

feed.FIBRE.future



May – October 2007

Final report

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Report on the **feed.FIBRE.future** project, May-October 2007, by Dairy Australia for the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and other stakeholders. This report was written and prepared by Pauline Brightling, Steve Little and Natalie Davey on behalf of:

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Pauline Brightling, Steve Little and Chris Murphy

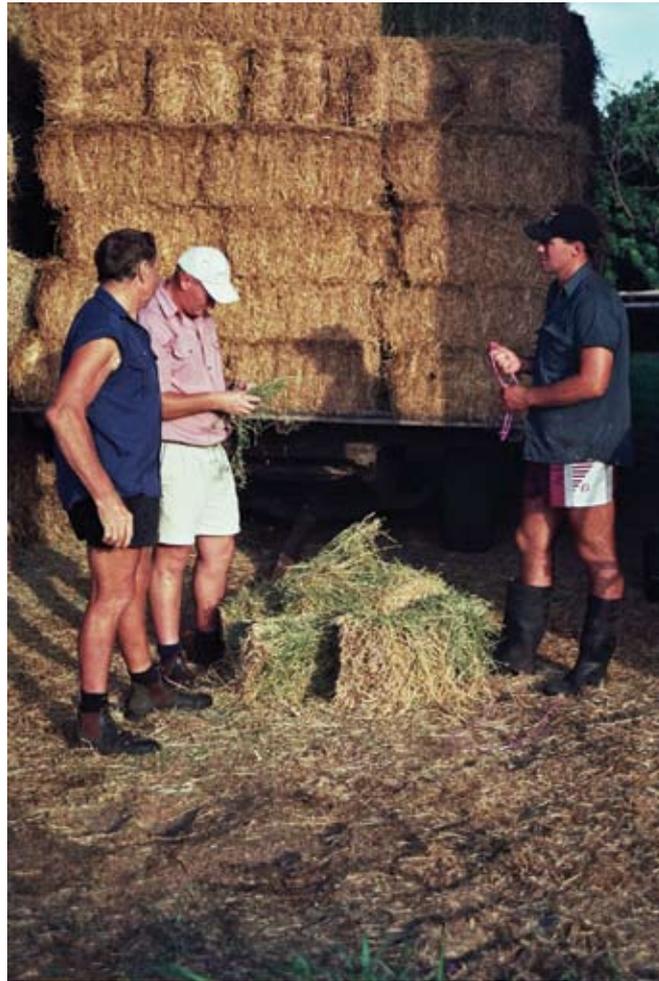
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The CD-ROM accompanying this report contains a library of current materials from feed.FIBRE.future. The CD can also be obtained from the Information Resource Centre at Dairy Australia, phone 61 3 9694 3777.



Summary

The **feed.FIBRE.future** project was a key part of the activities organised by the dairy and beef industries in response to the drought crisis. From May to October 2007 it provided dairy farmers and beef producers with information and advice on dealing with the food fibre shortage that dominated the winter feeding decisions of their businesses.

Activities were made possible by a grant of \$400,000 from the Federal Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and an investment of approximately \$655,000 from the dairy and beef industries. An independent analysis has estimated that the economic benefit to farmers and producers from this combined \$1,055,000 investment will exceed \$13 million over a 12-month period.¹

feed.FIBRE.future was an urgent response to a nation-wide shortage of fodder. In early May it was recognised that the needs of the national dairy and beef herds could not be met from reserves anywhere in Australia – an unprecedented situation – and there was no opportunity to import hay. A co-ordinated effort was required to help farmers make decisions in these unique circumstances.

The key elements of the **feed.FIBRE.future** campaign were to develop and disseminate technical and planning messages about nutrition, animal health and the relative profitability of feeding options (many of which involved unconventional approaches) during the fibre shortage. **feed.FIBRE.future** made a potentially dire situation manageable by clarifying the situation and available options for those involved.

Major challenges in this situation included the:

- extremely short timeframe to collate/create materials and to bring different organisations and people on-board;
- uncertainty about the technical messages related to some of the alternative feed stuffs;
- generally tired state of farmers, producers and service providers alike from the drought of the previous five years; and
- differences in the infrastructure available to deliver information to dairy farmers and beef producers.

The main methods of delivery were through print and broadcast media, direct mailing, service providers' interactions with clients, and at workshops, field days and 1-on-1 consultations for farmers.

All dairy farmers were mailed a technical pack of Fact Sheets that they rated to be of excellent quality and relevance. Farmers and producers had the opportunity to attend 46 workshops and field days run locally, and to discuss their specific farm situation during a 1-on-1 consultation with an experienced nutrition and business management specialist. More than 700 farmers and producers participated in workshops, field days and consultations. As a result, they reported that they felt significantly more in control of management in this area.

Footnote

1. *Benefit Cost Analysis by David Collins, BDA Group, October 2007; commissioned by Dairy Australia.*

Agricultural service providers were recognised as essential conduits of information to the broad farmer population. More than 200 service providers attended regional briefings or local workshops and half later reported that, on average, they had used the information provided by **feed.FIBRE.future** with 25 farmer clients. A conservative estimate would be that at least 2000 farmers or producers benefited from the project through this route.

feed.FIBRE.future was, of necessity, a very rapid and wide response. It utilised the infrastructure (such as detailed contact lists and regional co-ordination) and experience that had been developed in the dairy industry, particularly during the previous four years of drought response.

Despite the fact that farmers and advisers alike were already worn down by the drought, more than 41 nutrition, animal health and business management specialists delivered workshops, facilitated field days or conducted consultations under the **feed.FIBRE.future** banner. This level of engagement across the advisory sector and by farmers and producers was a cornerstone of the campaign's success.

Another key objective of the project was to improve the longer-term capacity of the dairy and beef industries to deal with this sort of challenge.

The enhanced understanding of rumen health and skills in managing new diets (including high levels of grain and/or alternative fibre sources) achieved by farmers, service providers and consultants will continue to be useful for many years.

The technical materials developed during **feed.FIBRE.future** will be accessible to the dairy and beef industries in a variety of formats. A comprehensive library of current materials is available electronically (the CD accompanies this report).

The 'brand' is now well recognised and will continue to be used in the on-going Dairy Australia program Grains2Milk. The messages will be further developed as that project explores and promotes 'flexible feeding systems'. The messages have also been used to develop a course offered by the National Centre for Dairy Education Australia (NCDEA).

A significant outcome of the past five months has been that better networks and working relationships have been established, at both individual and industry levels.

More farmers have established advice-seeking approaches. At the industry level, positive connections have been built between the dairy and beef industries, and with the fodder industry and DAFF. Fodder supplies for 2007/08 were discussed in September – six months earlier than was the case last year.

In many regions, especially the Murray Darling Basin and South Australia, the drought continues and irrigated industries are under extreme pressure. Access to feed fibre is no longer the immediate issue but the lessons from the **feed.FIBRE.future** project are being used in the design of further industry and government initiatives to assist farmers in dealing with today and planning for tomorrow.

Doug Chant
President United Dairyfarmers of Victoria
Chair, Steering Committee for **feed.FIBRE.future**

31 October 2007

The best thing we've ever done!

Graeme and Fleur Nurse, dairy farmers, northern Victoria (July 2007)

Dairy farmers Graeme and Fleur Nurse say attending a free 1-on-1 consultation through the **feed.FIBRE.future** project is the best thing they've done since they started dairying six years ago.

The Nurses' dairy farm is near Stanhope and, like others in northern Victoria, the drought has had a major impact on their business. Being committed to dairying in the long term, their drought strategy was to maintain the size of their 500-cow, split-calving herd.

The couple invested heavily in purchased feed, mainly grain and palm kernel extract (PKE) meal. Last spring they harvested silage on a leased property, but the volume was a little less than they would get in a normal season. The autumn-calving cows were dried off about a month early in a bid to maintain body condition when pasture availability became severely limited. Later in the season, the spring-calving cows were dried off about eight weeks early.

During autumn Graeme had oversown 120ha of pasture that was grazed twice by the end of June. However, by then, the Nurses were feeling a little nervous about getting through the winter.

"We had some silage and straw on hand that we thought should get us through, but it was going to be close, so we were considering other options too," Graeme said.

About that time, Graeme and Fleur were offered a free 1-on-1 consultation through **feed.FIBRE.future**. Organised by Dairy Australia on behalf of the dairy and beef industries, **feed.FIBRE.future** supported dairy and beef producers making decisions to cope with feed shortages this winter.

"We'd never used a consultant before, so we weren't sure what to expect," Graeme said.

As it turned out, the format of the consultation was flexible, allowing the discussion to focus on whatever issues were most important to the Nurses.

Fleur and Graeme's session with consultant Brian Crockart focused on feeding the herd between June and mid-August. Brian worked through a feed budget with the Nurses based on their herd's requirements, fodder reserves and what their budget could stretch to for purchased feed.

"Between us, we came up with a feasible strategy. We were fortunate to have enough fibre sources on hand, but we will need to buy extra grain and more PKE," Graeme said.

Brian also suggested buying lick blocks to feed to the young stock, so as to make up for the lack of protein in their current diet.

"It's a cheap input that will give us much better value from our poor-quality feed," Graeme said.

The Nurses went home with a clear plan, confident they could feed the herd through the winter.

"We came away feeling more positive about our ability to get through. Discussing our situation with an outsider gave us much more focus. Brian helped us work out what ideas to run with and which ones to shelve," Graeme said.

All dairy and beef producers are eligible for a free, 1-on-1 consultation.

"I challenge every dairy farmer to take advantage of this offer. It really is a fabulous opportunity," Graeme said.





feed.FIBRE.future enabled farmers to make good feed management decisions for their herds during a nationwide fibre shortage.

What was needed

The extent of the winter fodder shortage facing Australian dairy and beef cattle farmers this year came as a shock to the dairy and beef industries in early May 2007. It was an unprecedented situation. Previously it had always been possible to feed livestock through winter from the national fodder reserves. In the past, regional shortfalls in feed and fibre that followed droughts and crop failure were met by bringing in fodder from other locations – costly but possible. A meeting convened by the Australian Fodder Industry Association (AFIA) and attended by representatives from Dairy Australia and Australian Dairy Farmers (ADF) (the ‘Fibre Summit’) on 3 May 2007 exposed the fact that this was not an option in 2007. A subsequent survey of fodder reserves by ABARE confirmed this situation.

This nation-wide shortage of feed, or more precisely fibre, was immediately recognised as a crisis. Within days the Australian Dairy Farmers and the Cattle Council of Australia had met with DAFF to discuss the options and implications for the dairy and beef industries. A project was planned, to be run by Dairy Australia on behalf of both industries. Funds were made available through the Industry Partnerships Program (part of the Agriculture Advancing Australia package) and the **feed.FIBRE.future** project began.

The ultimate goals of the project were to:

- give farmers increased control to make good feed management decisions under the unprecedented current conditions of the feed fibre shortage; and
- enable the dairy and beef industries to better deal with this type of situation in the future.

