

WestVic Dairy News

September 2025

Lindsay Ferguson retires

By Aylish Tobin-Salzman, Communication Coordinator



Lindsay Ferguson, Regional Manager for Dairy Australia and Executive Officer to the WestVic Dairy Board, retired at the end of July after nearly ten years of dedicated service to the South-west dairy industry.

Throughout his time at WestVic Dairy, Lindsay has supported the dairy industry and dairy farmers through numerous challenges.

"We had the price downturn and clawback in 2016, bushfires and dry seasons in 2018, COVID in 2020 and for the last two years, the worst drought on record.", says Lindsay.

"Overcoming all these challenges required great flexibility in our service delivery plans. We needed to keep well informed on the situation and collaborate with the rest of industry.

"Getting through these things as well as we did was only through the guidance of the Board, the support of Dairy Australia and the hard work and dedication of our team."

Lindsay considers putting together and leading a strong team of highly competent professionals that deliver extension services to the southwest, one of his greatest accomplishments.

He is proud of the tangible impact of the organisation on dairy farms.

"It's a privilege being close to the farmers we deal with and seeing how they adapt their businesses to changing circumstances. It's rewarding to see them learn about and implement practices that we have shared with them."

What Lindsay will miss most is the people.

"I'll miss being part of a great team - not just the staff and Board at WestVic Dairy but also the wider DA team and the even wider team we have of people and organisations that service the regional industry.

"I will miss seeing individuals in these teams play their part as we progress an idea through to a concrete program or event, promote and run it, then see the learnings and benefits flow through to those attending.

"I enjoy that it is a dynamic industry so lots of things change. People and organisations change, but there remains wonderful goodwill which results in good industry collaboration."

Lindsay is excited for retirement. Most of all, he is looking forward to more time with loved ones.

"I'm most looking forward to spending more time with my long-suffering wife and kids, sharing passions and skills with our nine grandchildren and catching up more with friends."

Juanita Paul, Dairy Australia Regional Service Manager, will lead the Dairy Australia team in Western Victoria in the interim until a new manager is recruited.

With over 20 years of consulting and project delivery experience across fast moving consumer goods, utilities, banking and finance, and health, Juanita specialises in people and technology delivery and change management. Her deep-rooted connection to agriculture stems from 14 years as a beef farmer in the Murray Region and being part of a fourth-generation dairy farming family from the Waikato in New Zealand.

BJ's journey to farm manager

By Aylish Tobin-Salzman, Communications Coordinator



Mepunga dairy farm manager BJ McKenzie says the Manager/2IC Program she completed 12 months ago is the best thing she's done for her confidence and success.

When farm owners Mark and Tania Nevill asked BJ to step more into a manager role, she was hesitant.

"I just didn't think it was for me or that I'd be able to do it," BJ says.

They all agreed the Manager/2IC Program would be a good step. Since completing it, BJ has taken charge of day-to-day operations, people management, and planning.

"Some days I do it really well, some days I don't," she laughs. "It's definitely been a learning curve."

The course helped BJ build confidence in managing people, resolving conflict, and creating a positive team culture.

"The course reinforced that I'm not alone. It was good to be around like-minded people and learn from both Adam Jenkins the facilitator and the group as a collective."

"Hearing about other farmers' experiences was so valuable. I've been here so long, I'm in my own bubble. I wouldn't know how most farms operate, how they go about things, what accidents happen, or what other issues they deal with."

"Being able to hear about the challenges other farmers have faced, and to discuss how you could go about approaching a similar challenge was great. I loved the experience and really got a lot out of it."

BJ now prioritises planning and time management.

"Taking the time to plan is one of the biggest things I do differently. The more forward planning I do the more it takes the pressure off. The team's time is spent more efficiently and there is no mad rush at the end to get things done."

We also have time to work around everything that inevitably goes wrong."

She's also focused on tailoring tasks to peoples' strengths.

