Cow parking

'Cow parking' is the relocation of milking cows from their farm of origin to an alternative host farm where they continue to be milked but ownership is not transferred.

During a crisis (e.g. bushfire, floods) cow parking may be the only viable short-term option to get cows milked, while in times of feed or water scarcity, cow parking may involve a formal, longer-term business arrangement.

Cow parking agreements may vary in their terms, duration and level of formality. Considerations include who receives milk income, who pays for transport, and who pays for other expenses such as feed, power and veterinary care. Also consider ongoing responsibilities for calf rearing, reproduction, and animal sales, removals and deaths. It is important that the terms of the arrangement are formally documented and clear to both parties from the outset to avoid mismatched expectations in the future.

This fact sheet outlines some of the risks and considerations associated with cow parking. When drawing up a potential plan, both parking and host farms should seek advice with regards to animal health, milk quality, nutrition and regulatory considerations.

Infectious diseases

Cow parking increases the risk for introducing infectious bacterial and viral diseases into either the parked or host herd – these have the potential to cause substantial disease and economic loss (see Table 1 for details). Good biosecurity protocols aim to prevent entry of disease into either herd or secondly to minimise disease if it does occur.

Cows will need a period of acclimatisation to adjust to their new location, which can include the stress of being milked in a different dairy, a change of feeding system, a new herd hierarchy, and new climatic conditions. Reducing the impact of these stressors will help maintain a cow's immune system and minimise the spread and severity of disease if it does occur.

Table 1: Important infectious diseases of dairy cattle

Disease	Potential impact
Strep agalactiae ('Strep ag')	Strep agalactiae lives only within the cow's udder and is excreted in very large numbers of bacteria are excreted in the milk. There is the potential for rapid cow to cow spread during milking, resulting in a significant increase in Bulk Milk Cell Count (BMCC) and the number of clinical mastitis cases.
Mycoplasma	Causes mastitis, pneumonia, jaw swellings, and joint infections in cows and joint infections, pneumonia, and ear infections in calves. Mycoplasma rarely responds to antibiotics and animals must be culled. Carrier animals will shed the bacteria intermittently in saliva, nasal secretions, and milk.
Bovine Viral Diarrhoea Virus ('BVDV' or 'Pestivirus')	Herds that are free from BVDV ("naïve") can suffer significant reproductive losses when they are exposed to carrier cattle that are shedding the virus (these carriers are known as persistently infected animals, or "PIs"). Losses include poor conception rates, abortions, congenital abnormalities and the birth of more PIs. There is no treatment for Pestivirus, but a vaccine is available to help prevent infections.
Salmonella	Causes diarrhoea (scours) in cows, heifers and calves, and on occasion also results in pneumonia, jaundice, joint infections and death. Carrier animals will shed salmonella intermittently and stressors such as calving, transport, or feed restrictions will increase shedding and/or clinical disease. There are many different strains of Salmonella bacteria and they are capable of developing resistance to antibiotics. Vaccines are available that help reduce clinical diseases.

Delivering for Dairy

Diagnostic testing

It is important to know the disease status of both herds, ideally prior to their move. If animals have already been milked together (for example in emergency situations post flood or fire), these diagnostic tests should still be carried out.

Bulk milk can be tested for **Pestivirus** antibody levels to identify if herds are naïve or not, and to identify if a PI is present. If the herd is naïve, it is VITAL that PIs don't enter the herd – particularly at joining or during pregnancy. Heifers' immunity levels are harder to assess but can be done by taking blood samples and testing antibody levels.

For **Strep ag** and **Mycoplasma**, a bulk milk PCR test can be performed. The PCR test looks for the DNA of these bacteria. If Strep ag is present in either herd, it is very likely to show up on this test. For Mycoplasma, while a positive test indicates that it is present in the herd, a negative test is not a guarantee of its absence. Be aware that a bulk milk PCR only tests cows in the vat and not the sick herd; affected animals may be missed unless separate samples from the sick/fresh herd are collected and tested.

Talk to your veterinarian about taking samples for these diagnostic tests, and the implication of the results.

Quarantine

In an ideal world, the two herds would be milked separately to reduce risks to milk quality or would be quarantined from each other for a minimum of seven days in case diseases such as Salmonella flare up after the stress of transport. While this will likely be impractical and/or difficult to manage with the milking herds, it may be easier for calf and heifer groups.

Regardless, ensure all farm staff watch for sick animals from either herd, so that they are quickly detected and isolated from the main herd/s. Seek veterinary advice for any sick cows in the initial cow-parking period to confirm diagnoses, and ensure appropriate treatment protocols.

Traceability and records

It is vital that all livestock movements comply with the relevant legislation. Producers must ensure that any movement between properties is recorded so that whole of life traceability is maintained. This includes recording movements on the NLIS database and completing vendor declarations or waybills. Also consider completing **National Vendor Declarations (NVD) and National Cattle Health Declarations**.

Transport should be in line with the **'Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines – Land Transport of Livestock'** with particular attention to the requirements for pregnant stock and calves.

Milk quality considerations

Notify your milk processor if you intend to park or host cows – there may be additional information they will require, such as milk volumes and BMCC. Additionally, for the host farm:

- Obtain all parked cow treatment records and ensure any cows under treatment are clearly identified and marked to avoid antibiotic residues.
- Monitor Bulk Milk Cell Counts to identify any upward trends that are unusual for your herd.
- Record clinical mastitis cases and track case rates over time. Collect and freeze milk samples from all clinical cases, so that - if needs be - they can be sent for culture to check which bacteria are present.
- Make sure milking staff maintain good hygiene such as wearing clean gloves and ensuring good coverage of teat disinfectant.
- If able to milk herds separately, rinse or wash the plant between herds. Otherwise, ensure clinical cases (+/- high cell count cows) are milked last: this ensures that the clusters are cleaned well before milking other cows.
- Use blanket antibiotic dry cow therapy for all cows and heifers in both herds.

