Speaker 1:

Welcome to Ag Vic Talk, keeping you up to date with information from Agriculture Victoria.

Drew Radford:

If you mention managing seasonal variability, most people start thinking about strategies to deal with dry times. For some though, the opposite can be the problem, which is the case for dairy farmer Craig Dwyer from Bullaharre, just out of Cobden in South West Victoria. In this location, excessively wet winters can be a real problem when juggling the needs of a dairy herd against maintaining healthy paddocks.

Drew Radford:

To find out more, Craig Dwyer joins me in the AgVic Talk studio. Craig, thanks for your time.

Craig Dwyer:

No worries, Drew. Anytime at all.

Drew Radford:

Craig, the focus of our discussion is dealing with seasonal variability, but in terms of seasons, I understand you just had a pretty good one.

Craig Dwyer:

Ah, yeah, we've been pretty handy, given the spring kinder of lasted all the way through until, effectively, New Year. We did dry off a fraction and then had a very, very early break. Yeah, our down period was probably only about six weeks. I would have said last year, combined with a nominally high milk price, was probably one of the best ones we've ever put together.

Drew Radford:

For a lot of producers, the biggest seasonal risk is not enough rain for you though. I understand it's almost the opposite.

Craig Dwyer:

We can get very wet. We are a wet farm. We do have a lot of heavy black flats and a creek running through the middle of the property with kind of around that 850-millimetre rainfall average per year. Yeah. It's a management challenge in a wet winter. The winter we're going through right at the moment, up until this point in time has been very, very kind to us. Given that June was quite dry and July probably... I know others have had it, unfortunately too dry for them, but July's been ideal for us. The only thing that could have made it better was probably a little more sunshine.

Drew Radford:

What do you put in place, Craig, though, to manage the potential of a really wet winter?

Craig Dwyer:

We ensure that we've got enough grass cover on the property before we actually open the farm back up to the milking cows. We try to have grass cover levels at 2,500 kilos of dry matter to the hectare, and then once majority of the farm is at that point, we'll allow the cows to start grazing. Generally, with our calving pattern, we're calving around the 15th of May, so therefore we do sacrifice the cows off into a couple of paddocks to allow that grass cover to get ahead, to give us a feed wedge. Then once that wedge is established, we strip graze them around the farm to keep the rotation as long as possible.

Craig Dwyer:

It's around that 60 odd days before we're back in the same paddock again, which becomes a challenge though, in the middle of winter, when you potentially have to throw open... Most of the farm's divided into 10 acre paddocks, and when it does shockingly wet, we do have to throw the gate open and give them one complete paddock where you'd at least try to get two, if not three feeds out of the one paddock.

Drew Radford:

I understand also, you've been doing quite a bit in terms of pasture management, because it wasn't a dairy farm before, am I correct in that?

Craig Dwyer:

Well, it was a dairy farm through from about the early '80s up until 1999, but a very underdeveloped farm. Let's put it that way. It was just 22 paddocks with 22 dams. No trough infrastructure, or water infrastructure and very minimal lane ways, and that sort of thing. Then it was a beef farm from the late '90s all the way through until we bought it in 2012, but we leased it out for three years before we moved on to it ourselves.

Drew Radford:

So, to cope with the demands of a dairy herd, other than the infrastructure requirements, have you had to do a lot in terms of pasture development to support that herd?

Craig Dwyer:

Yeah. We've renovated virtually the whole place, Drew, back into the more newer varieties of perennial grasses. I'm not a big fan of the annuals, sowing annuals in, and then having to do the same thing again next year, I know you can get bulk feed off it, but I prefer to stick in the perennials, and given our wetter rainfall, or more likelihood of a reliable rainfall here, perennials seem to hang on better, that I've found. Yeah, we've renovated the whole farm over a period of five years, and upped the fertility base too, to support that grass. Yeah, I think we've almost got the place up to the right spec that we need for it to be producing as good as we could possibly get it.

Drew Radford:

Okay. You've got the pasture to a certain level, but you're still dependent upon fodder to a certain amount, aren't you?

Craig Dwyer:

Yeah, we do. We do buy in. We endeavour to cut as much silage as possible off the place, but we do buy in up to about 300 ton of cereal/clover hay that we have with a long-term relationship with a hay grower. Not far down the road for us, reasonably close. We've had that guaranteed for a few years now, so we do have that fodder up our sleeve to manage either a ridiculously wet winter, or a longer dry spell while we're trying to establish that pasture cover over the farm. It kind of swings both ways.

Drew Radford:

Are you having to store that on farm, or have you had to change infrastructure to deal with that?