"Knowing their skill sets means I can give them jobs they'll succeed in. I always remind them to ask if they need instructions explained differently."

Improving her skills in resolving conflict in a productive way is something BJ credits the program for, and the farm team relationships are better for it.

"The program gave me examples of why I should actively resolve conflict. It was clear listening to other participants that the positive outcomes far outweighed not doing anything about an issue."

"I have a better relationship with the team now. I feel like I've created a space where they feel more comfortable coming to me with problems or any concerns, even if it's personal."

"I try to be open and approachable. I want to be a leader, not a boss."

After 11 years on the farm, BJ says Mark and Tania have supported her growth every step of the way.

"They've given me every opportunity to learn. They're like family now."

BJ is passing on the value of continuous learning to the two young team members currently on-farm.

"If you allow people to keep bettering themselves it keeps them enjoying things and we get better outcomes. We have got two young team members on farm at the moment. One is studying at TAFE and the other is completing Dairy Australia's Feeding Pasture for Profit program."

"I try to create a safe, comfortable and happy space for everyone to work in. Our hours and our days are demanding enough as it is. It can be hard work, but I just love my job."

Manager/2IC Program 2026

If you're a manager who would like to further develop your skills, or a senior farm hand looking to take the next step, the Manager/2IC program is for you. To register your interest in the program email info@westvicdairy.com.au or call 5557 1000.

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Eight top tips for sponsoring employees

By Matt Wood, Extension Advisor – Workforce



My role here at WestVic Dairy sees me field many different workforce queries and questions from our region's farmers. An increasing number of these enquiries regard sponsoring overseas employees. Not surprisingly, the same questions come up frequently. Below are my top eight tips when considering sponsoring staff.

1 Get a Dairy Industry Labour Agreement (DILA)

It's that simple! The DILA offers many advantages over being a Standard Business Sponsor. Whilst the Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA) is similar, the DILA has further benefits for both farmer and employee.

There is no application fee for a DILA (most farmers use a migration agent which generally comes with a cost), and once in place lasts for five years.

2 Sort out your business structure

Several farmers and employees in our region have been inadvertently caught out due to a change in business name/structure when sponsoring employees. Therefore, ensure you have all of that sorted prior to applying for a DILA. The DILA is a direct agreement between the farm business and the government. Whilst common sense may say that editing the business name on the DILA would be an easy fix, it isn't, so be aware.

3 Know your obligations

There are plenty of rules to follow. A full list can be found at immi.homeaffairs.gov.au but in a nutshell, make sure you let the department know if there are any changes to the business or the employee's role.

4 Visa options

The two main visa options are Skills in Demand (subclass 482) and Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional (Provisional) visa (subclass 494). Let's just say your potential options are a 482 or a 494. Whilst very similar, there are advantages to the lesser utilised 494. The 494 allows the employee to access Medicare, and for the employer, once the qualifying period for permanent residency (PR) is complete, they are not required to nominate the employee (see next point). Instead, the employee applies for PR themselves.

5 Nominating for PR

When sponsored under a DILA, an employee becomes eligible to apply for PR after three years of working for the same employer. With a 482 visa, the employer must nominate the employee in order for them to apply for PR. This process costs thousands of dollars and takes time – something that catches many farmers by surprise.

6 It's not a silver bullet

Sponsoring staff is a great way to secure longer term, motivated staff. However, it won't fix issues such as poor people management, inefficient work practices and unrealistic expectations. Staff turnover is always going to occur for a range of genuine reasons. The key is to be honest with yourself if you see this happening. Why are people leaving your business? If you think you may be part of the problem, work on that before sponsoring employees. Rightfully, people can get up and leave a poor environment. Some costs can be recovered should this happen, but most cannot.

7 Communication

In a surprise to absolutely nobody, communication is key! Be very clear from the start about what you can offer an employee regarding role, housing, development, PR, salary etc... along with what your expectations of the employee are.