This was achieved through a directed campaign that helped farmers recognise what impact the current fibre shortage could have on their businesses and plan a way forward that was relevant to their own farm situation.

The project’s activities were funded by a grant of \$400,000 from DAFF and an investment of approximately \$655,000 from the dairy and beef industries (see Table 1).

This report describes the multiple interventions that constituted this campaign and their outcomes.

Table 1: feed.FIBRE.future was available to livestock producers between May and October 2007 for a total cost of \$1,055,638.

Contributing bodies	DAFF	Dairy Australia	Dairy industry other than Dairy Australia	Beef industry	Total
Dollars	\$400,378	\$345,060	\$251,000	\$59,200	\$1,055,638
Proportion of budget spend	38%	33%	24%	6%	100%

Figures are indicative only. Final figures will be available in the audit report.

Getting the ball rolling

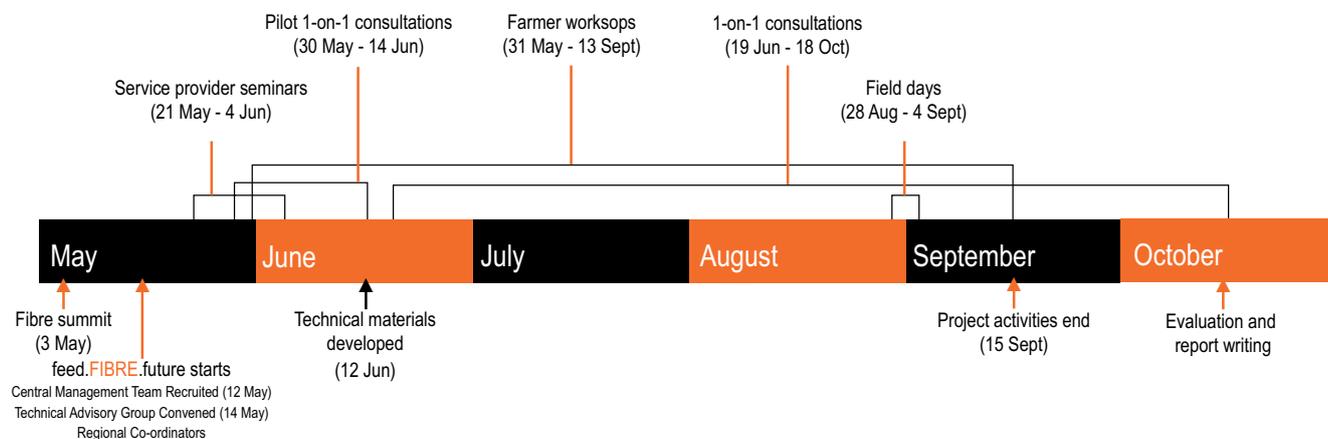


Figure 1: feed.FIBRE.future was an urgent response – development and delivery was achieved in an extremely short timeframe.

Creating the brand

The **feed.FIBRE.future** project needed a unique identity. The name and logo were chosen to encapsulate what the project was about in a simple but striking way. The brand was created from scratch and within a few weeks was widely recognised.

The people

Steering Committee

The project's development was extremely rapid. A steering committee, representing peak organisations for both the dairy and beef industries and key collaborators was set-up at the outset to ensure the strategy's design would meet the needs of their stakeholders and capture emerging issues.

Table 2: The feed.FIBRE.future Steering Committee ensured the planned activities were relevant and of benefit to their stakeholder groups.

Name	Organisation
Doug Chant (Chair)	Australian Dairy Farmers / United Dairyfarmers Victoria
David Basham	Australian Dairy Farmers / South Australian Dairyfarmers Association
David Inall	Cattle Council of Australia
Rachel Galvin	Cattle Council of Australia
Ailsa Fox	Victorian Farmers Federation Livestock
Chris Phillips	Dairy Australia
Steve Coats	Dairy Australia
Nigel Gosse	Meat and Livestock Australia
Chrisanya Robins	Department of Primary Industries Victoria
Penny Shaw	Department of Primary Industries Victoria
Simon Murnane	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Steve Nelson	Fonterra
Fionnuala Malone-McGrath	Dairy Farmers Group

Central team

A central management team for the project was recruited by Dairy Australia. By 12 May 2007 three people with experience in running national dairy projects were committed to **feed.FIBRE.future**. They were chosen to lead the technical aspects of the project (Steve Little), manage the regional co-ordination (Chris Murphy) and manage the overall project (Pauline Brightling).

Communication infrastructure and technical approaches developed in previous projects made a speedy response possible.

The speed of the **feed.FIBRE.future** response was possible in large part because the central management team had worked together on previous drought response activities and other projects. By utilising the approaches and infrastructure of earlier projects, they were able to streamline activities. For example, the format of the 1-on-1 consultations had been established in Taking Stock; the template for the workshop presenter's guide came from InCalf; many of the nutrition and business management specialists involved were drawn from networks already developed by Taking Stock and Grains2Milk; the communication approaches had been developed (with Monks Communication) for CowTime and InCalf; the service provider e-mail list and many of the relationships with collaborators such as dairy companies were in place from Dairy Moving Forward.

From the outset, the administrative requirements of the project, such as subcontracting and accounts, were handled by Dairy Australia (Carolyn May) and the evaluation elements by the Harris Park Group (Natalie Davey and Kerry Dawson).

Technical Advisory Group

On 14 May 2007 a Technical Advisory Group was convened to develop the technical content necessary for an effective crisis response. Collectively, the 11 group members initially recruited had significant expertise in nutrition, feed supply, farm management and animal health for both dairy and beef herds. This enabled them to readily identify key messages for the target farmer, producer and service provider audiences, and collate relevant tools and information into an accessible, highly topical technical kit (see Profiles: Technical material for farmers and service providers). Group members also acted as project champions, making organisations and advisers aware of the urgency of the situation and the fundamentals of the planned response.

During the five months of **feed.FIBRE.future** changes to the information were required (e.g. winter feeding and the management of dry and transition cows changed to managing calving and early lactation). When this occurred, other experts joined the Technical Advisory Group. In all, 22 people contributed.

Table 3: The feed.FIBRE.future Technical Advisory Group created the key technical messages and content for the project.

Name	Organisation
Steve Little	Dairy Australia
John Penry	Camperdown Veterinary Centre
Chris Hibburt	Timboon Vet Group
Cameron Smith	Farmanco
Scott Rathbone	CRC Agrisolutions
Durham Prewett	Fonterra Australia
Mark Burgemeister	Thinking Cows
Tim Harrington	Ridley AgriProducts
Robert Parkes	Ridley AgriProducts
Peter DeGaris	Tarwin Vet Group
Ian Lean	Cattle Production Consultants
Neil Moss	Cattle Production Consultants
Ian Sawyer	Feedworks
Brad Granzin	Norco
Fi Malone-McGrath	Dairy Farmers Group
Dave Barber	Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries
John Spragg	Stockfeed Manufacturers Council of Australia
John Webb Ware	Mackinnon project, University of Melbourne
Bill Wales	Department of Primary Industries Victoria
Frank Mickan	Department of Primary Industries Victoria
Michele Ryan	Department of Primary Industries Victoria
Greg O'Brien	Department of Primary Industries Victoria

Regional Co-ordinators

Delivering the Technical Advisory Group's key messages to farmers and service providers required direct communication with both target audiences in each region. A team of co-ordinators was needed as the hub of **feed.FIBRE.future** regional activities.

The Regional Co-ordinators were people already involved in drought response work funded by the dairy industry, or were working in the beef industry, who took on **feed.FIBRE.future** as a primary focus of their work. They played a crucial role in organising and promoting the workshops and consultations in their region and following up requests for further information or services from farmers. The Regional Co-ordinators were also the link for reporting regional information and feedback to the **feed.FIBRE.future** central team. Their input to **feed.FIBRE.future** was a significant part of the industry investment in the project.

Table 4: The feed.FIBRE.future Regional Co-ordinators were the hub of regional activities.

Region	Name	Organisation
Northern Victoria	John Boyd	Murray Dairy
South-west Victoria	Jeff Lawes	WestVic Dairy
Gippsland	John Hutchison and Deanne Kennedy	GippsDairy
South Australia	Verity Ingham Kirsty Flower Kirstie Murphy	Dairy SA Dairy SA Dairy SA
New South Wales	Jess Jennings	DIDCO
Queensland	Theresa Kunde Janine Teese Rod Saal	Subtropical Dairy Subtropical Dairy Agforce
Tasmania	Fiona Gluszyk	Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers
Western Australia	Lara Swift	WA Farmers
Northern Territory	Ian McLean	NT Cattleman's Association

Identifying the issues

At the outset, the Technical Advisory Group identified key points unique to the current situation:

- the quantity and quality of domestic fodder was highly uncertain;
- the availability and affordability of feedstuffs in some regions was likely to change from week to week;
- farmers were going to have to spend a lot more time securing feed over the next few months;
- for dairy farmers with seasonal calving herds, the need to manage the fodder shortage coincided with an already demanding planning schedule (setting up dry cow transition feeding programs, calving, etc);
- farmers needed to know their current situation (measuring the quality and quantity of available feed), 'guesstimates' would not be good enough;
- it would be very risky for farmers to follow their habitual management of stock feeding without reviewing it first (in some situations the past experience of topping-up fibre with grain would be reversed);
- with the use of new, alternative feed fibre sources (such as palm kernel extract (PKE) meal, grape marc and rice straw), people would be operating outside of their experience and comfort zone;
- in many circumstances, farmers would be forced to bend the conventional rules for feeding stock and would need to manage the risks to cow health and farm productivity accordingly; and
- in some regions (south-east Queensland and south-west Victoria), farmers were challenged not only by limited fodder availability, but also limited stock water.

An appropriate response would need to help farmers to work through these constraints and, to be widely applicable, cater for a population that varied widely in terms of its general organisational and feeding management skills, capacity to analyse and think clearly, ability to cope with (yet more) pressure, and the strength of its advisory network.

The Technical Advisory Group identified several issues faced by farmers unique to this crisis situation.



The project strategy

The **feed.FIBRE.future** project had five main elements that were each designed as part of the whole (see Figure 2). No element on its own would have been as successful without the rest. For example, the effectiveness of the service providers' advice to their clients was underpinned by the quality of the technical material available and the confidence that the service providers gained by attending briefings. The 1-on-1 consultations provided direct benefits to the participating farmers and producers and also increased the consultants' understanding of what options were possible. They used this information with their other clients and it was communicated to other service providers by e-mail bulletins.

