

Rural round-up



Georgette Wouda
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Stunning sunrises are one of the perks of early morning scanning sessions out on farm in late autumn.

It reminds well-wintered dairy vets like me that yet another 'year' – or rather, dairy season – is coming to an end.

For non-dairy farming people, a new year starts on the 1st of January and finishes on the 31st of December. But for dairy farmers and their vets, the 'year' begins on the 1st of June with the start of a new 'dairy season'.

Much like the end-of-year pre-Christmas rush, the end of the season is a hectic time for dairy farmers – and for vets and vet techs too. Assisting with dry cow insertion was unheard of as a service offering when I started at VetSouth 19 years ago. Nowadays, our diaries are packed with dry cow insertions and dry-off scans, plus heifer teat sealing too, as the uptake of these services has really taken off over the years.

Secretly, I quite enjoy this time of the year. It presents great vet and vet tech offerings for our clients and requires a big team effort. Getting these jobs done in an efficient manner, with a bit of banter and some snacks and tunes along the way, can be weirdly satisfying. And before we know it those physical weeks are behind us, and a new dairy season has begun.

A few of us vets are attending the big annual vet conference in Wellington in early June. Hopefully you'll manage to have a break from the farm too, before we all get swept up in the seasonal dairy calendar all over again.

Happy new season everyone!

Our antibiotic use

by Mark Bryan

Around ten years ago, we started becoming very aware of the risks of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) to the global population.

If you recall, there was a lot of noise around the risks of AMR, which could lead to antibiotics potentially not working for routine diseases, as the bugs would become increasingly resistant to the drugs. Things we take for granted could become far more dangerous if bugs become resistant.

This impacted our vet and farming world because around 80% of all antibiotics used globally are used in animals. And so, there was increasing pressure to regulate or curtail access by farmers to antibiotics. Of course, New Zealand is a very low user (currently still the third lowest user in the world), but the risk to farmers and us vets of potentially severe regulation was very real.

The New Zealand Veterinary Association responded by launching an aggressive plan to reduce antibiotic use (AMU) to almost zero by 2030. Behind that was the intent to demonstrate



that our clients could farm well without leaning on antibiotics – and, more importantly, without needing regulation to reduce their use.

Since 2015, New Zealand has halved antibiotic use across all animals. While other countries have made significant steps too, this has meant we have maintained our third lowest position.

Our local farms have led some of this change. We have very accurate data from our VetSouth dairy clients and in the past ten years the use of 'red light' antibiotics has reduced by 94%. They now make up only 0.6% of all AMU compared to 11% a decade ago. Overall, our AMU has decreased by 9% in the same period.

Alas, our AMU was higher again in the 2024-2025 dairy season, mainly due to unusual outbreaks of Salmonella. It's a good reminder that prevention is always better than a cure, and that vaccination against the various diseases that can happen on-farm is a great option.

ON-FARM FOCUS

DAIRY



- Finish drying off and teat sealing.
- Check on BCS of cows, especially in the first two weeks post-dry off.
- Keep an eye out for sick cows on crop.
- Plan Rotavirus vaccination for your herd at least three weeks pre-calving.
- Book your KeyVet consult to review last season and plan for next season.
- Keep an eye out for our dairy Winter Workshops, coming up in June/July!

BEEF



- Treat for lice if required.
- Mineral check stock going to works.
- Copper/Multimin injection for adult stock.
- Drench youngstock and supplement with trace elements as needed.

SHEEP



- Treat for lice straight off shears where possible.
- BCS ewes coming past the yards.
- Hoggets may benefit from sunshine vitamins (ADE).

DEER



- Pregnancy scan hinds.
- Mineral check stock going to works.
- Copper/Multimin injection for hinds and weaners.
- Drench weaners as necessary.

WORKING DOGS



- Consider a coat for your dogs to see them through the colder nights (especially your older or lighter ones).

Rounding up repro results

by Kath Aplin, Claire Hunter & Daniel Cragg

Thanks to over 250 of our dairy farmers who came out to celebrate the end of the season at our recent Repro Round Up events in Winton, Gore and Balclutha (a new location this year).

It was awesome to have a night off-farm and enjoy a meal together. During each evening, Line Ferriman spoke about the innovative CowSmart data analysis service, and Jess Wallace shared her riveting life story that led her to run Surfing for Farmers in Southland.

We provided farmers who'd scanned with us an info pack, including graphs benchmarking their farm's repro results, and we presented the overall results for the year with insights from our vets.

One of the interesting things we looked at during the **Winton** event was how the average 6-week in-calf rate (ICR) had changed over the last 12 years. There have been ups and downs, which is no

surprise with so many things influencing fertility, but it was great to see the trend has generally been upwards.