8 Get in touch for support

If you are considering sponsoring staff or already do but want to know how to improve your practices and knowledge, please contact me. With funding from the Gardiner Foundation, we are rolling out a one-on-one program to support farmers looking to hire overseas employees. The exact content of the program is tailored to a farmer's individual circumstances and includes a mix of farm visits and over-the-phone support. Give me a call today to learn more!

Contact Matt

Call 0417 669 597 or email matthew@westvicdairy.com.au

Beyond Weaning: Growing today's heifer for tomorrow's herd

By Debbie Twiss, Extension Advisor - Animal Health and Performance



In 2021, modelling on data from the Dairy Farm Monitor project estimated the investment to rear a replacement heifer calf from birth to weaning to be \$315 per calf.

Successful weaning is dependent on the rumen being sufficiently developed to enable the calf to gain enough energy from its diet after the removal of milk at weaning. Intake of grain (or pellets) is a useful indicator that can be used as a guide of a calf's rumen development and thus their readiness to wean:

For Holstien Friesian calves, rumen development is sufficient when concentrate intake is 1.5kg to 2.0kg per day for at least three days.

For Jersey calves, rumen development is sufficient when concentrate intake is 0.75kg to 1.0kg per day for at least three days.

The upper end of intake range is recommended for animals grazing in a mob, as assessment of intake is 'on average intake' rather than a 'per animal basis'. Other indicators such as visual appearance, age or weight are not predictive of a calf's rumen development.

Calves will experience some nutritional stress as they adjust to a diet without milk. It is important to consider how other stresses such as weather, vaccinations, drenching and transport can be minimised or avoided around the week of weaning.

A trial conducted in 2021 at Agriculture Victoria's Ellinbank research farm demonstrated that well grown calves still need good nutrition after weaning to keep growing well.

This implies that whilst heifers grown well from birth to weaning can achieve heavier weaning weights at an earlier age, this good growth does not protect heifers from the impact of poor nutrition from weaning to puberty or joining. Heifers need protein and energy to support skeletal frame development and liveweight gain to become productive herd animals. From weaning to nine months of age lean growth requires high protein (17%) and high energy (e.g. 48MJME/day for 150kg body weight) to ensure good skeletal height and pelvic width.

As heifers approach joining from nine to 15 months, they should be on a rising plane of nutrition but with reduced energy density and protein at around 15%.

Post joining, the older heifers at a body weight that is 85% to 90% of the weight of mature cows in their herd.

Table 1 The typical energy required for growth and maintenance, and the protein level required in the diet for heifers of different weights. Adapted from Holmes & Wilson (1987)

BW Kg	Maintenance MJ ME/day	Growth MJ ME/day	Protein %
25	6	10.4	17
50	10	13.2	17
75	14	14.6	17
100	17	19.8	17
125	20	21.5	17
150	24	23.3	17
175	27	25.0	17
200	29	26.7	17
225	32	28.4	17
250	35	30.0	15
275	38	31.7	15
300	40	33.3	15
325	43	34.9	15
350	45	36.4	14
375	47	38.0	14
400	49	39.5	14
425	52	40.9	14
450	54	42.4	14
475	56	43.8	14
500	58	45.2	14

The age at which heifers start to cycle will be affected by breed, genetic merit and weight. A trial in NSW showed 30% of heifers were cycling when they weighed 200kg compared to 65 per cent when they weighed 260kg. Conception at first mating is likely to be best in animals that have reached 55–60% of mature body weight. The key to being effective in monitoring growth is to have an accurate assessment of mature body weight of cows in your herd.

Cull cows can provide some data but could be heavier or lighter than the ideal mature body weight depending on the reason for culling. Getting the accurate weight of mature animals in your herd is a good investment in making sound decisions about heifer feeding to achieve body weight targets from weaning to joining and from joining to calving.

Well-grown heifers deliver more milk, better fertility, and stay in the herd longer.