Craig Dwyer:

We've just built a hay shed in May this year. It was purchased late last year, but unfortunately due to builder commitments and then some wet weather here through the early part of the autumn, we were unable to get it up until middle of May. At which stage the weather had already turned, and the hay that we had purchased this year had to be stored outside, so there wasn't much point putting slightly damaged hay into the new shed and being slightly damp as well. We definitely have upgraded the infrastructure, because it was the one thing that was missing on this farm, was a decent hay shed, and over this coming summer or this coming hay season, we will be reassessing our fodder requirements, and getting probably as much hay into that shed as possible.

Drew Radford:

Craig, in regards to assessing those fodder requirements, what are you actually looking at? I mean, what sort of planning tools, apps, or seasonal forecasts help you make those decisions?

Craig Dwyer:

I've already made decisions on which paddocks will be renovated for this coming spring. We'll put in a fodder rape crop into paddocks that have been either badly damaged by pugging, or have the most tired grass species in them, as in the ones that were probably sown five years ago. If they've got some ongoing issues, either from cricket damage, or pugging, etc, we'll renovate them, so those decisions have already been made for those paddocks that will probably get pulled out of the rotation.

Craig Dwyer:

Then we'll try and get those fodder crops in early to give us a feed wedge, to keep the cows milking through until hopefully at least February. Off some of that green feed, because we do pump our effluent water back over those crops to try and get a potential second, maybe even a third grazing off them. If the season's really kind to us with a little bit of rain fall and not too many stinking hot days, but we will also just bank on buying 200 ton of hay on this farm, pretty much every year without fail. I'd prefer to be over insured on the hay side of things by having that fodder on farm rather than having to go to the hay market, potentially, when everybody else is, if there is a shortfall. Hay in the shed, or hay on farm, we consider money in the bank here. It's plan for the worst and hope for the best.

Drew Radford:

Is that more of a seasonal plan that you've got in place as opposed to looking at seasonal forecasts and thinking, "Oh, maybe I need a bigger buffer, or even a smaller buffer"?

Craig Dwyer:

I do look at the forecasts potentially for the seasons coming. I did note the BOM this year predicted a very, very wet winter. That didn't eventuate here, thankfully, for a wet farm like ours. Yeah, I don't put a 100% faith in them. As I said, we will get as much fodder on farm as we can, and as our cashflow allows, anyway, and given that this hay shed is now here, and we'll probably try and keep that as full as possible over the journey. This season's shaping up like... The cereal guys up slightly north of us are having a cracking year at this stage, so if that continues, hopefully there'll be a fair bit of hay about, and the price might be back a little. The guys up north, New South Wales and Queensland, they've got some green grass about, so hopefully their requirements for fodder will be less, so the demand may not be there as there has been, but who knows, you throw a bushfire in there and the demand can go through the roof again.

Drew Radford:

Craig, looking further ahead. What plans have you got for your property to try and insulate it as much as possible from the extremes of either seasons?

Craig Dwyer:

Probably the next capital expenditure will be on some drainage, so we can avoid damaging some of that pasture that we're putting into the wetter paddocks. That'll allow us to get a little bit more traffic over those paddocks without doing as much damage. The drier side of things, we have got a lot better at the water storage on farm, given that there was 22 paddocks, 22 dams. There is a reticulated trough system to every paddock. Some of the dams have been cleaned out, so our capacity for storage on farm's a lot better. We've also put culverts in and redirected some drains to ensure that we do catch the surface runoff that we do get. Our effluent side of things, we're using that nutrient base, and the water that comes with that to go back over the fodder rape crops.

Craig Dwyer:

We're setting ourselves up as best we can here. We don't have any irrigation water, or any underground water here, so we're entirely reliant on runoff, so it is a very precious commodity that we have to try and manage better into the future.

Drew Radford:

Craig Dwyer. It sounds like you are doing a very detailed job of managing it, and in the process laying substantial foundations for the future. Thank you very much for joining me in the AgVic Talk studio.

Craig Dwyer:

No worries, Drew. Appreciate that. Let's hope the season's favourable for everybody.

Drew Radford:

For more agriculture Victoria information on dealing with climate variability, you can subscribe to both The Break, and the Milking the Weather newsletters. Both of these you can find through the Agriculture Victoria website. Also, you can get in contact with your local dairy extension officer who can direct you to relevant information and advice to help you get started in understanding how your business can adapt to climate variability.

Speaker 1:

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Speaker 1:

All information is accurate at the time of release. Contact Agriculture Victoria, or your consultant before making any changes on farm.

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