cash flow and benchmark their farm performance year on year against similar farming operations. This allows them to identify opportunities early and make confident decisions before small issues become costly problems.

2 Profit matters more than production

One consistently shared message from the event was that increasing production doesn't always increase profit. Successful farmers focus on controlling input costs, improving efficiency and ensuring every dollar invested delivers a return. Sometimes small improvements in feeding, pasture management or operating costs can have a bigger impact on farm profitability.

3 Every farm system can be profitable

Whether your business operates a low, medium or high-input system, there isn't a single 'best' model. The key is matching your farming system to your land, resources, labour and management capability.

Farmers spoke about the importance of continually refining their own system to achieve good long-term results rather than trying to replicate someone else.

4 Invest in people as well as infrastructure

High-performing farms don't just invest in sheds, machinery or cows – they invest in people. Good leadership, clear communication and developing capable staff can improve productivity, strengthen workplace culture and help retain good employees. Investing in your people is just as important as investing in physical assets.

5 Technology is becoming a business tool

Artificial intelligence and digital technologies are rapidly becoming practical tools on dairy farms. From analysing pasture growth and herd performance to supporting better day-to-day decision-making, technology is helping farmers use data more effectively. The message wasn't to adopt every new gadget, but to understand which technologies can genuinely improve your business.

Looking ahead

Another key theme throughout the conference was that wealth creation doesn't happen overnight. Farmers who successfully progressed from employees to farm ownership consistently spoke about disciplined financial management, setting clear goals, building strong partnerships and continually learning throughout their careers.

Rather than relying on a single breakthrough, many described their success as the result of making better decisions year after year with information and resources they already had. Success being a more profitable and resilient dairy businesses.



If you'd like to find more about Dairy Australia's Farm Business Management services and resources, feel free to contact me on **0414 684 065** or email sheeraz@westvicdairy.com.au.

Learning to lead: a dairy duo's management shift

By Matt Wood, Extension Advisor – Workforce



Dairy farming couple Adrian Parsons and Tori Boyle credit the Manager/2IC Program with strengthening their management approach – particularly people management skills.

Adrian and Tori manage one of the five Boshier Farms in Ecklin South, in Western Victoria milking 800 Holsteins alongside one fulltime employee and up to three backpackers, depending on the season.

Tori says the Manager/2IC Program has made a noticeable improvement to her management and processes.

The program equips participants with the knowledge, skills and resources to improve people and business management.

"We learned a lot across the board, but the people management component really stood out," said Tori. "We've always known that everyone works differently, but gaining a deeper understanding of those differences – and how to communicate more effectively – has genuinely improved how we lead our team,"

"We've started using more openended questions, improved our rostering, and planned our time better in the lead up to busy periods. It's reduced pressure on us and on the team."

Adrian has been dairy farming his whole life and has been in his current management role for three years. Even with decades of experience, he found the course worthwhile.

"We split calves... 500 in autumn and 300 in spring. With the workload changing so much, we bring in backpackers during peak times to keep labour efficient," Adrian explained.

"With different nationalities and varying levels of English, communication is crucial. We've always held weekly team meetings, but now they're more of a two-way conversation rather than Tori and I just giving instructions. Backing up those discussions through our WhatsApp group has also helped ensure everyone knows what's happening and when."

The benefits of completing the 2IC/Manager program extended beyond Adrian and Tori. Farm owners Jed Boshier and Ella Credlin say the program is also a smart investment in their business.

"Good people are the reason we can do what we do, so we want to support their growth," Jed said.

"Courses like this are a win for everyone – they learn new skills, and the business improves as a result. We've already sent three of our managers and plan to send another to the next intake."

The Manager/2IC Program focuses on skills that are harder to learn on the job. Alongside a strong emphasis on people management, the course covers farm business management in depth, including budgeting, data analysis, business obligations, and performance reporting. Participants then bring everything together through planning for success and identifying next steps.

Adrian explained that he's looking forward to applying more of the business management skills.

"We work to budgets now but going forward it'll be great to work more closely with Jed and Ella on detailed budgeting, benchmarking, and business performance," he said.

"Overall, the course was excellent. Some things we could implement straight away, and others we'll return to over time. We now have a much better understanding of the behind-the-scenes side of running a farm business."

Find out more

To learn more about the workforce support available, contact Matt Wood, by email at matthew@westvicdairy.com.au or phone 0417 669 597 or visit dairyaustralia.com.au.

The value of a structured approach to finances

By Aylish Tobin-Salzman, Communications Advisor



Between raising three young children and running a 300-cow dairy farm at Bostocks Creek in Western Victoria, Pete and Marnie Kerr have plenty on their plate. Since buying their farm of 121ha in 2022 and leasing an additional 160ha, they've used a structured approach to their finances to steadily build their business. Their disciplined approach helped them achieve a recent milestone: purchasing 64ha they had previously been leasing.