Use Dairy Australia's Heifers on Target Calculator to set growth goals and weigh every eight to 12 weeks to catch underperformers early. Aim for 60% of mature weight at joining, 90% at calving, and 85% of heifers getting back in calf. Heifers which remain in your herd for at least three lactations will repay your investment. Don't guess – track, feed, and grow your future herd.

References

[A guide to growing more productive heifers](https://dairyaustralia.com.au/en/resource-repository/2020/07/09/a-guide-to-growing-more-productive-heifers)

dairyaustralia.com.au/en/resource-repository/2020/07/09/a-guide-to-growing-more-productive-heifers

[Dairy Australia Heifers on Target Calculator](https://dairyaustralia.com.au/animals/fertility/heifers-on-target-calculator)

dairyaustralia.com.au/animals/fertility/heifers-on-target-calculator

African Black Beetles

By Libby Swayn, Extension Team Lead



African black beetle

Credit: Cesar Australia website (cesaraustralia.com/pestnotes/beetles/african-black-beetle)

The dry conditions over the past two years have created ideal circumstances for many insect pests to thrive and cause significant damage to pastures and crops. This autumn and winter alone we have seen extensive pasture damage and occurrences of nearly all the common pests found in Western Victoria.

One species that has seen a notable increase in numbers is the African black beetle (ABB). ABB belong to a subfamily of the scarab beetle and are closely related to other scarab pests including the redheaded, the blackheaded and the yellowheaded pasture cockchafers. Unlike the cockchafers, which are native species, the ABB is an introduced pest originating from Africa.

ABB favours the common pasture and cropping species, including ryegrasses and cereal crops, and is emerging as a major pest across all dairy regions. Warm dry winters and springs, along with lower soil moistures, have contributed to increased ABB outbreaks.

Unlike cockchafers, damage to pasture and crops can be caused by both adults and larvae. Adults feed on the stems of young plants, either underground or above the soil surface, often killing the growing points. Larvae will prune or completely sever roots of perennial grasses. Affected pasture becomes patchy and can be rolled back like a carpet when larvae populations are high. If adult beetles are found in an area with stem damage just below or above the surface, ABB is a likely suspect.

ABB are difficult to identify, often being mistaken for other scarabs. However, they can be distinguished from cockchafers by considering behaviour, biology and physical appearance. Larvae are 5mm long when they hatch, with a grey body.

As they mature, they grow up to 25mm in length and transition to a creamy-white colour. They have six legs, a brown head capsule and 'C-shaped' body.

Adult beetles are 12–14mm long and have a brown to black body with striations on the wing covers and spurs on their legs. To ensure correct identification (they can be confused with some dung beetles) collect a sample for local agronomist to identify.

ABB have a one-year life cycle. Adults lay eggs in the soil in spring and the larvae emerge two to five weeks later. The most damaging larval stage (third instar) occurs from mid-January to March. Larvae then pupate in the soil and emerge as adults, which feed on pasture and crops throughout autumn, winter and spring.

If you suspect an ABB infestation, consult your agronomist to ensure correct identification, monitor the situation and explore suitable methods of control. Control options are limited and may include a strategic approach involving insecticides, pasture species selection, crop rotation, control of alternative feed sources and managing soil pH.

Has your farm had problems with beetle or pasture soil grub pests, such as cockchafer, in the last five years?

Dairy Australia is wanting to gauge the impact of these pests on dairy pastures to assess a potential solution to this problem.

Please scan the QR code and complete the quick survey if beetle or pasture soil grub pests have caused damage to the pastures on your farm in the last five years.



Dairy women gather for the 16th South West Ladies Luncheon

By Liza Fahey, Project Coordinator



Ladies Luncheon Committee 2025

More than 300 women from across South-west Victoria gathered at the Deakin University Café in August for the South West Dairy Ladies Luncheon. Now in its 19th year, the much-loved event continues to offer a space for women in dairy to connect, reflect and share ideas. Supported by longtime Ruby Sponsor, Westpac Bank, this year's theme of 'love your farmer' focused on recognising the contribution of women in agriculture.