For further information or discussion speak to your mastitis advisor or veterinarian.

Compare vaccination schedules

A good tip is to compare the vaccination schedules of the two herds. One farm may not see clinical disease because they vaccinate, but animals may still shed pathogens. Animals from the other herd may then become sick because they don't have the protection that vaccination can provide. Common vaccines include:

- Calf scour vaccines (rotavirus, coronavirus, E. coli)
- Salmonella
- BVDV/Pestivirus
- Bovine ephemeral fever
- Tick fever
- Vibriosis
- Bovine Johne's Disease (BJD)
- Pinkeye
- Respiratory disease (Mannheimia, IBR)
- Clostridial diseases (5-in-1, 7-in-1)
- Leptospirosis (7-in-1)
- Botulism.

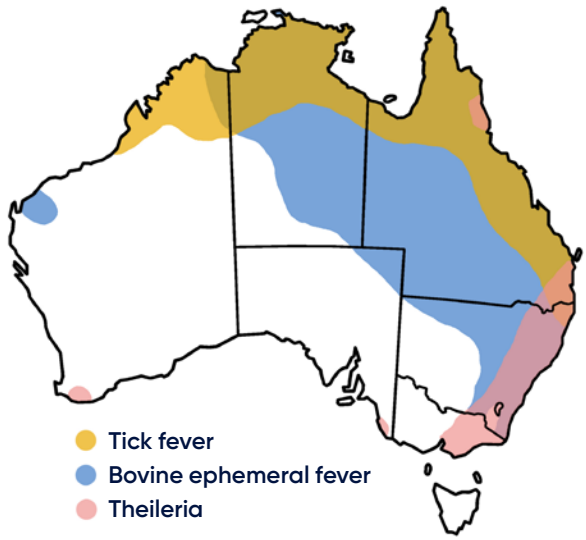
Both farms should consider where the use of vaccines will help mitigate animal health risks, remembering that time is needed for immunity to develop.

Vector-borne diseases

There are several important diseases that are transmitted by vectors such as ticks, flies and mosquitoes (see Table 2). When naïve cattle are moved to regions where these vectors and diseases are present, they can suffer significant disease and death.

Table 2: Important vector-borne diseases of dairy cattle

Disease	Potential impact
Theileria	This blood-borne protozoa is carried by **bush ticks**. Infection can cause a drop in milk production, severe anaemia, abortions or deaths. Treatment options are limited. Clinical disease is seen when cattle are moved from an area without the disease, to a district where Theileria is common (see map).
Tick fever	Tick fever is a disease in northern dairying areas, where the *Babesia* and *Anaplasma* organisms are transmitted between animals by the **cattle tick** and infect red blood cells, resulting in anaemia. Clinical signs include fever, lethargy, depression, loss of appetite, jaundice, red urine, and muscle tremors. Abortion may occur in cows and temporary infertility in bulls. A tick fever vaccine is available in Australia: it is best to vaccinate for tick fever well before arrival into tick areas to ensure immunity is present.
Bovine ephemeral fever (Three-day sickness)	This mosquito-borne virus causes flu-like symptoms including sudden onset of high fever, depression, inappetence, lameness and muscle stiffness, and a sudden and severe drop in milk production. Pregnant animals may abort. Supportive care is the only available treatment, but a preventative vaccine is available. Sickness tends to occur after periods of heavy summer rainfall; however cases can occur from late November through to early June.



Nutrition considerations

Changes in nutrition can increase the risk of certain diseases, such as ruminal acidosis, salmonellosis and botulism. Compare the feed systems of the two farms and identify key risks and mitigation measures. For example:

- Higher levels of grain feeding (or a lower fibre-concentrate ratio) can increase the risk of salmonellosis and ruminal acidosis. Ensure an adequate transition period to allow rumen adaption to the new diet, and that new animals have adequate access to fibre sources.
- There are some farm management factors that increase the risk of Botulism (a progressive paralysis that results from ingestion of toxin produced from carcass-contaminated feed). If a mixer wagon is used to combine feeds, then the botulinum toxin will be distributed throughout the feed and the entire herd exposed. A vaccine is available that is cheap and effective.
- Change of pasture can increase the risk of clover bloat or nitrate toxicity, and animals may be exposed to (and graze) unfamiliar toxic plants. Take particular care of animals post transport as they may be hungry and more likely to graze hard.
- Introducing cattle infected with liver fluke to a susceptible uninfected property can lead to the contamination of the environment and establishment of new infections.

Talk to your nutritional advisor and/or veterinarian about these diet-related diseases.

Young stock nutrition

If calves are being parked, comparison of the farms' calf feeding systems is also important: changing from whole milk to milk replacer (or vice versa) can impact calf health, as too can changes in the composition and additives in concentrates. Don't feed calves mastitis milk, or milk from scouring cows, as these may contain infectious bacteria.

Young stock grazing pastures on a new farm may be exposed to gastrointestinal parasites that they haven't already developed resistance to (or, if dry/drought conditions have impacted overall nutrition and immunity they may be more susceptible to disease, such as worms or pink eye). Discuss the most appropriate worm and fly prevention with your veterinarian.

Acknowledgement
Dairy Australia acknowledges the funding from levy payers and contribution by Commonwealth Government.

Dairy Australia
1800 004 377
enquiries@dairyaustralia.com.au
dairyaustralia.com.au

5904 | May 2025