Pete and Marnie say that by keeping a close eye on stocking rates, milk production, business costs, and overall profitability, they have been able to identify opportunities, make confident decisions, and build a strong foundation for the future.

"I grew up in Melbourne and started an apprenticeship with family friends," said Pete.

"From there we progressed onto a low-level share agreement and then took on 50/50 share farming and then we were fortunate to be in the position to purchase 300 acres four years ago."

For Marnie, having a clear understanding of the business finances has created opportunities beyond the farm gate.

"We've got three beautiful kids and I've been lucky enough to be able to take two years off work to really focus on family because we've had such a tight understanding of finances and how we can support not just the farm but our family as well," she said.

"My physical involvement fluctuates with family life and employee availability, but I do the books every month and have the data sitting there ready for budgets.

"I think the more you work on finances together, you feel like more of a team. Having a really good understanding of our finances month to month has really helped the business go forward and our family life to thrive."

Marnie explained that participating in the Focus Farm Program has kept financial management front of mind.

"I like doing the books and having everything organised. I think the Focus Farm Program has really kept us on our toes with monthly budgeting and making sure we always have all the finances up to date," said Marnie.

A Focus Farm is supported by a peer group made up of a Dairy Australia team member, farmers and service providers who offer guidance, expertise and practical advice to support Focus Farmers to achieve set goals over a defined period.

Pete uses Dairy Australia's Cash Budgeting Tool to compare actual performance against their budget.

"Each month I enter our data into Dairy Australia's Cash Budgeting Tool, (and) update it with the actuals compared to our budgeted figures. This gives us a good idea of how we're tracking," he said.

"If there's any surprises that turn up, we can plug them in and adjust our plans, making decisions about what we're going to do based on what the numbers are telling us."

The couple also uses the Dairy Australia's Dairy Standard Chart of Accounts and DairyBase to support their financial planning.

"Our accountants helped us set the Dairy Standard Chart of Accounts up from the get-go," Marnie said.

"As our business has grown and changed, we've made some more purchases that deviated from the standard chart, (so) our accountants have adapted it as we've gone along, which has been fabulous and very helpful," said Marnie.

Pete says years of financial and production data continue to play an important role in shaping the farm's future.

"We've got financials and DairyBase data going back nearly seven years."

Keeping accurate records has helped the family demonstrate the strength of their business when seeking finance.

"I think it's so important to keep detailed records. We have always been able to provide the bank with good information. This has allowed us to pay the cows and machinery off, and secure a loan without high levels of equity," said Pete.

"We keep going back to the DairyBase dataset to make plans and set goals for where we want to go.

"Going forward, we'll continue to use DairyBase to monitor our financial position so that we can continue to improve our business. We have some infrastructure improvements and other big projects we are working towards."

For Pete and Marnie, strong financial management is about creating opportunities, making confident decisions and building a future that supports both their farm and their family.

Find out more

Dairy Australia offers a range of business programs and resources for dairy farmers at every stage of their journey, from those starting out to experienced operators looking to take their business in a new direction. To learn more about the support available, contact the Western Victoria team or visit dairyaustralia.com.au.

Milk let-down and setting up the best milking environment

By Meaghan Johnston – Head of Milk Supply Bega Group

This month, we're pleased to feature a guest article from Meghan Johnston, Head of Milk Supply for Bega. Whilst dairy farmers are familiar with the basics of milk harvesting, new research presented at the IDF Mastitis and Milking Technology Symposium in Stockholm in March 2026 provided some fascinating insights into the physiological triggers behind milk release.

As dairy herds have become larger and milking technology has become more advanced, research continues into milk extraction, milk let-down timing, and mastitis prevention. Understanding how cows release milk and how milking equipment interacts with the teat is becoming increasingly important for both milk harvesting efficiency and optimal udder health.

Milk let-down is the first critical step in efficient and healthy milking. The second is the milking machine itself. Optimal machine function and its interaction with the cow's teats are crucial for mastitis prevention and overall animal health.

So what is milk let-down?

Milk let-down is the process by which milk stored in the alveoli (the milk-producing structures within the udder) is released and made available for removal during milking or suckling.

The majority of milk within the udder (up to 80%) is stored within the alveoli and small milk ducts. This milk must be moved into the larger milk ducts, gland cistern, and teat cistern before it can be efficiently removed by the milking machine.

This process is driven by oxytocin, often referred to as the milk let-down hormone. When oxytocin is released into the bloodstream, it causes the muscle-like cells surrounding the alveoli to contract. This squeezes milk from the alveoli into the milk ducts and cisterns, where it becomes available for extraction.

How is milk let-down triggered?

One of the most interesting aspects of milk let-down is that the primary trigger is teat stimulation. Whether through calf suckling, fore stripping, wiping the teats, or attaching the cups, stimulation of the teat sends signals to the brain that initiate oxytocin release.

For many years, it was believed that cows simply heard the sounds of the dairy and let their milk down. While cows certainly become accustomed to the routine and environment of milking, the key trigger

for milk let-down is stimulation of the teat itself.

