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R A. Bettenay

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DAIRY FARMING IN THE BUSSELTON-MARGARET RIVER DISTRICT

PART 1—STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

By R. A. BETTENAY, B.Sc. (Agric.), Agricultural Adviser, Busselton

This article is the first of four in a series reporting a survey of farming practices in the Busselton-Margaret River area. Besides the development of farms the series will cover farm stocking rates and milk production on farms in the area.

The survey of farms in the Busselton-Margaret River district began at the end of the 1962 season. Information on the stage of development of the properties was obtained from 94 farmers during advisory visits.

The properties were mainly in the Busselton Shire and the northern half of the Margaret River Shire, with a few isolated farms south of Margaret River.

The District

The climate of the survey area is typically Mediterranean with a growing season of about seven months at Busselton and eight months at Margaret River. Rainfall in the area varies from about 35 inches in the north to 45 inches in the south of the district.

There was little farming in the district until the Group Settlement Scheme started there in the mid-1920's. Farm areas remained small until the mid-1940's when bulldozers revolutionised land clearing methods. Progress since then has been rapid but hampered by the lack of capital and high clearing costs.

Pasture Development

The area of developed land and the rate of development in the last three years, and the total acreage of the holdings is shown in Table 1.

The area of sown pasture is increasing and the average farmer is sowing a little more than 10 acres of virgin country a year. The average property still has almost 120 acres of virgin land.

Close investigation of the data collected in the survey shows that 21 of the 94 farmers had developed all their worthwhile land and had no more suitable for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.—Pasture development—acres per farm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area of Pasture 1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>204.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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An area of first year pasture on land cleared under the Dairy Farm Improvement Scheme and used for demonstration purposes.

clearing. Here it is worth mentioning that there is a trend in the district for farmers to acquire Conditional Purchase virgin blocks—even some distance from their homestead locations—to continue development. Another trend is for the merging of properties as farms come on the market, and a number of farmers now own properties several miles apart.

Table 2 shows the number of properties with various acreages of cleared land in 1959, together with the development which has taken place up to 1962.

Table 2 shows that the rate of development is about the same on small farms as on larger farms. It would perhaps be expected that the larger farms would develop faster as more finance for development would be available. To some extent, however, this is offset by Dairy Farm Improvement Scheme funds designed to assist small farms to the level of 160 acres of improved pasture. The influence of the D.F.I.S. will be felt more in the next few years, as part of the survey district was not accepted under the scheme until recently.

No virgin land has been cleared on almost a third of the farms in the last three years. All of the arable land has been cleared on some farms and on others the period has been used to consolidate and clean up pasture areas.

Mowable Area

It should not be assumed that all pasture land was fully cleared and developed. In fact there were all stages from sown on the burn in a parkland style, to fully developed, with most pastured areas having some dead standing trees or regrowth.

In the surveyed area, and in fact the whole of the South-West, pasture growth is seasonal and fodder conservation is most important. Carrying capacity under

Table 2.—Number and rate of development of farms of various sizes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acres of Pasture 1959</th>
<th>Less Than 150</th>
<th>150 to 159</th>
<th>200 to 249</th>
<th>More Than 250</th>
<th>All Farms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of Farms</td>
<td>32 (34%)</td>
<td>17 (18%)</td>
<td>19 (20%)</td>
<td>26 (28%)</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Av. Acres Sown 1960-62</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Cent. Unchanged Since 1959</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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these conditions is determined largely by
the amount of conserved fodder available
to carry stock through the lean periods,
the most critical being the late autumn
to mid-winter.

The Department of Agriculture's recom­
mendation to dairy farmers is to cut
from 2 to 2½ tons of hay or its equivalent
for each dairy-cow unit, but few reach
anywhere near this level. One of the main
limitations to conserving this tonnage is
that few farmers have sufficient paddocks
clear and level enough for mowing.

The survey showed that the average
farm with 235 acres of pasture land had
only 68.4 acres clean enough to be mowed.
Twenty-eight of the 94 farmers (30 per
cent.) had less than 20 per cent. mowable
land, and only nine (10 per cent.) had 50
per cent. or more land in good enough
condition to mow.

Most farmers realise the need to increase
fodder conservation and to spell their
paddocks, and are cleaning up extra areas
every year. However, stocking rate and
total pasture area are also increasing.
Because of this it is now evident on many
farms that the whole of the mowable area
will have to be used for hay cutting for
several years yet to maintain fodder con­
servation even at its present inadequate
level.

This aspect will be dealt with more fully
in a later article dealing with fodder
conservation.

**Water for Stock**

The importance of water for stock,
especially milking cows during the hot dry
summer, has often been emphasised. Cows
will not walk far to water, or if they do,
will not travel far from water to dry feed
until the cool of the evening. In fact many
farmers believe, with some justification,
that a shortage of water near the dry feed
is an important reason for the decline in
production during the summer.
Most farmers aim to have water available in every paddock, and others to have water either in every paddock or in a race-way near the paddock which can be left open to the stock.

Water supplies have already been given a high priority on most farms. Of the 94 farms, 24 (26 per cent.) had water in, or at least near every paddock. A further 52 farmers (55 per cent.) had at least four permanent water points widely spaced over the farm. Eighteen farmers (19 per cent.) had three or less water points and were making inefficient use of dry paddock feed because of water shortage.

Table 3.—Number of paddocks on holdings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Paddocks Per Farm</th>
<th>Percentage of Farms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-17</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Than 20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subdivision

The efficient management of a dairy farm requires subdivision of the property.

The milking herd, dry cows, yearlings and calves are usually run separately to each other and need adequate paddock space for grazing. On larger farms it is not always practical to return cows overnight to the paddocks they grazed during the day and a “night” paddock is needed. Most farmers appreciate the need for good overnight grazing pasture for their cows.

Subdivision must provide for hay paddocks besides grazing rotation. Excluding small paddocks near the dairy building for calves, sick cows and bulls, about 20 large paddocks are needed for easy working of a dairy farm.

Table 3 shows the percentage of farms and numbers of paddocks, not including the small paddocks. Twenty-seven per cent. of the farms had less than 11 paddocks and would be extremely hard to manage.

Most farms in the area were designed first as small properties of about 150 acres and the original pasture area was fenced into paddocks often as small as five acres. Some of the land cleared later and further from the homestead, however, is in paddocks of up to 100 acres.

The survey showed that paddock size would best be standardised at about 10 acres on properties of 200 to 250 acres where 50 or so cows are milked. Temporary subdivision for the grazing of special crops can be done with electric fencing.

The next article in this series will cover stocking rate and production of dairy farms in the Busselton-Margaret River district.
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