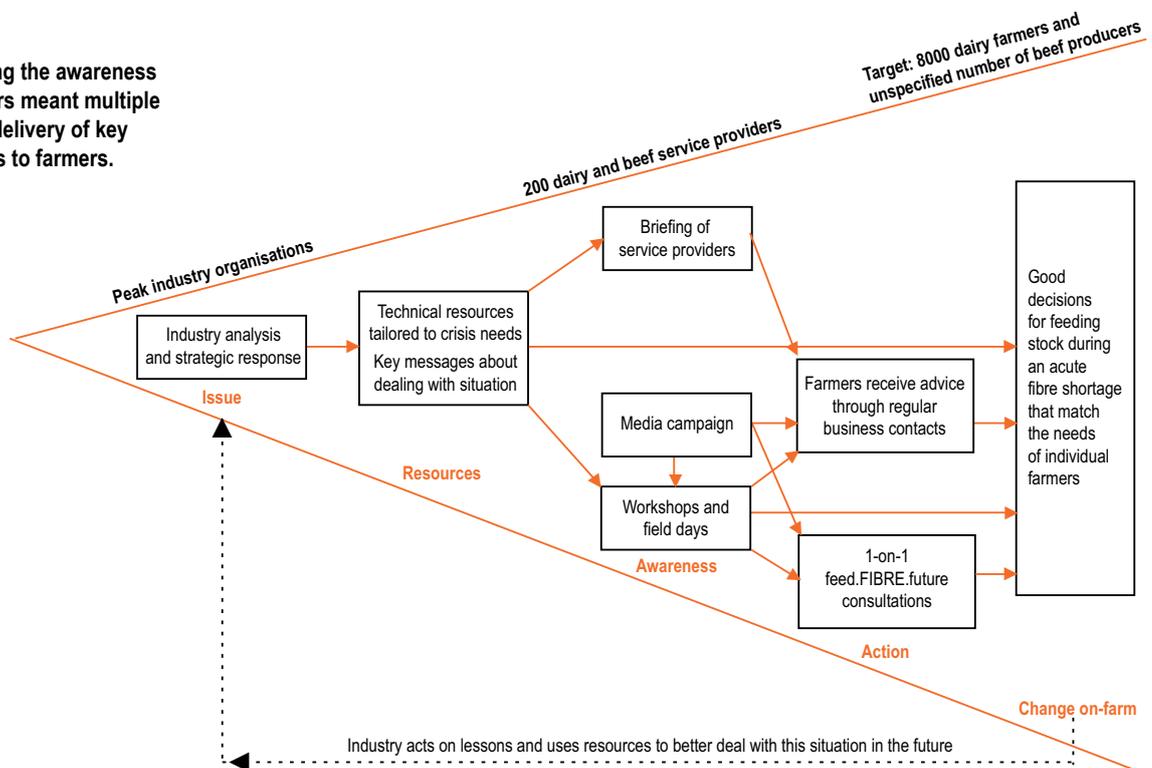
Promoting awareness and the technical messages

A first step in promoting better feed management decisions was to raise awareness of the situation and outlook of the fibre shortages and the likely impact for farm businesses. Targeted communication and media activities were used to raise awareness of the current feed situation among farmers and service providers. For example, the *Grain and Hay Report* helped everyone keep abreast of the constantly changing availability of feed and its prices (see Profiles: Technical material for farmers and service providers).

Farmers and producers then needed information and tools to help them make better decisions about feed management on their farms in these circumstances. High-quality, relevant information was made widely available through the publication of the key technical messages in rural print and broadcast media and industry newsletters. From May to October 226 articles were run in more than 90 publications.

A technical pack of 11 Fact Sheets was mailed directly to all dairy farmers across Australia and was distributed at workshops, consultations and other meetings. It was also available on dairy and beef industry websites as PDF documents. Six additional Fact Sheets were added to the pack as the need arose (see Profiles: Technical material for farmers and service providers).

Figure 2: Increasing the awareness of service providers meant multiple opportunities for delivery of key industry messages to farmers.



Core messages from the feed.FIBRE.future technical pack were run in many respected and widely read publications.

The Australian Dairyfarmer
– distribution approx. 17,000 dairy farmers and service providers nationally.

What to do about fibre shortage



DESPITE rain in some areas, many Australian dairy producers face a forage shortage this winter, with fibre sources being the most challenging to provide. "We've never faced a challenge of this nature before but help is available," Dairy Australia's Chris Murphy said.

Dairy Australia is co-ordinating Feed.Fibre.Future, a program to help farmers make decisions about feeding their herds this winter. It's being delivered with \$400,000 funding from the Federal Government.

Feed.Fibre.Future is providing farmers with information, advice and support in making decisions. Technical information has been published in a series of easy-to-read fact sheets on topics such as risk factors with low fibre diets, alternative fibre sources, feed additives and feeding management tips.

Feed.Fibre.Future workshops have been and are being run across dairying areas in June and July. These provide technical and management information to help farmers assess their current position, review feasible feeding strategies and options, and develop a plan to get through the winter.

A second series of workshops will offer farmers a free 90-minute individual consultation with an adviser with nutrition and farm business expertise. These 'one-to-one sessions' will help farmers quantify their



Stanhope, Vic, farmers Graeme and Fleur Nurse have changed their young stock's diet to help manage forage supplies this winter.



Farmers need to manage their herd's diet to ensure adequate fibre sources are included.

available. Farmers will leave with a plan specifically designed for their individual situation.

Stanhope, Vic, dairyfarmers Graeme and Fleur Nurse participated in a pilot 'one-to-one session' in June.

"It was a really good opportunity to look at the whole picture and plan ahead. Back on the farm we are focused on the immediate challenges. As a result of the session we've changed our young stock's diet which will mean we get more value from our (hefty) investment in feed this winter," Mr Nurse said.

Feed.Fibre.Future is a collaborative

feed.FIBRE.future

project supported by the Federal Department of Agriculture

and Forestry, the Australian Dairy Industry Council (ADIC), Dairy Australia, the Cattle Council of Australia (CCA) and Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA).

For more information, visit website <www.dairyaustralia.com.au>. This website has Feed.Fibre.Future Fact Sheets and a schedule of Feed.Fibre.Future workshops for each region. To register for a 'one-to-one session' contact dairy company field officers or regional drought coordinators.

The fuss about fibre

LONG fibre is an essential part of all cattle diets. It promotes cud chewing, which in turn triggers saliva production, which keeps the rumen's acid level (pH) in the optimal range for rumen microbes. Without enough fibre in the diet, cows are at risk of acidosis.

become noticeably sick as acidosis progresses. Severe acidosis results in scouring, 'downer syndrome' and eventually death.

As a rule of thumb, fibre sources should be chopped to 1.5 centimetres (about the length of a matchstick) or longer.

For more information, refer to Feed.Fibre.Future's Fact Sheets, available on <dairyaustralia.com.au>.

Assessing the risk of acidosis

IN NORMAL circumstances a dairy herd may not be at high risk of developing acidosis. However, drought conditions force many farmers to change their feeding practices. Farmers can use the Risk Assessment Grid (see next page or download a copy from the website <www.dairyaustralia.com.au>) to ensure their operation is not being inadvertently put at high risk.

Read the options in the three columns of this grid and highlight the box that best describes what is happening on the farm.

The first part establishes a profile of the herd. Some animals (like first calvers) are more vulnerable than others.

The second part looks at what is being fed and feed storage. It spells out amounts or levels that can affect acidosis risk.

The third part looks at feed management and assesses risks associated with the way a farmer feeds their herd. How and when cows are fed, as well as what is fed, influences risk.

Moving from a high-risk level (red zone) to a lower-risk level (orange or green) doesn't always need to be expen-

feed.FIBRE.future

sive. For instance, the list below contains ideas for changing to a lower risk feeding system.

- Plan ahead to make feeding change slowly over a couple of weeks.
- Introduce a transition diet during the last two to three weeks before calving for cows and heifers to get them used to the diet they will be eating after they calve. There is a good chance this will easily pay for itself in higher milk production.
- Some high fibre by-products can be fed in the paddock. Just make sure all animals get free access to the feed.
- If pasture in the paddock is plentiful, don't hold the cows back after milking. Let them head to the paddock to reduce the time between grain/concentrate and forage feeding.

However, if the pasture in the paddock is only enough for about two to three hours grazing, hold cows back after milking and offer them some hay or silage

while waiting, then allow them to head to the paddock as a herd.

Even the simple management changes can make a difference.

Once aware of the risks, many farmers can come up with ideas and strategies tailored to their situation.

Sometimes, taking action isn't hard but it might mean feeding a little differently. Help is available.

- For one-on-one support, contact an adviser. This may be a Department of Primary Industries extension officer, nutritionist, local veterinarian or farm management consultant.

- Find out how other farmers are working through the issues at Feed.Fibre.Future workshops in the area. Contact the Drought Response hotline on 1800 050 015, regional drought response co-ordinator or go to website <www.dairyaustralia.com.au> for details.

- To learn how to better solve the problem, check out farmer courses. Contact the National Centre for Dairy Education – Australia for more information. Go to website <www.ncdea.edu.au/farming>. **D**

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The Australian Dairyfarmer July-August 2007 21

What to do about fibre shortage

Despite rain in some areas, many Australian dairy and beef producers face a forage shortage over the winter months, with fibre sources being the most challenging to provide.

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Feed.FIBRE.Future workshops were run across dairying areas during June and July. The workshops provided technical and management information to help farmers assess their current position, review feasible feeding strategies and options, and develop a plan to get through the winter.

A second series of workshops will offer farmers a free 90-minute individual consultation with an adviser with nutrition and farm business expertise.

These '1-on-1 sessions' will help farmers quantify their feed gap, based on the amount of feed available on-farm and herd requirements.

The adviser will help tailor options to close the feed gap, considering resources available.

Farmers will leave with a plan specifically designed for their individual situation.

Stanhope dairyfarmers, Graeme and Fleur Nurse participated in a pilot '1-on-1 session' in June.

"It was a really good opportunity to look at the whole picture and plan ahead. Back on the farm we are focussed on the immediate challenges. As a result of the session we've changed our young stocks diet which will mean we get more value from our (hefty) investment in feed this winter," said Graeme.

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For more information, visit www.dairyaustralia.com.au.

This website has Feed.FIBRE.Future Fact Sheets and a schedule of Feed.FIBRE.Future workshops for each region. To register for a '1-on-1 session' contact your Milk Supply Officer or regional drought co-ordinator. Milk Supply Officers also have information packs available.



Milk Harford looks at the feed.fibre.future



Fonterra supplier newsletter 'FarmLink' – distribution approx. 2200 in southern and western Australia.

Quick checks

feed.FIBRE.future

The fuss about

Long fibre is an essential part of all cattle diets. It provides cud chewing which in turn triggers saliva production which keeps the rumen's acid level (pH) in the optimal range for rumen microbes. Without enough fibre in the diet, cows are at risk of acidosis.

Cows may not appear sick with a mild dose of acidosis but feed intake and milk production will drop. Cows become noticeably sick as acidosis progresses. See...

What's happening in the vat?

