

DELVING INTO THE DIFFERENCES IN Paddock PERFORMANCE

Every dairy farmer knows that some paddocks are more productive than others but FutureDairy researchers were staggered to find the average difference between the best and worst paddocks is 100%!

Or to put it another way, the pasture utilisation from the top yielding paddock was almost always twice that of the lowest paddock.

Researcher, Professor Yani Garcia and his colleagues analysed data from commercial and research dairy farms in both Australia and New Zealand.

“In almost every case, there were more paddocks performing below average than above. This means a few very high yielding paddocks were inflating the averages,” Prof Garcia said.

Research farms operating to best management practices achieve much higher overall levels of pasture utilisation (20-25 t/ha/year for ryegrass compared with 12-14 t DM/ha on commercial farms) but still had big variations between paddocks.

“Although we weren’t expecting such large variability between paddocks, we are very confident in the findings because we found the same trend across multiple farms, across years and even across the two countries,” he said.

“In all the studies, pasture management and fertiliser (and irrigation in some cases) were based on best management practice and well defined management rules. So we expected that differences between paddocks would be reduced, but they were not.”

While more research is needed to better understand the causes of paddock variability and therefore ways to overcome it, Prof Garcia said the findings showed enormous potential gains from improving under-performing paddocks.

“It is certainly worth identifying under-performing paddocks and investigating underlying cause such as compaction, soil nutrition, drainage and pasture management.

Prof Garcia suggested that in the future technology such as unmanned ground vehicles had the potential to provide farmers with detailed information about soil nutrition and pasture cover which would allow more precise management and boost pasture utilisation.

“Although there has been a lift in the average in pasture utilisation on Australian dairy farms there is still a huge gap between potential pasture utilisation and what is currently achieved on commercial farms. As pasture is our cheapest feed source, anything that can help bridge that gap will contribute to on-farm profitability,” he said.

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Photo: Click here to receive a high res image by automatic email: fdDUG@monkscom.com.au

Caption: Professor Yani Garcia with a prototype of ‘DUG’, an unmanned ground vehicle which is being developed for use on dairy farms.

Information for media

FutureDairy is a national research project for the Australian dairy industry, aimed at addressing the challenges likely to occur in the next 20 years. FutureDairy’s major sponsors are Dairy Australia, DeLaval and the University of Sydney. Project leader: Associate Professor Kendra Kerrisk 0428 101 372 E kendra.kerrisk@sydney.edu.au

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