The day featured eight stalls with boutique items available to purchase, a recharge zone, and 30 table giveaways donated by sponsors. Organised by a dedicated committee of dairy farming women (Simone Renyard, Belinda Doolan, Renee Prendergast, Anne Roslin, Julie Giblin, Fiona Kent, Anna Kenna, Bronwyn Lenehan, and Rochelle Pekin, and myself), the luncheon has become a tradition for many, with groups of friends using it as an annual catch up.

Committee member and dairy farmer Renee Prendergast says the luncheon is all about connection in an industry where it's hard to connect.

"It's great that this event gives dairy farming women the chance to get off farm for a well-deserved break and catch-up," said Renee.

Guest speakers Kate Meade and Samuel Johnson OAM brought practical insights and personal stories. Samuel Johnson, actor and founder of Love Your Sister, shared his journey from acting to cancer advocacy. His message focused on purpose and persistence.

Kate, a broadcaster and disability advocate raised on a dairy farm, spoke about self-drive and community.

Renee said the speakers were inspiring.

"It's always nice when you can take something from the day and apply it to your own life," said Renee.

Planning is already underway for the 20th anniversary luncheon in 2026. While this year marked the 16th gathering, the event's legacy spans nearly two decades. With several committee members retiring, organisers are inviting new women to join and help shape the future of the event.

"We welcome any ladies who would like to join the committee," said Renee.

"We thank those retiring for their contributions, hard work, and dedication, they will be missed."

The South West Dairy Ladies Luncheon continues to be a valued opportunity for women in dairy to connect, share and learn. It's a day built around practical insights, real stories and strong community ties.

Here's to 20 years of tradition, and to the many more stories, friendships, and moments of inspiration yet to come.

Do you want to get involved in this community event?

If you'd like to be a part of the committee the plans and delivers the South West Dairy Ladies Luncheon email liza@westvicdairy.com.au or call 0408 141 820.



Guest speakers Samuel Johnson OAM and Kate Meade

Share Farming: A win-win opportunity for dairy farmers

By Sheeraz Ahmad, Extension Coordinator – Farm Business Management

For both new and experienced dairy farmers, share farming offers an exciting pathway to success. It's a collaborative model where the landowner and the share farmer work together, sharing the resources, risks, and rewards of running a farm. This arrangement not only helps newcomers get their start in the dairy industry but also provides landowners with a chance to increase profits and secure future succession options.

So, what makes share farming such a great opportunity for both parties? Let's explore how it works, the benefits it offers, and some of the challenges it presents.

What is share farming?

In a share farming agreement, the landowner provides essential resources like land, infrastructure, and sometimes some of the livestock, while the share farmer brings their labour, expertise, equipment, management and usually contribute additional livestock. Both parties share in the income, usually based on a pre-agreed percentage.

This setup allows the landowner to stay involved in farming without being responsible for day-to-day operations, while the share farmer gains valuable experience and the chance to build their own assets over time.

Benefits for landowners

- 1 Profiting from industry upside:** Partnering with a skilled share farmer can increase farm productivity and profits. As the farm prospers so does the landowner's share of the farm's success.
- 2 Access to skilled operators:** Share farmers are often motivated and experienced, which leads to better farm management and potentially higher production levels.
- 3 Flexible agreements:** Share farming agreements can be tailored to meet the needs of both the landowner and the share farmer. This flexibility allows the partnership to adapt as the farm grows or as challenges arise.
- 4 Mentoring opportunities:** Many landowners enjoy mentoring newer farmers, helping them navigate the challenges of farm management and guiding them toward long-term success. This strengthens the partnership and builds trust.