Changes in milk composition are directly linked to the cow's diet. Both fibre content and energy intake contribute to the percentage of milk fat and milk protein. A low fat test may be a sign of acidosis, especially if it falls below the protein test. A falling protein test is a sign that energy intake has dropped. Less commonly, acidosis can also cause the milk protein percentage to drop.

Monitoring changes over a one week period and looking for changes from year to year can help you spot signs of acidosis.

Milk Supply Company Daily Results						Date: 26/05/2007		
DairyConn						Supplier name: BULL A&I		
Farm No: 9225	Litres	R/Fat%	kg	Fat%	kg	DM%	kg	DM%
21/05/2007	7680	4.22	324	3.82	270	126	126	126
23/05/2007	7320	4.44	325	3.51	257	130	130	130
25/05/2007	7460	4.18	312	3.45	237	143	143	143

I didn't realise I could use my factory results slip to help check for acidosis! What do I look for?

- Is the fat test less than 3.6% for Holsteins or 5% for Jerseys?
- Has the fat test dropped between 0.3 and 0.5 % in a week?
- Has the protein test dropped more than 0.3% in a week?
- Are your current fat and protein tests similar to this time last year?

It looks like we're okay at the moment but I'd better keep a close eye on the factory results slips.

feed.FIBRE.future info packs are available from your Milk Supply Officer. All of the information contained in them is also available at the Dairy Australia web site at www.dairyaustralia.com.au/



The information includes

- Quick checks
- Facts about fibre
- Assessing your risk of acidosis
- Risk assessment grid in relation to rumen function and acidosis

- A to Z of fibre sources and their expected feed values
- Closing your feed gap
- Know what you are buying
- Feed additives
- Tips on solving feeding problems



Hosts . . . Kerrie and Paul Price hosted the Feed.FIBRE.Future seminar on their dairy farm at Lancaster.



Hands on . . . Thinking Cows ruminant nutritionist Mark Burgemeister gives a practical demonstration on rumen health.

Feeding in the big dry

Maintaining adequate fibre levels in cattle is a pertinent issue in drought conditions as many farmers may have been forced to alter feeding practices.

Ensuring cows are getting enough fibre and thereby reducing the risk of acidosis by making the most of spring feeds was one of the key themes addressed at a series of federally-funded workshops held across northern Victoria.

Lancaster dairy farmers Paul and Kerrie Price hosted a Feed.FIBRE.Future workshop last Thursday with about 30 people attending.

Thinking Cows ruminant nutritionist Mark Burgemeister and DPI dairy extension officer Chrisanya Robins facilitated the seminar covering topics including maximising fodder and balancing daily diets to provide for rumen health, and tips for detecting acidosis among herds.

Mr Burgemeister said one of the aims of the workshop was to take a practical look at feed and pasture spring management this season.

"We will focus on things they (farmers)

can do to manage the current conditions," he said.

Ms Robins hoped the workshop would also encourage farmers to take a collaborative approach to their business by working with other farmers, the DPI as well as farm advisers.

Mr and Mrs Price said the on-farm days were useful for farmers as they provided a practical learning environment.

"It's better than sitting in an office because it's hands on," Mr Price said.

"We always get something out of it."

The Prices said they were interested in getting more information on diets and how to get cows through what was shaping up as another tough season.

Kyabram West dairy farmer Linton MacKenzie said in the current situation, getting expert information on making the most of available resources was important.

"I'm just here to make sure we use what resources we have to get maximum milk production and return," Mr MacKenzie said.

"The current situation makes it all the



Helpful hints . . . DPI dairy extension officer Chrisanya Robins gives tips on managing spring pastures and feed.

more important to keep cows healthy. . . and the information needs to be kept available."

Those who attended the workshop received free information on alternative feed and fibre sources, feeding management tips and advice on devising a strategic plan for individual farms.

Briefings for service providers were important for rural communities – helping them to dispel myths and come to terms with options.

Briefing service providers

Experience with an earlier dairy industry drought response project (Dairy Moving Forward) showed that service providers have a high level of influence in the farming community, both as conduits of information and in setting the mood. Service providers include dairy company staff, agronomists, accountants, veterinarians, rural financial counsellors, key merchandisers, and the staff of herd improvement organisations and government departments of primary industries.

Thorough briefings for service providers were deemed to be an important part of the project, to dispel myths and set up a clear outline of the options and planning processes. The objective was to have service providers supportive of the project messages, delivering **feed.FIBRE.future** information in their advice to their clients where appropriate, and better able to direct farmers to other assistance.

The first events run by the project were six briefing meetings for service providers that informed them about the **feed.FIBRE.future** key messages, the available **feed.FIBRE.future** resources and what they could do to help farmers. More than 200 service providers attended these meetings or subsequent farmer workshops. E-mail bulletins were sent to approximately 2000 people on two occasions to alert the wider service sector to the situation and the components of the response (See Profiles: Briefings for service providers).

Evidence of the extended reach of the project due to this approach was clear. In September, respondents to an e-mail survey of 110 service providers reported that they had, on average, used **feed.FIBRE.future** information with 22 dairy clients and three beef clients. A conservative estimate would be that an additional 2000 farmers or producers benefited from the project through this route.

In the first few weeks of the project it was a challenge to merge **feed.FIBRE.future** activities with local events that had already begun in response to the feed fibre crisis, so as to provide a cohesive approach with consistent messages. This involved particular efforts to engage local service providers. For example, Department of Primary Industries Victoria (DPIV) staff in northern Victoria came increasingly involved over the life of the project, and the field days in August 2007 were good examples of collaboration.

Farmer workshops and field days

Farmer/producer workshops were developed, promoted and delivered at local venues in nine regions (see Profiles: Farmer workshops and field days). The first of these was run on 31 May 2007, just 19 days after the project had been initiated. These workshops provided technical information, a four-step process for managing the feed fibre shortage, and encouraged farmers to seek the advice of service providers.

As the season progressed and spring management messages were of increasing importance, the format of the meetings was changed from workshops to field days on-farm in Victoria and South Australia. These field days included a panel of local farmers who were implementing different approaches and practical demonstrations of indicators of animal health and agronomics.

The original plan was to deliver a minimum of 24 workshops. By the end of the project almost double that number of group meetings or field days had been run (see Profiles: Farmer workshops and field days). A flexible approach enabled additional sessions at locations where need emerged – for example in the Hunter Valley region after the floods that added significantly to the pre-existing fibre shortage.

Twice as many workshops were held as had been planned, with many of the later meetings adapted to meet emerging regional needs.

1-on-1 consultations

Information provided at workshops is, by necessity, of general applicability, but each farm situation is different and each solution must be customised. Also, some farmers did not want to participate in workshops (with many 'bunkered down' on their own farms under the weight of their own worries).

To increase the chance of farmers taking action and to reach more people, a free, confidential, 90-minute, 1-on-1 consultation with a nutrition and business management specialist was offered to dairy and beef farmers. Farmers and producers could register their interest at a workshop or by contacting their Regional Co-ordinator after finding out about the consultations through the media, from another farmer or a service provider.

Farmers who participated in a 1-on-1 consultation considered options and strategies for closing feed gaps and minimising risks, and developed feed plans specific to their own situation. More than 220 1-on-1 consultations were delivered (see Profiles: 1-on-1 consultations).

Industry networks

In designing the project strategy and tactics it became clear that the two industries – dairy and beef – were in very different positions. Unlike dairy, the variety of production systems in the beef industry has resulted in a far more varied service provider network. The dairy industry had collaborating entities such as dairy companies (that have close relationships with farmers through their milk supply contracts, field officers and regular connections such as daily milk tanker visits). The dairy levy-payer database enabled a direct mailout to all dairy farmers and *The Australian Dairyfarmer* magazine (which is sent to all dairy farmers and many dairy service providers) and *The Dairy Australian* (which is sent to all Dairy Australia members) both allowed significant direct communication with dairy farmers. In contrast, the project had to rely on rural print and radio media to communicate with the larger number of beef producers.

The existing dairy Regional Development Programs and their drought co-ordinators were able to contribute immediately to the planning and implementation of **feed.FIBRE.future**. For the beef industry more preparatory work was required to put the co-ordination capacity in place.

As a result, the beef industry was initially less able to contribute to **feed.FIBRE.future**.



1-on-1 consultations provided the most intensive, customized intervention of the feed.FIBRE.future project.



Actions tended to involve ways of extending the available feed or buying feed without increasing farm debt.

“The field days have been the most successful, with farmers enjoying the format of some theory and some practice. Many appear keen to follow up in further detail on some of the issues discussed.”

Anthony Pearce,
ruminant nutritionist,
Meningie Fodder,
South Australia

The benefits for participating dairy farmers and beef producers

There were different ways in which farmers could engage with the **feed.FIBRE.future** project. They could choose what most suited them – by just accessing resources, attending a workshop or field day or taking part in a 1-on-1 consultation. In this way more farmers had the opportunity to participate and benefit. Others were exposed to the project’s messages through routine interactions with their service providers and the broad media.

Implemented actions by farmers mainly revolved around increasing or extending available feed and sourcing capital through the sale of stock or other farm capital (such as water) rather than increasing farm debt. The ways in which farmers could make net economic gains included:

- grow more home-grown forage by altering the paddock rotation, adding extra nitrogen to pasture, over-sowing pasture, planting a forage crop;
- make better forage purchase decisions by considering the nutritional value/role of alternative feeds in diets and creating a feed budget;
- reduce their total feed costs by extending limited (expensive) fodder with other (cheaper) feeds (grains, by-products) or by taking steps that reduced feed wastage rates;
- improve their feed conversion efficiency by making adjustments to diets for different animal types, splitting dry cows into fats and thins, drying-off low producers early, agisting heifers, and other strategies to re-apportion feed in favour of the more productive/profitable animals;
- manage rumen health better, lowering risk of clinical/sub-clinical acidosis, which would result in more milk, fewer sick cows and deaths;
- use a transition feeding program on dry cows pre-calving, which would result in fewer health problems and more milk in early lactation;
- cull unproductive animals and use income to buy fodder for more productive animals rather than borrowing more funds;
- stimulate more spring pasture growth through changes to rotation length and fertiliser application;
- conserve more spring pasture as silage/hay; and
- re-structure short-term debt and reduce interest payments.

Financial benefits

Quantification of the benefits from **feed.FIBRE.future** and estimates of the impact of other elements of the project were derived from surveys of service providers and nutrition/farm management consultants carried out in September 2007. Results from the surveys indicated that each service provider had used **feed.FIBRE.future** material across, on average, 22 dairy farms and three beef farms.

The average net benefit per farm through actions taken from involvement with the **feed.FIBRE.future** project was estimated by the service providers at \$4,700 for dairy farmers and \$3,600 for beef producers. Service providers estimated that 20% of dairy farms and beef producers had made no financial benefits, although many may have received social or other non-financial benefits. The median net benefit was less than \$3,000 per farm (for both dairy and beef), but around 20% of farmers had been able to realise net benefits of \$10,000 or more. This represents a total gain for the dairy farmers participating in **feed.FIBRE.future** of \$12.5 million and \$1.3 million for beef producers. The estimate is assumed to be for one year only, as the project was particularly tailored for the circumstances facing farmers in 2007.

