Working together: A case study on the DairyNZ early response service

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Context

The dairy community has a long history of people working together and supporting each other. The DairyNZ Early Response Service was established in September 2010 as a support mechanism for farmers who need assistance to manage challenging situations on their dairy farms. Often these are situations where there is a likelihood the welfare of animals is being placed at risk. More often these are situations where people are struggling to cope with the pressures of making the right decisions in a timely manner, to manage their way out of difficult circumstances.

DairyNZ Animal Husbandry Extension Specialists are involved in the Early Response Service giving one-on-one advice, providing planning support and forming networks of technical expertise around the farmers. To-date the farmers involved have found the process positive, it has helped them bounce ideas off others and aided them to work through plans to get them out of a rut.

The Early Response Service is a good case study of how support, drawn in from many avenues, helps decision-making. The service is establishing itself as the ‘fence at the top of the cliff’, reducing the risk of issues affecting animal and farmer welfare becoming reality. This is largely achieved through trusted partnerships between farmers, veterinarians, DairyNZ staff, dairy company staff, farm consultants and other rural professionals.

The DairyNZ early response service process

Support finds its way to farms from two avenues: Anyone can confidentially call 0800 4 DairyNZ (0800 4 324 7969) when they, or someone in their community, need support from the Early Response Service. Farmers who need support can be referred to the service by dairy companies, veterinarians, rural professionals and other industry organisations.

DairyNZ has a process where an Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist contacts the farmer’s dairy company Area Manager about the initial support call. The dairy company arranges a meeting with the farmer, the Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist and the Area Manager to assess the situation to see if there are any issues requiring follow-up support. This meeting is usually held on the farm.

When needed, an agreement is made with the farmer to develop an action plan for them to work through, to resolve any issues that have been identified.

This action plan is a document in which the farmer needs to have a strong sense of ownership. This plan sets out decisions that need to be actioned and draws in support from outside expertise to help farmers work through the decisions they need to make.

The role of the DairyNZ Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist is to facilitate action of the plan, to draw in support and to have an overview of the progress being made on the action plan. This overview involves regular follow-up phone calls and visits to both the farmer and those who are in the plan as part of the support team.
Where tasks are not being actioned, solutions are worked through until barriers to the task being completed have been resolved. If satisfactory progress is not being made on the action plan despite assistance, the situation is elevated to the dairy company to enforce outside of the Early Response Service process.

Farmers who have been involved in the process have provided positive feedback on the quality and level of support they received through the service.

Four DairyNZ Animal Husbandry Extension Specialists carry out this work across the country – two in the North Island and two in the South Island.

These DairyNZ specialists are experienced in stockmanship practices and are familiar with how dairy farms run so they can think in terms of the overall farm system when assessing issues on farms. Skills in coordinating support from others, such as bankers, dairy companies, veterinarians, farm consultants and industry networks are crucial, as well as skills in communication and facilitation.

DairyNZ Animal Husbandry Extension Specialists play a key role in helping farmers look at their situation with a fresh eye, and work through options and solutions to put things back on track.

**Working together relationship 1: The farmer and the DairyNZ animal husbandry extension specialist**

The process is set up so the relationship between the farmer and the DairyNZ Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist becomes one that is based on trust and support. DairyNZ is an industry-good organisation funded by a levy collected on milksolids production from every dairy farmer in New Zealand. DairyNZ has no authority to enforce farmer compliance with statutory requirements. DairyNZ relies on building relationships and promoting and demonstrating good practice to achieve change on farm.

The initial objective of the Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist at the first meeting is to build rapport with the farmer and an understanding of the situation on farm. Rapport is essential for farmers to trust the advice given on practices they may need to review and change, as well as to accept advice on other networks and support they should access.

The initial phase of this process can be awkward. Unsurprisingly, farmers are often very private and slow to open up about situations which may involve personal relationships, illness, financial difficulty, or emotional and mental strain.

The Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist comes from outside the farmer’s local community and this can help to remove some barriers. Farmers can feel more comfortable working through their circumstances confidentially with someone removed from their community.

**Working together relationship 2: The veterinarian and the DairyNZ animal husbandry extension specialist**

Naturally veterinarians have a significant role in the process. They are regularly seeing the farmer, and treating and assessing stock on the farm. Veterinarians are one of the main sources of referrals to the Early Response Service.

It is often a frustration to veterinarians that they only see the cows in the dairy yards when treating them, or when carrying out routine tests. It is not often that they get the time and access to see the whole farm, and to understand the systems the farmer is operating which may account for some of the reasons behind the condition of stock.

Veterinarians are the experts in animal health, and their involvement is essential in the treatment of animal health issues that arise in early response service situations, as well as in many of the actions farmers need to address around the prevention of issues.

Their long-term relationships with clients can be particularly valuable in resolving issues. Their knowledge of the local area and of the issues other farmers may be facing can also be vital, especially as some situations are brought on by seasonal circumstances, adverse events or cases of local disease or infection.