Many of us expected reproductive results to be affected by the wet start to the season. However, the average 6-week ICR was 69%, which equalled last year's result (Winton's highest result to date). With an industry target of 78% (what the top NZ herds achieve), an average across all our herds of 69% is fantastic. It's rewarding to see the hard work farmers put in to keep cows healthy pay off, despite the bad start.

At the **Gore** event we talked about how we think 3-week ICR should be given more focus by the industry. Our clients were excited to hear that our farms made another improvement this year, even after breaking the record last year, to achieve an excellent average 3-week ICR of 47%. The industry target is 53%.

Particularly intriguing, after many years of analysis, Gore farms with wearable tech out-performed farms without wearable tech (the humans do the heat detecting) for the first time. Wearable farms had an average 3-week ICR of 48.5% vs. non-wearable farms who averaged 46% for their 3-week ICR.



Given it was the first year of holding an event in **Balclutha**, it was amazing to see it so well supported. We were also surprised to see how well these local farms performed given the immense challenges last spring. It was good to have a discussion around reproduction while looking at the results, and it was great to see everyone catching up with friends and neighbours.

The gears are already turning with ideas for next year's events. We can't wait to see you there.

Investigating the mystery of phantom cows



by Christine Utting

What is a phantom cow?

It's a cow that has been mated and didn't return to heat, but did not conceive to that mating. Phantom cows cost dairy farming systems as they either become pregnant much later in the mating period or end up empty. The prevalence of these cows has been estimated as high as 9% in some herds.

Can anything be done about them?

Phantom cows can be detected through early age scanning of all cows who have been mated but not returned to heat. They will either be pregnant or a phantom. Identified phantoms can be treated by enrolling in a CIDR program with fixed time AI.

Is there local data around this?

We have done an analysis from seven farms with wearable collars who did an early age scan and intervention to their phantom cows this season.

There were 228 phantom cows in total, with a 5% prevalence average across the farms (the range was 4-9%).

Key findings from these phantom cows:

- 19% had no heat events at all before mating, i.e. were mated at their first heat and then became a phantom cow.
- 9% had been treated for metritis with Metri-Clean.
- 28% had been treated as non-cyclers with a CIDR program at their first mating.
- Of the phantom cows, 17% were 2 years old, 14% were 3 years old, 59% were 4-8 years old, and 10% were 9+ years old.
- Cows that went on to become phantoms on average ruminated lower in the colostrum period than the rest of the herd (there was some farm variation around this).
- 62% of phantoms that ended up empty did have another heat after their intervention mating. Unfortunately for most of these cows, mating had finished by then, so they didn't get another chance at breeding – but the intervention did seem to have 'restarted' their cycle.

Pregnancy outcomes after intervention mating of these cows:

- 47% pregnant,
- 49% empty,
- 3% recheck,
- 1% dead.



What are the takeaways?

Phantom cows are present in every dairy herd, but they are more likely if you've treated a high number of non-cyclers. Heifers and middle-aged cows are most at risk of becoming phantoms.

It's interesting that cows who became phantoms generally ruminated less during the colostrum period. This reinforces that focusing on transition management is key to setting you up for a good start to the season.

Almost half of phantom cows became pregnant following treatment, which would make scanning and intervention cost-effective on most farms.

If you're interested in an early age scan for phantom cows next season, discuss this with your KeyVet to work out the logistics, such as optimum timing and treatment options.



Urea toxicity in cattle

by Oli Rowlands



We recently saw a rare case of urea toxicity on one of our farms. Thankfully only a few animals were affected, and due to the actions of the farmer there were no deaths.

Urea toxicity is uncommon in Southland. Knowing why it happens, what to do if you spot signs, and how to avoid it, can reduce risk further.

Typically, toxicity in cattle occurs following incorrect feed storage, contamination of feed troughs, or turning stock out onto pasture recently covered with urea. A toxic dose is only 20g per 50kg of liveweight, so they don't require a huge amount to begin having issues.

About 20 minutes after ingestion you'll start to see signs, including twitching, excess salivation, muscle tremors, collapse and convulsions. Cows will often bloat and struggle to breathe if badly affected. Usually, farmers will find a certain group of animals affected, such as those feeding on a particular section of paddock or recently eating from a feed trough (e.g. in a milking shed).

If any of these symptoms are noticed, call your vet straight away. The animals on that pasture or with access to that feed trough need to be immediately moved to an uncontaminated area. Make sure they have free access to clean water.

Drenching affected cattle with 30-40L of water and 3-5L of vinegar can help slow the onset of clinical signs.

To prevent toxicity, ensure that adequate time and rain has transpired between spreading urea on paddocks, and putting cattle onto them. An even spread of urea over pasture is key, as clumps of urea can take longer to dissolve into the soil.

It's also important to check that feed is uncontaminated before giving it to stock and to thoroughly wash out any troughs that contained urea before using them for feeding.