The economic benefit of the **feed.FIBRE.future** project can be estimated from the number of farmers taking action as a result of each project element and the likely average net benefit of their actions. For example, if 180 farmers had a net benefit of \$6000 as a result of their plans from the 1-on-1 consultations, then the gain would be just over \$1 million. The total benefit is estimated in Table 5. Much of the evidence for the number of farmers and the likely financial benefits can be drawn from the surveys and feedback of participating farmers and service providers, but the total figure is only approximate because all figures are estimates. It is assumed that where farmers engage in two activities the benefits accrue from each.

The average net benefit per farm through actions taken from involvement with the **feed.FIBRE.future** project was about \$4,700 for dairy farmers and \$3,600 for beef producers.

Table 5: Estimated net economic benefits to dairy farmers and beef producers through actions taken from involvement with the feed.FIBRE.future project.

Ways in which farmers or producers were influenced by the feed.FIBRE.future project	Number of farmers or producers taking action	Estimated average net benefit (\$)	Total net benefit (\$)
Information received by direct mail or through the media or industry newsletters (9000 dairy farmers received a full pack of Fact Sheets as direct mail, assume 15% take action, and 450 others act on info in newsletters and other media).	1,800	\$400 (e.g. equivalent to 1 tonne of hay, or value of 1/3 cow)	\$720,000
Advice from a service provider (Assume approx. 120 service providers use the information with 25 clients each).	3,000	\$4,000 (estimated by the service providers at \$4,700 for dairy farmers and \$3,600 for beef producers)	\$12,000,000
Information from workshops or field days (More than 600 attended, assume 80% took action).	480	\$1,000	\$480,000
Customised plan from 1-on-1 consultation (220 participated, assume 80% took action)	180	\$6,000	\$1,080,000
TOTAL			\$14,280,000

An additional survey of consultants was also undertaken to test the robustness of the net benefits estimated above. Five consultants were asked to detail changes that they *knew* had been made by two of their clients. Their feedback demonstrated how different farmers had realised net benefits, and included:

- \$7,980 realised from extra milk production, a premium on increased protein and lower feed costs. This was achieved by drying off 20 cows and agisting on another property and changing the feed ration.
- \$13,200 realised from increased milk returns (\$21,600 income) as a result of increased fodder purchases (\$8,400 costs). Refinancing options were limited and there was little scope to increase the farm overdraft. A decision was made to cull 15 marginal value cows (that were not pregnant, were low producers or had high cell counts) and use the funds to retire part of their short-term debt and use the remainder to buy fodder.
- \$16,000 realised from increased milk yields per cow, fewer penalties and increased butter fat. The main change was the addition of effective fibre to the rations at a cost of around 30¢ per cow per day.



Non-financial benefits

Many of the benefits were social in nature, as well as economic. Many farmers reported increased 'peace of mind' or decreased stress as a result of better defining their particular circumstances and feasible options, confirming that their basic plans were sound or seeing a new way forward.



"I believe that the social benefits were of the greatest benefit. Most people I worked with had the basics of the story, but needed some confidence that what they were thinking or planning was right. Many families needed prompting to take action and the package allowed that. Interestingly, there were many pretty tough stories coming out of the 1-on-1 consultations and a lot of financial rescue resulted from those contacts. Many farm businesses will survive as a result of this initiative."

Bob Gray,
farm system consultant,
Gippsland

Longer-term benefits

The **feed.FIBRE.future** project gave some dairy farmers and beef producers greater opportunities to develop skills and knowledge they could use in the future. The process of assessment and planning is also transferable to other areas of farm management.

Those farmers who were not avid information seekers developed a new appreciation for the value of industry-developed resources and tools, and for advisory services.

Some farmers developed a new relationship with a service provider and a greater understanding of the support that nutrition and business management specialists can offer their farm business. Many of those farmers who had little or no advisory network are likely to continue using advisory services in the future.

Looking beyond the outcomes for farmers, service providers also benefited. They found the resources and processes developed by **feed.FIBRE.future** were useful in their work with clients and provided opportunities for their businesses. Service providers were able to build on their existing relationships with clients and expand their client base. By helping farmers to be more profitable, their businesses profited.

The dairy industry is now better skilled and able to deal with crisis situations in the future as a result of the **feed.FIBRE.future** project. A new way has been found for the industry to effect a rapid and wide response to a crisis that makes best use of the infrastructure and experience developed in the dairy industry in previous drought response projects and other national projects. While managed centrally, the **feed.FIBRE.future** project improved regional communications and networks. Better information flow and a strong sense of ownership within the regions led to a high level of responsiveness to their specific needs.

"The tools and resources are excellent and have a longer-term application in our business, particularly in light of the possible changes to feeding regimes off the back of anticipated shorter growing seasons."

John Penry,
veterinarian,
south-west Victoria

Through feed.FIBRE.future the dairy industry has proven its capacity to act effectively in a crisis situation.

What you'll find in the Fact Sheets

A. Facts about fibre

Do you really understand what fibre is, how we measure it, and why cattle need it?

B. Assessing your risk of acidosis

Even simple management changes can make a difference to your risk of acidosis.

C. Risk Assessment Grid – factors affecting rumen function and risk of acidosis

What happens on your farm? Use this grid to make sure you are not inadvertently putting your operation at high risk.

D. Quick Checks

These quick checks help you spot trouble before sub-clinical acidosis becomes a major problem.

E. A to Z of fibre sources (forages and high-fibre by-products) and their expected feed values

Use this table to look up nutritional specs and other key information on alternative fibre options you may decide to use.

F. Closing the feed gap

Some things to consider when exploring the options you have to close the gap between the feed you have and the feed you need.

G. Know what you are buying

Make sure the feed you buy will suit your system and not introduce new problems. Some example feeds and what to consider. Crunching the numbers on feed value.

H. Feed additives

Do you understand the role of feed additives in acidosis control? You miss out on the benefits if the additive dose rates in your feed aren't right.

I. Tips on solving your feeding problems

Every bit counts when feed is scarce. Some tips on good feeding management.

J. The impact of your feeding decisions

There are many things you may decide to do to get through the next few months. Be sure that you have considered the implications.

K. Facts on alternative fibre sources

Palm kernel extract meal, grape marc, rice straw and sugar cane products – when to feed, how much to feed and issues to consider.

These Fact Sheets are also available on the Dairy Australia website – www.dairyaustralia.com.au – and new ones will be posted soon.



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Profiles

The resources developed and the key activities of the feed.FIBRE.future project are profiled in this section of the report. The outcomes, lessons learnt and the future application of the resources and activities are also discussed.

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Technical material for farmers and service providers

Purpose

To provide high-quality, relevant information and tools that clearly communicate independent, credible key messages about technical issues and approaches for feeding dairy and beef cattle under conditions of limited feed fibre availability.

Products

While general information on cattle nutrition and feeding management was already available to farmers and service providers through various sources, specific information on how to deal with the prevailing conditions was not available in an appealing and easy-to-read format.

The technical materials collated, developed and made available through the **feed.FIBRE.future** project were:

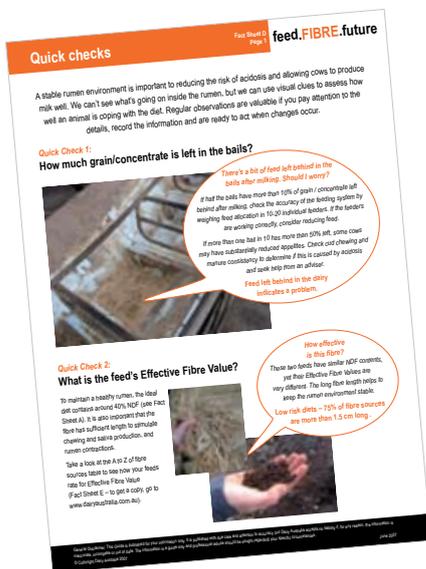
- Fact Sheets supplied as a technical pack;
- software tools (mini RationCheck and MISTRO feed budget) and other technical information;
- a scientific review of ruminal acidosis; and
- *Grain and Hay Report*.

Fact Sheets (technical pack)

The **feed.FIBRE.future** 'technical pack' of Fact Sheets was designed and developed by the **feed.FIBRE.future** Technical Advisory Group. The pack initially included 11 practical, easy-to-read A4 Fact Sheets enclosed in a presentation folder. As the project progressed the need arose for more Fact Sheets, which were produced and added to the collection. There are currently 17 Fact Sheets (labelled A to Q) available.

The Fact Sheets cover a range of fibre-related topics including information on what fibre is, how to measure it and why it is important; the risks that fibre shortage poses to rumen and cow health and some quick checks for recognising early signs of acidosis; management strategies to reduce cow health risks, close feed gaps and improve feeding management; and recommendations for safely using alternative fibre sources. Four of the Fact Sheets were written with specific information for beef producers.

The **feed.FIBRE.future** Fact Sheets were specifically designed to be appealing to farmers. Educational developers, Joanne Campbell (Department of Primary Industries Victoria) and Michelle Axford (National Centre for Dairy Education Australia), worked with text designers Anne Burgi and Natalie Stewart (Substitution Pty Ltd) to create a practical design that would attract the reader's interest. A conversational writing style and language intended to be familiar to farmers was used. Design features were employed to engage and challenge the readers' knowledge and understanding of fibre and feed management. Some examples of solutions to feed problems faced by farmers were provided and each Fact Sheet directed the reader to further information or help if it was required.



In addition to being stand-alone, informative documents, the Fact Sheets also provided a source of technical information that could be used as the basis of articles written for industry publications, such as dairy company newsletters (see examples of articles on pages 11-13).

Media releases derived from the technical information and accompanied by stories of on-farm experience were prepared and distributed each month.

Software tools and other technical information

Two software tools and other technical information useful in the current circumstances of fibre shortage were made available to farmers and service providers on the Dairy Australia website. These included:

- The software tool, Mini RationCheck (NSW Department of Agriculture), which was customised by **feed.FIBRE.future** to better suit the prevailing conditions. This tool can be used to 'sanity check' diets before implementing them and to assess the nutrient specifications and relative value of alternative fibre sources.
- An example of a software-based feed budgeting tool, MISTRO Feed Budget (Gippsland Herd Improvement).
- A large compilation of technical information sheets from state departments of primary industries covering a variety of drought-related topics such as stock water requirements and management, nutrition and feed management, animal health and welfare, and weed management.

Scientific review on ruminal acidosis

The ruminal acidosis review is a 60-page monograph summary of current scientific literature on ruminal acidosis, covering cause, prevention and treatment. It was prepared by the Reference Advisory Group on Fermentative Acidosis of Ruminants (a panel convened by the Australian Veterinary Association, of which Steve Little is a member). The review was already in progress when the **feed.FIBRE.future** project began, but its completion, publication and distribution were supported and fast-tracked by the project so it could serve as a valuable resource for veterinarians and nutrition specialists during the feed fibre crisis.