This differs somewhat from humans, where both touch and other sensory cues, such as hearing a baby cry, can contribute to milk ejection.

Why is milk let-down important?

To efficiently remove the 80% of milk stored within the alveoli, effective milk let-down must occur.

Oxytocin is released rapidly following teat stimulation and, provided stimulation continues and the cow remains calm, sufficient levels are maintained throughout the milking process to allow effective milk extraction. The main milk ejection response lasts approximately five to eight minutes, which aligns well with the design of most modern milking systems.

Creating a familiar and low-stress milking environment is equally important. Cows thrive on routine, and changes in their environment can affect milk let-down.

When a cow becomes stressed, adrenaline is released. Adrenaline interferes with milk let-down by reducing the effectiveness of oxytocin within the mammary gland. If milk let-down is delayed and cup attachment occurs too early, only the milk already present in the cisterns is immediately available for removal. Milking then becomes slower and less efficient, increasing the risk of over-milking and teat-end damage.

This highlights the importance of calm cow handling and good heifer training. Familiarising heifers with the dairy before calving can significantly improve their experience during the first few milkings and help establish good milk let-down patterns.

What about using oxytocin injections?

The use of oxytocin can be a useful management tool for cows that struggle to let their milk down during the first few milkings after calving.

However, it is generally not recommended as a long-term management practice.

After discussing this topic with researcher Dr Rupert Bruckmaier, I gained a better understanding of why.

The oxytocin available through veterinarians is typically administered at levels significantly higher than those naturally released during normal milk let-down. Repeated use can alter the normal milk ejection response and reduce the mammary gland's sensitivity to oxytocin over time.

In addition, injected oxytocin remains active in the cow for considerably longer than the naturally released hormone, which is normally removed from the bloodstream within minutes. Once treatment is discontinued, the cow's natural oxytocin release resumes; however, repeated administration can negatively affect the normal regulation of milk let-down.

In summary

Understanding oxytocin, how it is released, and its role in milk let-down helps set cows up for milking success.

Milk let-down is a remarkable biological process that allows milk to move from the alveoli to the teat for efficient harvesting. By providing effective teat stimulation, maintaining a calm and consistent milking environment, and properly training heifers before calving, farmers can maximize milking efficiency while supporting udder health and animal wellbeing.

Want to improve milk quality on your farm?

Milking and Mastitis Management is a two-day course that provides dairy farm workers, managers and owners the opportunity to gain or refresh knowledge and practical skills to:

- Identify, treat and reduce risk of mastitis.
- Understand best practice for milking routine.
- Manage milk plant hygiene for good milk quality on farm.



Scan the QR code to express your interest.

South West Dairy Ladies Luncheon celebrates women in dairy

By Liza Fahey, Project Coordinator

More than 300 women from across the dairy industry gathered in Warrnambool on Thursday 13 August for the 2026 South West Dairy Ladies Luncheon. This year's event marked a significant milestone, celebrating 20 years since the first South West Dairy Ladies Luncheon. As part of the celebrations, Barb Collins, the event's first coordinator, was recognised. She was thanked for establishing the luncheon and laying the foundations for what has become one of the region's most recognised dairy industry events. Over two decades, the luncheon has grown into an important annual occasion for women in dairy to connect, learn and support one another.

The morning keynote speaker, Rebecca Couch (AKA The Wellness Coach), delivered a presentation focused on perimenopause and menopause. Rebecca openly discussed the physical, emotional and mental impacts women may experience during this stage of life and provided practical strategies to support health and wellbeing. Her presentation encouraged discussion around a topic that is often not spoken about openly and gave attendees useful information to better understand the changes many women experience.

The afternoon keynote featured Melbourne Cup-winning jockey Michelle Payne, interviewed by Sara James. Through a candid conversation, Michelle shared her experiences, challenges and achievements throughout her horseracing career. Michelle spoke about determination, resilience and the importance of believing in yourself when faced with setbacks. Her story was a highlight of the day for attendees.

The event featured a range of boutique stalls showcasing local, artisan products, providing attendees with an opportunity to support local businesses. Throughout the afternoon, attendees also enjoyed lucky door prizes, spot prizes and awards donated by local businesses and supporters, highlighting the strong support the luncheon receives from the community.

Congratulations to the South West Dairy Ladies Luncheon Committee, led by Chair Anna Kenna, for delivering another successful event.

The volunteer committee dedicates significant time throughout the year to planning and coordinating the luncheon.

A special thank you must also be extended to the event's sponsors, in particular to longtime major sponsor Westpac. The continued support of sponsors and volunteers, is instrumental to the success of the luncheon.

As attendees departed the event they left with new connections and plenty of inspiration. Twenty years after the first luncheon was held, the South West Dairy Ladies Luncheon continues to provide an important opportunity for women in dairy to come together, share experiences and celebrate the contribution women make to the dairy industry and regional communities.



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

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