

WEATHER FORECASTING CONVERT

Dairyfarmers, Sam and Fleur Tonge ignore the daily weather forecast, as it's proven to be unreliable and irrelevant to their farming operations. However, detailed weather forecast data available on the internet has become an essential planning tool for both day-to-day farming activities and longer-term farming business decisions.

The Tonges milk about 200 cows year round at Kupidabin, their property located near Casino in northern NSW. Their farm group, 'Sunmilk,' was involved in a DPI, NSW climate change study conducted by Katrina Sinclair.

The process gave the Tonges a better understanding of interpreting weather forecasting, accessing websites and assessing probabilities. These skills have brought numerous benefits to their dairy business – easier management, financial benefits and reduced stress.

"We realise now that the daily weather report in the media is targeted at people in towns and cities. A forecast of 'a chance of rain' means take your umbrella to work. As farmers we need to know the actual probability of rain to make decisions such as whether to irrigate, sow a crop or cut hay," said Fleur.

The Tonges use a variety of weather forecasting web sites to assess local weather conditions and to plan farming activities. "It makes life a bit easier," said Fleur.

But the major impact has been on medium and longer-term planning and their confidence in taking risks. The Tonges monitor weather forecasts in the grain growing areas to guide their decisions about forward purchase of stock feed. "Last season, the financial benefits were considerable," she said.

Although they recognise that farming is a risky business by nature, the Tonges describe themselves as conservative when it comes to taking risks. Weather forecasting has given them more confidence in their longer term decisions which come with an inherent risk. It's also relieved them of some stress.

"For example, our area is rarely affected by El Nino so I no longer lie awake worrying when I hear El Nino predictions in the media," said Fleur.

But longer term forecasting shows some significant climatic trends that will affect the way the Tonges farm in the future.

"We are now planning for longer dry periods and warmer summers by changing the pasture species we sow, and increasing our focus on fodder conservation," said Fleur.

The Tonges recognise that their climate in the future will be less reliable, requiring a more flexible management approach.

"For example, we don't rely on the old rules of thumbs anymore, such as 'start sowing on St Patrick's day.'

These days we plan our sowing date according to the weather forecasts.

To find out more about how weather forecasting can be used by dairy farm businesses, register for the Dairy Research Foundation's Annual Symposium at Camden 8-9 November. Speakers include Fleur Tonge and Julie Evans from the Bureau of Meteorology.

Diary date: Dairy Research Foundation 2007 Symposium 8-9 November 2007 at Camden Civic Centre. To register contact Sherry Catt ph (02) 9351-1631 or email sherryc@camden.usyd.edu.au

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Photo: Fleur Tonge looking at a weather forecasting site on the computer

Click on the following link to automatically receive a high res image by email: fdtonge@future dairy.com.au

Caption: Casino dairy farmer, Fleur Tonge will address at this year's Dairy Research Foundation symposium on using weather forecasting to improve dairy farm and business decisions.

About the Dairy Research Foundation

The Dairy Research Foundation integrates basic and applied research with extension activities to disseminate this information among dairy farmers nation wide. The work is based at the MC Franklin Laboratory at part of the University of Sydney's Camden Campus. The team carries out a wide range of basic and applied research focusing on pasture management, animal nutrition and whole farm systems. One of the roles of the Dairy Research Foundation is to inform the dairy and general community on the work undertaken by the University and this is achieved by running an annual Symposium at Camden.

The Foundation's activities are made possible through close co-operation and generous financial support from dairy producers, corporate sponsors and industry funding for specific projects.

Media contact

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