Grain and Hay Report

The *Grain and Hay Report* is a situation and outlook report on grain and fodder availability and price. It is produced regularly (either weekly or fortnightly) by Dairy Australia and has a national overview and separate reports for each of 14 regional districts.

Audience

The technical materials were developed as comprehensive resources for farmers and for service providers. The Fact Sheets, for example, were developed specifically for farmer use but they were also useful for service providers to use to guide or support their discussions with farmers around feed management issues. The ruminal acidosis review was prepared specifically for veterinarians and nutritional professionals.

Distribution of technical materials to farmers and service providers

A total of 11,200 technical packs were printed. They were widely distributed at the **feed.FIBRE.future** workshops and given to farmers at 1-on-1 consultations or by their service providers. Dairy Australia posted a copy to all their 9000 levy payers.

As new Fact Sheets were developed they were mailed to dairy farmers by dairy companies, inserted in *The Weekly Times* and *The Dairy Australian* newsletter, and posted on the Dairy Australia and other partner organisations' websites (e.g. Cattle Council of Australia, Victorian Farmers Federation, etc).

A total of 1500 copies of the acidosis review were mailed to members of the Australian Veterinary Association's cattle and sheep veterinarian special interest groups and to nutrition company staff on Dairy Australia's database. The review was also available on the Dairy Australia website.

The *Grain and Hay Report* was distributed through dairy companies, direct e-mails to farmers and service providers, as well as on the web and via AusdairyL, an e-mail discussion list for the Australian dairy industry with 480 subscribers.

"The information has been used and referred to by producers far more than I expected and I notice the feed.FIBRE.future cardboard folder of fact sheets is still within reach of most of my clients: a) they opened it; and b) they know where it is and have used some of the info."

Lyn O'Connor,
Dairy Recovery Program Manager,
Queensland

The outcomes

Most farmers (89%) attending **feed.FIBRE.future** workshops highly regarded the quality of the information in the technical pack, ranking it 4 or 5 (on a scale of 1 = poor to 5 = excellent). Service providers also endorsed the materials. Many (80%) of those directly involved in the project (by attending a service provider briefing, presenting **feed.FIBRE.future** farmer workshops or conducting **feed.FIBRE.future** 1-on-1 consultations with farmers) indicated the information and tools had enabled them to better help their dairy or beef farmer clients plan and make decisions about their feed fibre situation over the past three months.

The additional and continuing requests for more copies of the technical pack also confirm its value to farmers and service providers.

Lessons and reflections

Development and success of the technical pack was possible due to existing relationships with a team of people who had the skills, knowledge and experience to be able to describe the key messages and technical issues, present them in a format that appeals to farmers, and produce them in a very short timeframe.

Prompt delivery of the technical materials to all of the regions required clear communication between the **feed.FIBRE.future** central team, the printer (Printworks), the Regional Co-ordinators and service providers. The technical pack delivery costs were increased because of the urgent nature of the project. For the packs to arrive at destinations throughout Australia in time for the workshops, they were delivered by courier and often required air freight.

The *Grain and Hay Report* provided a regular alert to changes in grain and hay markets, which was a new service that opened an important channel of information flow for most subscribers.

The future

The content of the technical pack will continue to be relevant and useful to farmers in other environmental conditions. For example, when the **feed.FIBRE.future** project was being delivered, the Hunter Valley region in NSW and Gippsland in Victoria experienced severe flooding, which escalated feed shortages. The technical packs were used with farmers in these regions as the information was as relevant to their situation as it was to the farmers in drought-affected regions. The messages are not just suited to crisis situations. They can be used any time to help farmers with on-farm feed management decisions.

The technical resources will continue to be available to farmers and service providers on the Dairy Australia website.

The National Centre for Dairy Education Australia has used the technical and planning messages from **feed.FIBRE.future** to develop a short course about feed budgeting that will be available in the long term. The information will also be used in the ongoing Target 10 project through the Dairy Extension Centre.

The *Grain and Hay Report* will continue to be produced and distributed by Dairy Australia.

It is envisaged that the **feed.FIBRE.future** resources will be of use for future project development within the dairy and beef industries. For example, the Dairy Australia program, Grains2Milk, is incorporating the messages in its next topic area about flexible feeding systems. The technical resources and procedural documents that could potentially be of use for future project development are provided on the CD accompanying this report.

“We do not have a fibre problem on the mid-north coast, in fact we’re having a good season, but the information is useful regardless of the conditions.”

Tony Dowman,
NSW Department of
Primary Industries

Briefings for service providers

Purpose

To help service providers to the dairy and beef industries understand their role in supporting farmers to plan and make decisions through the current fibre shortage, make them aware of the key technical messages developed by the **feed.FIBRE.future** Technical Advisory Group and introduce them to the available tools and resources.

The products

A two-hour seminar developed specifically for service providers was run in six locations. All the seminars were delivered by Steve Little with support from John Penry (Camperdown Veterinary Centre) in Warrnambool, Dave Barber (QDPIF) in Brisbane, Mark Burgemeister (Thinking Cows Pty Ltd) in Shepparton and Neil Moss (Cattle Production Consultants) in Sydney.

The technical packs were not available at the time of the seminars, but were posted out to service providers as soon as they were printed.

Service providers were also welcome to attend the farmer workshops held in their regions (see Profile: Farmer workshops and field days).

Service providers also heard about the **feed.FIBRE.future** messages and resources at other events such as the Australian Fodder Industry Association's (AFIA) National Fodder Conference that was held in July at Coffs Harbour.

In mid-June and mid-July an e-mail bulletin identifying the main issues, requesting a 'call to arms' and providing web links to technical information was sent to rural service providers who had previously received drought information through the Dairy Moving Forward project.

Audience

The seminars were for nutritionists, animal health experts, veterinarians, farm system consultants and other service providers who advise dairy farmers and beef producers on feed management.

The e-mail bulletins were sent to dairy company staff, agronomists, accountants, veterinarians, rural financial counsellors, key merchandisers and the staff of herd improvement organisations and government departments of primary industries.

Design features

The briefing seminars aimed to assist service providers to:

- understand the recommended approach/process to assist farmers to manage their fibre shortage;
- be aware of the supporting information resources and planning tools that are available; and
- refer farmers to appropriate key advisers if necessary to fully develop and implement strategies tailored to their farm.

The seminars were designed to take into account that service providers who attended were likely to have varying levels of advisory skills, experience of dealing with farmers during drought conditions and the capacity to reflect on the nature of their advisory relationships and that service providers were already supporting farmers to deal with the current feed fibre situation in different ways.

How it worked

Regional co-ordinators used their networks to promote the briefing seminars, with the aid of a flier distributed by e-mail and followed up by phone calls.

The outcomes

A total of 141 service providers attended the seminar briefings over a two-week period.

Location	Date	Attendance
Ellinbank, Gippsland, Victoria	21 May	20
Brisbane, Queensland	22 May	25
Warrnambool, South-west Victoria	23 May	46
Shepparton, Northern Victoria	1 June	14
Cohuna, Northern Victoria	1 June	14
Sydney, New South Wales	4 June	22
	Total	141

In addition, 131 service providers attended local farmer workshops. Approximately 2000 service providers received two personalised e-mail bulletins during the project.

Lessons and reflections

Service providers were the most effective way for the **feed.FIBRE.future** information and resources to influence farmers. Of the \$14 million net economic benefit estimated to be achieved by farmers through actions taken from involvement in the **feed.FIBRE.future** project, \$12 million was attributable to advice from a service provider.

Although service providers played a large part in distribution of the messages to their clients, all the elements of the project were needed to achieve this part of the project's success.

As expected, the broad range in nutritional knowledge and experience of the service providers who attended the initial briefings resulted in feedback from some that the content was too basic and from others that it was too detailed.

The future

Service providers have developed their skills and knowledge and have access to a set of resources that they can use with their clients into the future.

The **feed.FIBRE.future** information and resources have given service providers ongoing opportunities to increase the services they offer their clients and build their businesses.

The communication channels and effective networking with service providers have been re-enforced.

"The whole package, workshops, leaflets and the 1-on-1 sessions has allowed a lot of people to get a real grasp of the issues. Most importantly, they have not been left with just part of a complex picture. What has been very clear is that the info has been passed around the community through the informal networks and the 1-on-1 sessions have been able to straighten out the distortions that result from that process."

Bob Gray,
farm system consultant,
Gippsland

"It has allowed me to expand my farm client base, either regionally or accross industry sectors as I see fit. The project has given me the opportunity to prove my suitability as a consultant who can deliver industry-based services or training. I would be happy to be involved in programs structured in this way in the future."

Philip Pittolo,
consultant nutritionist,
New South Wales

feed.FIBRE.future farmer workshops and field days

Purpose

To motivate dairy farmers and beef producers to make sound decisions in the current environment based on good information and planning.

The product

A two to three hour workshop-style meeting run in all regions by experts in nutrition and animal health to provide farmers with technical (nutritional and animal health) and management information to help them assess their current position, review feasible feeding strategies and options, and develop and implement action plans using suitable decision support tools.

In the seasonal dairying regions of Victoria and South Australia a series of two-hour, on-farm, field days were also run in late August/early September with an emphasis on managing feed in early spring. The field days were facilitated by expert nutritionists and DPI agronomy staff. A panel of local farmers were also invited to discuss their ideas and experiences. The field day format was less formal than the workshops, allowing time for more discussion among farmers and some 'hands-on' activities.

Audience

The workshops and field days were developed specifically for dairy farmers and beef producers, but some elements were also relevant to other livestock farmers, e.g. sheep. Local service providers also attended the farmer workshops and field days.

Design features

The workshops aimed to help farmers to:

- be aware of what fibre is and the minimum daily fibre requirements of cattle;
- understand the recommended approach/process to manage their fibre shortage;
- be able to conduct a risk assessment of factors influencing the success of diets on their own farm, and use the recommended observational checks to see how well their animals are coping;
- be aware of the supporting information resources and planning tools that are available; and
- consult advisers if necessary to fully develop and implement strategies tailored to their farm.

It was important that the workshop design considered that:

- every farm is different – there are no 'blanket' recommendations;
- the current feed fibre situation is forcing farmers into uncharted waters for herd nutrition;
- farmers are being forced to bend the conventional rules of cow feeding, and as they do so, risks to cow health and productivity increase;
- risks can be minimised with good herd husbandry and careful monitoring;

- advisory input is likely to enhance farmers' chances of successful outcomes;
- a plan is essential – begin with the end in mind; and
- the environment is constantly changing – review the plan regularly.

The workshops and field days were designed by the Technical Advisory Group and the key messages were incorporated into guides and materials for the presenters.

How it worked

Experienced presenters with nutrition and animal health expertise were commissioned and trained (using the presenter's guide and a video).