Veterinarians have also valued the support an independent advisor can add to recommendations they may have already made to their clients, but had not been actioned.
This is also a process of resolving issues so the welfare of animals is safeguarded without having to go through the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) or the Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in the first instance.

Working together relationship 3: Dairy company representatives and the DairyNZ Animal husbandry extension specialist

DairyNZ Animal Husbandry Extension Specialists work with dairy company area managers as well as people in the milk quality and sustainability teams around the country.

It is important that the dairy company sets-up the initial Early Response Service meeting with the farmer to help set the context for the farmer and to ensure that DairyNZ and the dairy company staff are consistent in their understanding of the situation and in the approach to resolve any issues.

Dairy company staff are involved in the formulation of the action plan with the farmer and the DairyNZ Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist. They need to be confident that tasks are realistically achievable, and how they may need to be involved to assist the farmer in carrying out the tasks in the action plan.

Dairy companies have supply agreements with their farmer suppliers that they can enforce. This gives them some direct and enforceable influence over the practices of farmers that DairyNZ does not have. The knowledge that a dairy company area manager can enforce certain tasks in the action plan to ensure conditions of supply are met is particularly useful to have in the background if farmers are not implementing the plan as agreed.

For the dairy company the involvement of a DairyNZ Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist is beneficial as it brings farm systems expertise and practical dairy farming knowledge into situations where this is required to support their suppliers. At a higher level, achieving good outcomes for animals and farmers, by supporting farmers before a risk becomes a reality is a matter of industry reputation.

Working together relationship 4: Other support organisations and the DairyNZ animal husbandry extension specialist

The Rural Support Trust and Federated Farmers are two important organisations that support farmers. Although they are more often involved in situations of regional adverse events, such as droughts, floods and storms, they are often called on in cases where individuals require their support.

The Rural Support Trust gets involved in situations where they can help the farmer with their general personal wellbeing, and issues around the health of their family and staff. They also provide help around mentoring, financial budgeting and assistance. Importantly they are farmers themselves and they are a valued support network. DairyNZ’s Early Response Service has some good linkages for referring people to their services. Federated Farmers have extensive networks and can support individual farmers through their local knowledge of feed supplies, contract and employment options. They have been a key supporter of the Early Response Service from its conception.

Working together relationship 5: Rural professionals and the DairyNZ animal husbandry extension specialist

In Early Response situations, finance can play a major part in the cause and in the solution. Bankers are often unaware of the situation around stock health on farm. Involving bankers in the situation and having a well-thought through action plan makes bankers more open to options. They get to see their client’s situation in detail and they can then help to work through options that avoid mortgagee sales and the depreciation of their investment in the farm asset.

For an Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist, preparing farmers to present their case for funding to their banker is an important role.

In many cases farm consultants have been called in to assist long-term in the running of the farm. Their advice around grazing and pasture management and the day-to-day running of the farm is usually provided on a monthly basis. Farm consultants have seen this service as opening up opportunities for them to provide support to farmers who really need it. They also enjoy the challenge of turning around farms.
Working together relationship 6: MAF, SPCA and the DairyNZ animal husbandry extension specialist

MAF and the SPCA were involved in the establishment of the Early Response Service and they support the process. Both organisations work in the enforcement space in situations where issues have eventuated and there is an immediate requirement to protect animals from suffering. The aim of the Early Response Service is to prevent farms and animals getting to the point where intervention by MAF and/or the SPCA is required. However, if farmers do not respond to the support provided and the situation on farm worsens, then the case may be escalated to the enforcement agencies, through the dairy company.

Outcomes to date

Good outcomes for dairy cattle have been achieved since the system was established in 2010. There are cases where minor changes have quickly removed risks to stock and farmers. In other cases while the risk to stock has been removed, other changes have taken time. The reality is that farm systems do not change from performing poorly to performing highly overnight. For example, while feed can be imported to feed stock, failed pastures on the farm can take a long time to regenerate and get back to a point where they can support a high performing dairy farm.

In almost all cases farmers have been able to work through an action plan, with support from a range of rural professionals, to achieve a satisfactory solution on farm. In many cases this has resulted in an on-going relationship with a farm advisor to the long-term benefit of the farm business and the animals. In a small number of cases the farmer has chosen to exit the industry and this has been handled with empathy and respect.

The success of this programme is a result of the trust that the Animal Husbandry Extension Specialists have been able to build with the farmers concerned, and the support networks that have been provided by brokering arrangements with appropriate organisations and individuals. At all times the approach has been very much a team approach, where individual expertise is valued and used to support an action plan that leads to improvement for the animals involved, and also recognises that the farmer, farm business, the whole dairy industry and ultimately the whole of New Zealand stand to benefit. DairyNZ has been very appreciative of the efforts made by a wide range of rural professionals and organisations to support this service, and look forward to continuing to work in this way. The work can be challenging, but is ultimately some of the most rewarding work that the Animal Husbandry Extension Specialist team undertake – thank you for your support.