



## Dairy Farmer Insights into Natural Disasters



Sam and Fleur Tonge at their dairy farm near Casino, NSW

### Animal Health Considerations

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### Sam and Fleur Tonge’s Story

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After more than forty years of dairying, expecting the unexpected is the new normal for Sam and Fleur Tonge, who milk 270 Holstein cows on 490 acres near the town of Casino in the Northern Rivers district of NSW in a year-round pasture based calving system.

Aside from a small hill where the house and dairy are, most of the farm went under water in February 2022 during one of the biggest floods ever recorded in the area.

Strong wind, driving rain, fast rising creeks, stranded neighbours, and staff unable to make it to work caused incredible stress for the Tonge’s, who, despite the challenges, managed to get the herd milked amid the chaos.

“It was very confusing just to get your priorities right, and work out who was going to do what and how,” reflects Sam.

While they managed the immediate needs of the herd amid rising waters, the ensuing



*Collecting a fecal sample to send for testing for early detection of parasites*

six months of wet weather challenged long standing management practices.

Mastitis is an issue familiar to dairy farmers and has a high correlation with wet weather, so when the disease arose the Tonge's put into practice procedures that have proved effective in the past, including putting an extra person in the dairy to assist with milking as well as washing and drying the cows and creating a hospital herd to help manage animal health issues.

But regardless of their efforts, cases and cell counts remained stubbornly high.

Then, when cows started to go lame, the Tonge's again relied on past experiences to solve a common problem, using a crush to treat hooves and keeping the impacted animals close to the dairy to reduce the distance they had to cover to go to and from milking.

But with laneways badly scoured by the flood, gravel continued to surface, and more and more cows presented lame.

The prolonged wet also meant heat detection became difficult, having repercussions on reproduction down the track, and, making matters worse, parasites and ill thrift set in.

"Normally we would expect liver fluke to

be managed by our current strategy of treating at dry-off, but the cows, when we tested them, had active liver fluke infections, and we also had a whole series of cows that were coughing and this proved to be lungworm," says Sam.

While lungworm is not unusual, what surprised the Tonge's was its presentation in mature cows.

"It's usually regarded as a young cow disease and very rare in adult cows, we'd never seen it in older cows around here before", says Sam.

The persistence of animal health issues, despite implementing tried and true husbandry practices, compounded by the difficulties of simply moving around the farm, managing feed, hospital herds, and staff, were the catalyst for the Tonge's to look beyond their previous experience to help manage the impacts of the prolonged wet.

"We've always prided ourselves on milk quality on this farm, but conditions were so extreme that we were still seeing case rates of mastitis that were well above what's considered normal," says Sam.

### **Outside help**

Based in Gippsland, VIC, private consultant and vet, Mark Humphris, was parachuted into the Northern Rivers by Dairy Australia in the immediate aftermath of the 2022 floods to assist farmers in managing the impact of mastitis and lameness brought on by the extreme and unprecedented wet conditions. It was here he met Sam and Fleur, who subsequently engaged him to help manage issues on the farm that arose in the following months.

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*Mark Humphris, private consultant and veterinarian based in Gippsland, VIC*

For the Tonge's, a differing approach included bringing in additional workers during milking to support teat and udder health and cleanliness and putting rubber matting in the laneways to provide soft walking surfaces to support hoof health. They also needed to create parasite treatment regimens that enabled the cows to continue providing milk without prolonged withholding periods, and they made sure to treat each cow each morning as she presented lame.

"We were treating around three or five lame cows a day, but we just had to get

busy and get at it and keep doing what worked to get the cows mobile again," recalls Sam.

While the extra labour was an added impost on the farm, this was offset by the knowledge that the cost of doing nothing would have far greater long-term negative impacts on both cow welfare and production.

"It was a huge workload, but it was what was needed to get on top of all these things happening in the herd all at once on a scale like we'd never seen before", says Fleur.

### **Knowing your herd**

With the benefit of experience across many farms around the country, Mark believes the best way through extreme conditions is to know your herd's base-line performance so you can notice and treat issues early to avoid problems later.

"When there's a greater number of lame cows that's beyond what you normally do, it really is important to get help because if we don't treat cows quickly, they're the ones that are going to leave the herd in three to six months and cost you production next year," says Mark.



*Rubber matting installed in the dairy and surrounding concrete areas to support hoof health and reduce lameness risk.*

And where parasites are a concern, Mark observed that farms that used diagnostic testing when they noticed something different were in a much better position to respond because they knew what they were dealing with and could treat more effectively.

While realising they could no longer rely solely on past experiences to solve on-farm issues was confronting for Sam and Fleur, it has reinforced their lifelong philosophy of treating people with respect and operating on a 'win-win' basis with their supplier network.

"One of my main learnings from all this is that it's an advantage to have very good rapport with your suppliers because they can easily find you things which may not

be available to everybody when conditions are tough," says Sam.

Relationships with farmers and service providers are also important to help navigate difficulties associated with extreme weather, when good decisions can be the difference between cows surviving or leaving the herd.

"To be able to ring up and say, 'hey, this is what I'm seeing, what do you think?' Has really helped us get through the whole flood and wet weather times" says Fleur.

For Sam, a big part of the road to recovery is being willing to try new approaches when your usual methods don't work.

"If things are different you have to try different things," says Sam.



*Cows at the Tonge's have returned to grazing following recovery from severe flooding*

## Acknowledgments

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