Providing the presenters with a detailed guide ensured that the core content of the workshops and field days was consistent irrespective of the presenter, while still allowing flexibility to incorporate regionally specific issues or concerns.

The workshop presenter's guide and Powerpoint resources were revised and improved following feedback from the first five workshops. An additional segment addressing water issues was added to address the needs of farmers in regions in NSW and Queensland, where water for stock and dairy use was also limited.

A second presenter's guide, a set of posters and other delivery materials were developed for the field day facilitators. These guides and materials are available on the CD accompanying this report.

Convenient venues with suitable facilities were selected by the Regional Co-ordinators for each workshop.

A teleconference was used to confirm the roles and responsibilities of the regional and central project team members before roll out in each region, to ensure things ran smoothly.

Workshops were promoted as part of a broader communication strategy developed and implemented in conjunction with Monks Communication. An open invitation to participate in workshops was made to farmers and service providers by radio and through advertisements in rural publications, notices in newsletters, and fliers distributed by milk tanker drops. The Regional Co-ordinators also played a significant role in promoting events in their region through word of mouth with their industry contacts as well as managing the logistical aspects of the workshops. They booked the venue, set up the room and equipment for the presenter, arranged catering, recorded attendance, collected farmer feedback and distributed **feed.FIBRE.future** technical packs for the farmers to take home.

WORRIED ABOUT FEEDING YOUR HERD THIS WINTER?



feed.FIBRE.future workshops can help you work out how to feed your herd through winter.
Free for dairy and beef producers. Coming soon to your area.

Tongala	18 June	10am – Noon	Tongala Football Clubrooms	Tallygaroopna	6 July	10am – Noon	Tallygaroopna Football Club
Corryong	19 June	10am – Noon	Corryong Shire Office	Deniliquin	10 July	10am – Noon	Deniliquin RSL Club
Lockington	20 June	10am – Noon	Senior Citizens' Rooms	Leongatha	18 June	10am – Noon	Leongatha Football Clubrooms
Dingee	25 June	10am – Noon	Dingee Memorial Hall	Warragul	19 June	10am – Noon	Warragul Exhibition Hall
Stanhope	26 June	10am – Noon	Football Club Social Rooms	Maffra	20 June	10am – Noon	Macalister Research Farm
Cohuna	5 July	10am – Noon	Cohuna Bowling Club				

RSVP Friday 15 June. Northern Victoria RSVP: John Boyd, (03) 5852 0533 or 0400 083 285. Gippsland RSVP: Deanne Kennedy, (03) 5659 4219 or 0419 878 055







The workshops were widely advertised.

The outcomes

A total of 38 workshops and eight field days were held over three months. The first workshop was held on 31 May, 2007 and the last field day was held on 4 September, 2007.

The workshops and field days were attended by 603 farmers and 131 service providers. Of the farmers who attended, 70% were dairy farmers, 28% were beef producers and 2% either didn't specify their farm type or were not dairy or beef cattle farmers.

See Table 6 for workshop and field day locations and attendance details.

Most of the farmers (89%) who attended a workshop or field day found that it was beneficial and were impressed with the quality of the information provided, rating it a 4 or 5 (on a scale of 1= poor to 5 = excellent). Farmers thought the workshops were well presented, informative, a good opportunity to ask questions or hear what others thought, and provided reassurance that they were on the right track.

The workshops provided farmers with more than just information and an opportunity to share and get new ideas. Three-quarters (76%) of the farmers said that attending the workshop would help them with planning and decision making, rating it 4 or 5 (on a scale of 1 = didn't help at all to 5 = greatly helped them). Only two farmers said that they didn't get anything out of the workshop and seven farmers, mostly beef producers, felt it wasn't suited to their needs.

Many farmers (88%) wanted to receive more information or participate in other activities that would help them with their feed management planning and decisions:

- 43% wanted to receive more **feed.FIBRE.future** information;
- 22% wanted to register for a free 90-minute 1-on-1 consultation;
- 8% said they would like to register for a dairy Taking Stock consultation; and
- 15% wanted to participate in a workshop to build a nutritional or financial plan.

Many of the farmers who registered for a consultation (132 farmers registered) at a workshop participated in one (104 farmers).

Table 6: Workshops and field days for farmers were held in nine regions

Region	No. of workshops & field days	Locations	Number of farmers	Number of service providers	Presenter/s
South Australia	4	Murray Bridge, Naracoorte, Mt Compass, Mt Gambier	46	12	Anthony Pearce, Vicki MacDonald, Kylie Boston
South-west Victoria	11	Simpson, Colac, Warrnambool, Cobden, Glenormiston, Ballarat, Macarthur, Heywood, Terang	161	17	John Penry, Michele Ryan
Northern Victoria	10	Tongala, Corryong, Lockington, Dingee, Stanhope, Cohuna, Tallygaroopna, Deniliquin, Cobram West, Lancaster	103	26	Lisa Heard, Mark Burgemeister, Scott Rathbone, Steve Little, Ian Sawyer, Brian Crockart, Brett Davidson, Chrisanya Robins
Gippsland	5	Leongatha, Warragul, Macalister, Nyora	116	14	Peter DeGaris, Greg O'Brien
NSW	8	Aberdeen, Cowra, Dubbo, Tamworth, Holbrook, Bega, Bodalla, Forbes	83	12	Fi Malone-McGrath, Paul Cusack, Ian Sawyer, Philip Pittolo, Dick Buesnel, Neil Moss
Queensland	5	Toowoomba, Wondai, Beaudesert, Roma, Gympie	71	31	Fi Malone-McGrath, Ian Hannah, Brad Granzin, Alistair Brown
Tasmania	1	Bothwell	10	10	John Webb Ware
Western Australia	1	Geraldton	3	0	John Webb Ware
Northern Territory	1	Alice Springs	10	9	Phil Holmes
Total	46	Total	603	131	

Lessons and reflections

The farmer workshops were designed in a very short timeframe. For the first few workshops held in late May and early June there was very limited time to promote the events. The short promotional period may have resulted in fewer farmers hearing about and attending the events. Farmers who attended the early workshops were mailed the technical packs because it was not possible to produce, print and deliver them at such short notice.

The presenter's guide, which was based on a template that had been designed for InCalf, was valuable for maintaining a fairly high degree of consistency between workshops when delivered by different presenters in each region.

The acidosis risk assessment activity conducted during the workshop using Fact Sheet C proved to be a very effective means of getting farmers to consider the risk factors operating on their own farm, and stimulated much discussion.

The collaboration of the **feed.FIBRE.future** central team with the Regional Co-ordinators and service providers was essential to the delivery of successful **feed.FIBRE.future** workshops. Working together ensured that the presentation materials were delivered to the presenter; venues were booked and prepared; farmers and service providers in the region were notified of the workshops; the workshop content addressed regional issues; and catering, attendance records and feedback was managed.

Regular contact with the Regional Co-ordinators enabled quick responses to regional needs, e.g. extra workshops were organised in NSW in response to flooding.

Each region had its own idiosyncrasies to be considered for the workshops to run smoothly. The industry organisations and Regional Co-ordinators in each of the regions had different ways of working and viewing farmer expectations in their region.

Promoting the workshops, and all other **feed.FIBRE.future** events, to beef producers was challenging. Unlike dairy farmers, beef producers have less structured industry networks and support. Hence, communication with the beef industry was less direct and relied heavily on mass media. However, the number of beef farmers attending some workshops, e.g. in Gippsland, was greater than expected.

Organising workshops for regions that were predominantly beef areas was also a challenge. These regions had very locally focused issues, especially Alice Springs, Roma and Geraldton. The workshops for these regions needed to be adapted significantly with the expert support of John Webb Ware. Separate promotional messages were created for these regions.

The future

The process that farmers were introduced to for managing feed on farm can be applied to similar situations in the future and to other management areas. They can keep referring back to the resources they have received to help with their decision making.

Farmers now have a better idea of where to find resources and seek help when they need it in the future.

The presenter's guides that have been written for the workshops and field days can be used as templates for developing guides for future projects.

Presentation content and materials used in the workshops can be used at other group meetings where feed management is being discussed.

feed.FIBRE.future 1-on-1 consultations

“The concept of 1-to-1 works well as the farmers do prefer individual support. The workshops were too prescriptive and the “programmed” aspect (e.g. presenter’s guide) leaves little room for discussion and addressing the issues the farmers have.”

Steve Scown,
sCOWn Consulting,
South Australia

Purpose

To enable farmers/producers to plan and make better feeding decisions specific to their own farms under the current constraints of fibre shortage and provide a way for farmers who do not usually attend workshops or are reluctant seekers of information to access the **feed.FIBRE.future** project.

The product

A free, confidential, 1-on-1, 90-minute consultation with an experienced nutrition or business management specialist held at a local meeting place off farm.

Audience

The consultations were available to all dairy farmers and beef producers and were open to all members of the farm team – in fact, all key decision makers were encouraged to be involved.

Design features

As with all elements of the **feed.FIBRE.future** project, there was a sense of urgency in developing the consultation process to offer it to as many farmers as quickly as possible.

Before proceeding with the program of consultations, three pilot sessions were held to confirm that the intended process would work. The pilots involved six consultants and 26 owner dairy farmers. All of the consultants and farmers who participated indicated that the consultations were worthwhile and that the design was workable.

Because the experience, knowledge and skills of each farmer are different, as well as their farm circumstances, the consultations needed to be flexible and guided by the need of the farmers. Issues expected to be discussed at the consultations included:

- whether the farm had enough feed and what was the gap;
- how to close the gap – by growing more feed, purchasing feed, extending the existing feed, reducing cow demand and changing stocking rates, using an alternative fibre source;
- effects on cow health and production and managing cow health issues;
- feeding management practices – including more effective methods and how to appropriately feed different groups of cows;
- finances, budgets, cash flow and the viability of the business in the future; and
- stock water shortage.

For a consultation with this level of flexibility to be as effective as possible the farmers needed to do a degree of preparation to brief the consultant. Farmers were asked to supply some key information about their farm by completing a registration form before the consultation.

The consultations were held at a local venue with meeting rooms (not on farm) to enable the consultant to see a maximum number of farmers in a day. Meeting farmers off-farm created an environment free from distractions or interruptions that may happen on-farm and the consultants involved and other service providers in the region saw the consultations as distinctly different to (and not competing with) their regular on-farm advisory work.

Three consultations were scheduled for each consultant per day. This number was chosen so that as many farmers as possible could have access to a consultation and so that the consultant had time to prepare before each consultation, summarise the meeting afterwards and take a break between consultations.

How it worked

Experienced nutrition and business management specialists in each region were commissioned and briefed on their role in the **feed.FIBRE.future** 1-on-1 consultations.