Benefits for share farmers

- 1 Lower start-up costs:** Unlike purchasing a farm outright, share farming requires less capital. This makes it an attractive option for those looking to get started in dairy farming without significant financial investment.
- 2 Creating wealth:** Share farmers can gradually build their own livestock numbers and increase their assets, equity and wealth without the huge upfront costs of buying a farm.
- 3 Flexible terms:** The flexibility of share farming agreements makes them appealing to young or new farmers. These arrangements can be adjusted based on the farm's success and the financial needs of both parties.
- 4 Mentorship and support** Working with an experienced landowner provides access to valuable resources and guidance, setting the share farmer up for long-term success.

Challenges for both parties

While share farming offers many benefits, it's important to be aware of the potential challenges.

- 1 Administrative complexity:** Managing a share farming agreement can involve higher administrative costs and more detailed record-keeping compared to traditional leasing arrangements. Both parties need to stay on top of income-sharing and operational expenses.
- 2 Reliance on each other:** A successful "partnership" requires trust and good communication. The share farmer depends on the landowner's financial stability, while the landowner relies on the share farmer's management skills. If either party struggles, it can impact the entire operation.

A benefit and a challenge to both parties is the shared risk. Both the landowner and the share farmer share the risks involved in farming. This includes market fluctuations, lower milk price, poor weather conditions, and operational missteps that could affect profits.

An important benefit of this arrangement is that the overall risk is apportioned between both parties, rather than being carried by one alone.

Keys to success

To ensure the success of a share farming arrangement, clear communication and mutual trust are essential. Both parties should have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities from the outset. It's also important to establish a transparent agreement that outlines how income and expenses will be shared, how risks will be managed, and what the exit strategy will look like if one party wishes to leave the partnership.

Flexibility is key—both the landowner and the share farmer need to be open to adjusting the terms of the agreement as the farm's needs change over time. With good planning and collaboration, share farming can be a rewarding experience for everyone involved.

In conclusion, share farming is a fantastic way for new dairy farmers to get their start while allowing landowners to ensure the future success of their farm. By understanding the benefits and challenges of this model, both parties can create a prosperous, sustainable partnership that works for the long term.

This article is based on insights from the 'Governance and Investors in Dairy Farming workshop' by Dairy Australia and Pinion Advisory covering various business models including share farming, direct management, leasing, and equity partnerships.

If you'd like to find more about WestVic Dairy's Farm Business Management services and resources, contact Sheeraz Ahmad on 0414 684 065 or email sheeraz@westvicdairy.com.au.



WestVic Dairy Focus Farm report

Bostocks Creek

Date	04/08/2025
Milking area	212 ha
Production	
Cow numbers	287
Milk solids/cow/day	1.85kg
Litres/cow/day	25.5L
Fat	4.41%
Protein	2.85%
Grazing and supplement feeding (cow/day)	
Barley costing 42c/kg DM (\$380/t)	6.0kg
Profeed costing 81c/kg DM (\$727/t)	2.0kg
Winter hay blend 61c/kg DM (\$520)	3.5kg
Pasture Hay 24c/kg DM (\$200)	3.5kg
Palm kernel meal 54c/kg DM (\$450)	2.0kg
Pasture (kg DM)	0
Area in rotation	167ha
Rotation Length	33 days
Grazing area (ha per 24 hours)	5ha
Daily income over supplementary feed costs (IOSFC)	
August Milk Price (\$/kgMS)	\$8.87
Income/cow	\$16.41
Supplementary feed cost/cow	\$7.15
IOSFC/cow	\$9.26
IOSFC/ha	\$12.53

Notes

- The herd have been on pasture for a week now and increased production by around three litres/cow which has also reduced the level of supplement fed. There are still 45ha that will not be ready for grazing in the next month.
- Have enough fodder/ palm kernel meal to feed into September if required.
- Have been applying urea at 80kg/ha post grazing.
- Six weeks into AI, non-cyclers have been identified and synchronised this week.
- This week we will review the last 12 months performance with the Dairy Base tool and set a plan for the next 12 months.



Contact us if you would like know more about our services and resources

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