Prevention is easier than treatment when it comes to urea toxicity, but taking prompt action if it does occur can minimise its impact on your herd.

Setting up for spring

by Donna Hamilton

Maximising profit on farms is all about having a good spring.

Having ewes in good condition so they can withstand what comes their way needs to be our target at this time of year – and ensuring there's feed available during the hard six weeks they face (four weeks before lambing and two weeks after).

We're seeing a lot of poor drench performance, with major issues showing up on local farms. To combat this, we need to farm in a way that reduces the need for drenching. Achieving well in spring is an important part of this. Getting lots of lambs off the farm at weaning opens the gate for modifying lamb production in a way that relies much less on drench.



Two key focus areas for now are:

1. Condition of ewes

Some farmers aren't always sure about the recommendation to have ewes well-conditioned. But we're only meaning a body condition score (BCS) of 3-3.5 – not a beach ball!

You only have six weeks after shearing to assess condition by sight. After that, you'll need to get your hands on them.

A sheep with BCS 3 will have full muscles, a smooth, rounded spine, and smooth, rounded short ribs that can be counted with effort.

Ideally, you'd do individual BCS and treat accordingly, but doing a few races will give you a general idea.

2. Planning feed

By now you'll have a handle on your winter feed supply. If it's not ideal, have you got a Plan B underway? It's a good idea to have Plans C and D lined up as well.

Having enough feed for your ewes in the month before lambing can be one of the biggest challenges, but it's a vital driver of ewe performance. If this is always a pinch point, look at your system and ask yourself where changes could happen to ensure peak ewe performance.

Would hoggets out grazing be an option? What about adjustments in winter feeding or trying different crop options? Reducing stocking rate? Getting lambs off earlier to carry more feed into winter? There are plenty of advantages to be gained from that one.

Hopefully you've got a support team around you to discuss these things with. If not, ask us – we're happy to work with you to help build a plan that suits your farm and situation.

A farm store with more

by Kellie Mulholland

Old McDonald may have a farm – but where does he go for all his production animal needs? To one of our VetSouth Farm Stores, of course. We currently have eight farm stores operating across our clinics in Southland and Otago.

From registered veterinary medicines to animal health essentials and nutritional supplements, our farm stores stock a full range of leading brands, as well as trusted products for dairy, sheep, beef, deer, and equine.

A-team service with a smile

Our super friendly team – many of whom are local farmers themselves – know a thing or two when it comes to supporting your farm operation. And if they don't have the answer

at their fingertips, there's always an experienced vet on hand to call. Between them, they've got a wealth of expertise and can offer advice that fits your farm.

Move over Uber – we also deliver

Did you know we also deliver on-farm? That means we'll bring your animal health products to you, for FREE. We can also collect samples for testing or hoof knives for sharpening (remember to arrange this with your local driver first).

Our delivery vans cover most areas weekly and follow a regular schedule – just check what day we're heading past your gate and the rest is easy-peasy. You'll even save a bit on fuel. Sweet as!

Our Invercargill farm store is launching now

We're excited to announce that our Invercargill clinic now has its very own farm store. Welcome to the family, Findlay Road!

Alongside all the great products on offer, the capable retail team is backed by our very knowledgeable Treena, who brings more than 20 years of experience in the farm product biz. Got a question or need advice on the right product? Treena will be happy to help.

So, drop into any VetSouth farm store and have a yarn with one of our production animal retail experts. Or if you're in a hurry, call ahead, collect, and cruise on.



Clinic corner



Toss your tubes in our bags

Dry-off is certainly a busy time of year for us and our dairy farmers. We shift over one million tubes of dry cow and teat seal in the space of a few months.

Did you know you can drop empty Dryzen tubes (non-antibiotic only) and buckets to our participating clinics to be recycled? To reduce plastic waste, they are made into fence posts. This epic initiative contributes to a more sustainable future for the dairy industry.

Here's a peek at what's been collected at one of our clinics so far...



We're coming to Milton

We've got some exciting news. We're opening a new VetSouth in Milton and expanding our network of trusted clinics across Southland and Otago.

From on-farm callouts and advice, to RVMs and farm store animal health supplies, our experienced team is here to back your farm – and for Milton area farmers we'll soon be just down the road!



Looks like we've found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow... it's our people!

Not just our amazing team of vets, vet techs, vet nurses, and support staff, but our awesome clients too.

You're pure gold, and we couldn't do what we do without you.

Our clinics

Winton
Gore
Balclutha
Tapanui

Invercargill
Lumsden
Otautau
Clydevale

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Keep your pets happy and healthy with our small animal teams in Winton, Gore, Balclutha, Tapanui & Invercargill



Proud to support:

Young Farmers Grand Final
MLT NZ Gold Guitar Awards