Farmers were able to register to participate in a 1-on-1 consultation at the **feed.FIBRE.future** workshops or by contacting the Regional Co-ordinator. A media promotion strategy similar to the one used for the **feed.FIBRE.future** workshops was employed. However, in addition to this, 5000 postcards, specifically promoting the 1-on-1 consultations, were printed and distributed by the Regional Co-ordinators, consultants and other service providers in the regions. The postcards were designed primarily for participating farmers to use to recommend the consultations to other farmers. The 'call to action' on the card was to contact the Regional Co-ordinator to register for a 1-on-1 consultation.

Service providers were asked to play a 'finding' role in the regions by using their existing networks and knowledge of farmers' circumstances. Their role was to identify farmers likely to benefit from a consultation and, in particular, farmers who normally don't seek advice from a consultant. Interested farmers were then directed to the Regional Co-ordinator, sometimes with the aid of the postcard.

When at least three farmers in an area expressed interest in a consultation, the Regional Co-ordinator booked an available consultant and a venue and scheduled farmers to meet with the consultant. In many circumstances the Regional Co-ordinator also needed to act as a 'finder' of farmers.

Occasionally it wasn't possible to organise for three farmers to attend a consultation on the same day at the same venue. A small number of consultations were offered on farm or by phone so that farmers who wanted a consultation didn't miss out.

At the end or shortly after the consultation the farmer was provided with written notes and actions.

Both farmer and consultant were asked to provide confidential feedback to **feed.FIBRE.future** immediately after the consultation.



The outcomes

Farmers were very positive about the 1-on-1 consultations, which were offered by 25 consultants and taken up by more than 220 farmers. Details of the participants and their farms are in Table 7 and the regional details are in Table 8.

Of the farmers who had a consultation, 93% said that they were impressed and 78% said that they were so impressed they would tell others about it. There was only one farmer who was not impressed with the consultation.

Table 7: Farmers accepted the offer of a 1-on-1 consultation.

Total number of consultations held in all regions	236
Number of consultants	25
Percentage of dairy farmers who participated*	79%
Percentage of beef producers who participated*	23%
Age of participating farmers	
<35 years	17%
35-50 years	47%
>50 years	36%
Number of dairy companies participating farmers supplied	12
Size of the dairy herds	Range = 40-700 cows Average = 192 cows
<i>*6 farmers were beef producers and dairy farmers</i>	

Table 8: 1-on-1 consultations were held in seven regions.

Region	No of 1-on-1 consultations	Consultants
South-west Victoria	34	John Penry, Chris Hibburt, Helen Chenoweth, Steve Jagoe
South Australia	34	Steve Scown, Sam Acheson, Tom Thorn
Northern Victoria	42	Scott Rathbone, Brian Crockart, Cameron Smith
Gippsland	47	Bob Gray, Phil Johnstone, Neil Lane, Peter DeGaris
NSW	37	Anthea Young, Philip Pittolo, Amanda Lockyer, Brian Crockart, Andrew Maw, Neil Moss
Queensland	37	Vincent Posada, David Barber, Cameron Whitson, Jim Wade
Tasmania	5	Daniel Huggins, Basil Doonan
TOTAL	236	

Issues raised by farmers with consultants resulted in many outcomes, including:

- completing a feed budget or plan, calculating how much feed will be required;
- examining ways to improve cow production or health;
- recommendations for selling and culling cows to increase cash flow and reduce demand on existing feed;
- pasture rotation, management and use of nitrogen;
- analysing rations and suggesting modifications such as introducing or increasing supplements, concentrates, pellets, transition diets, talking to feed company about feeding strategies to stretch reserves, changing feeding management practices – using hay to slow rotation, considering purchasing feed storage and milling system;
- setting up rations for different groups of cows – heifers, dries, milkers;
- evaluating, sourcing, buying fibre, looking into alternative fibre sources such as palm kernel extract (PKE), brewers grain, cotton seed and recommendations for feeding safely;
- referral to another appropriate adviser or support – nutritionist, vet, accountant, bank manager, milk processor, Centrelink;
- recommendations for reducing acidosis risk and other cow health risks;
- recommendations for improving butterfat content, diets to improve production; and
- providing confirmation existing plans will work.

Discussing these issues with consultants increased the sense of control that farmers felt they had over the feed fibre situation on their farm. Before the consultation, farmers estimated their sense of control as an average of 5.8 on a scale of 1 = no control to 10 = totally in control. Only one farmer said they were totally in control and four felt they had no control at all before the consultation. After the consultation farmers averaged 8.2 on the same scale. Only two farmers scored their level of control below 5.

Farmer reactions:

“Good sound feeding advice and was able to justify the money spent from the finance available.”

“I found it useful to explore options and reassuring to review our situation with a second opinion on hand.”

“After the consultation we decided to sell the breeders and concentrate on fattening steers. The consultation allowed me to confirm this decision.”

“Good opportunity to talk with someone and assess my situation and then look at options to go forward.”

Table 9: Farmers reported that the 1-on-1 consultations increased the sense of control they had over the feed fibre situation on their farm (on a scale of 1 = no control to 10 = totally in control).

	Sense of control	
	Before the consultation	After the consultation
Average score	5.8	8.2
% scored <5	27%	2%
% scored ≥5	72%	98%

The consultants were also asked to (independently) estimate the degree to which the consultations had increased the farmers' sense of control over the feed fibre situation on their farms. The consultants assessed that the farmers' sense of control had increased after a consultation but were slightly more cautious about the extent of the increase.

Table 10: Consultants assessed that the 1-on-1 consultations increased the sense of control farmers had over the feed fibre situation on their farm (on a scale of 1 = no control to 10 = totally in control).

	Sense of control	
	Before the consultation	After the consultation
Average score	5.6	7.5
% scored < 5	30%	3%
% scored ≥5	70%	97%

"Like most campaigns the feed, fibre story uncovered a significant body of other situations. feed.FIBRE.future was the mechanism for a lot of people to seek help with financial assistance, family support, personal health, leaving the business, etc, etc. That needs to be recognised. One guy had been living on reject spuds for seven months."

Bob Gray,
farm system consultant,
Gippsland

"Farmers seemed to get a lot out of the consults and the feedback was very good. The farmers were very positive, and grateful to receive a free service that benefited their business that had been funded by their industry bodies."

Amanda Lockyer,
nutritionist, NSW

Other benefits of the 1-on-1 consultations described by the farmers, besides their increased sense of control, were:

- reassurance in difficult times and confidence that they could do something;
- chance to hear new information and learn something;
- opportunity to explore options, make plans and set targets; and
- motivation to make changes on farm.

The farmers' positive thoughts on the process were supported by the consultants' view that 94% of farmers valued the consultation (scored 5 or above on a scale of 1 = farmer not likely to attribute any value to 10 = very highly valued) and that 43 % valued it highly (scored 8-10). The consultants said farmers particularly valued the following features of the consultation:

- having someone who would listen to them and provide some confirmation or reassurance they were doing the right things (particularly farmers who were already in control);
- learning new information;
- resolving problems; and
- developing plans that they intended to act on.

One of the objectives of the 1-on-1 consultations was to extend the reach of the project beyond what would have been achieved by workshops alone and reach farmers who would not normally have participated in such programs, the so-called 'shy feeders'.

The consultants estimated that the farmers they saw varied widely in their motivation to seek information and 20% of the farmers were not eager information seekers (scored below 5, on a scale of 1 = rarely seeks information from anyone to 10 = very inquisitive information seeker).

Reaching this 20% of farmers as well as attracting farmers who had not attended a **feed.FIBRE.future** workshop (approximately 50% of farmers who participated in a consultation had not attended a workshop) indicated that the 1-on-1 consultations had increased the reach of **feed.FIBRE.future**.

The consultants were not able to help all the farmers with all of their issues in a 90-minute consultation. In 43 cases the consultant referred the farmer to one or more other drought support initiatives. The consultants recommended an interest subsidy to 22 farmers, a professional advice grant to 18 farmers, and family support to 18 farmers. Eight farmers were referred to some other form of support, such as a vet, milk processor, financial adviser, counsellor or another workshop.

Because of the short, intensive nature of the **feed.FIBRE.future** project, there was not time to follow up with the farmers and ask whether they had taken actions as a result of participating in a 1-on-1 consultation, although the consultants felt that most farmers were likely to do so. In their opinion, only 4% of farmers were unlikely to take any action (scored below 5 on a scale of 1 = unlikely to act to 10 = very likely to act). Besides the actions farmers take on-farm, consultants thought farmers were also likely to take up other opportunities to gain information or skills, such as Taking Stock (29%) or NCDEA courses (29%). Other industry initiatives also mentioned were a Pro Fodder group meeting, risk management, water security, business advice, flood relief loans, Centrelink payments, Nutrition Plus Nutrition course, personal adviser for a sheep flock.

Several consultants involved have gained ongoing, paid on-farm consulting work with some of the farmers they did a 1-on-1 consultation with and reported that the project had changed the farmers' opinions of the value of advisory support.

Lessons and reflections

In the states where there are greater distances between farms, such as New South Wales and Queensland, there weren't enough consultants in some areas to meet farmer demand. In these circumstances, consultants needed to travel from other regions to conduct the consultations.

The Regional Co-ordinators did an outstanding job of organising and monitoring more than 200 1-on-1 consultations, which were far more difficult and time intensive to manage than the farmer workshops. It was difficult coordinating the availability of consultants and farmers and there was significant work involved in collecting and analysing the feedback. An additional unexpected work load for the Regional Co-ordinators was promoting the consultations and referring farmers. It was initially expected that service providers would play this role, especially dairy company field staff, with the aid of promotional devices such as the postcards, but multiple contacts were needed to connect with farmers.

The ability and willingness of the consultants selected to assist with the consultations was exceptional. Their experience enabled them to quickly identify important issues on farms they weren't necessarily familiar with and they managed to achieve some significant outcomes in just 90 minutes.

Another lesson from the consultations was the value of having all key decision makers in the farm business participating in the consult, especially in those husband-wife partnerships where the husband is the 'do-er', and the wife manages the finances.

"... A lot of the quieter farmers are less likely to be comfortable asking for help or divulging personal information about their farm business. The information on the web was good value but only accessible to the farmers who are using that technology. The way the program was designed, in that there was not a major commitment to road shows etc, and could be tailored using a series of 1-on-1 consults, was well done. I have made a very wild guess at \$3000 per farmer. I believe that confidence was probably the main outcome, which is hard to objectively measure."

Chris Hibburt,
veterinarian,
south-west Victoria

The future

The process followed in the 1-on-1 consultations will help the participating farmers improve their decision making and planning in the future.

The 1-on-1 consultations have changed some farmers' attitudes to advice seeking and they are now more likely to work with advisers to improve their farm business. The consultations have also been beneficial to the consultants' businesses by improving their existing relationships with clients and building their client base.

The design itself has been proven to be a successful approach. A 90-minute targeted interaction between a farmer and expert consultant who does not know the farm business can lead to an overview, plan and 'signposts' to other advice that are of significant benefit. This approach will be an important option in many projects in the future.

