

Comparing Gippsland to Walcha

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Introduction

The idea of a dairy in the New England region was established on one of a number of trips to the region in November 2007. I have had a number of years of contact with the area and considered dairying possible in the region, however, I knew there may be a number of obstacles to overcome. We just completed some field days looking at pasture development in the region and were told of a property that may come up for sale. Luckily for me I have had a number of years experience in dairying, particularly in developing and was keen to have the opportunity to purchase and develop a further dairy in a region not dissimilar, yet characteristically different, to Gippsland, differences which will be further explored in this paper.

Initial steps taken

- Inspect property
- Look for what resources were available on property
- Look at what support industries were available in the area
- Check long-term rainfall and climate history
- Research market for milk produced
- Can we lock in milk price?
- Determine whether resources were available to manage and devote time to the development of the farm, given already busy nature of our lives (seed business, own farm, President of local footy and netball clubs and many more things to do)
- Project a development budget
- Project a long-term budget and feasibility review

And finally a proposal was put to the banks for consideration.

Comments from banks

- Dairy farming where no other dairies are presently running!?

Response: Greater opportunity to acquire land and less competition for adjustment or other grazing needs.

- Building the highest altitude dairy in Australia!?

Response: Hadn't thought of that one, maybe a little bit crazy! But certainly no colder than the southern bit of New Zealand!

- What if you run out of water!?

Response: Long term rainfall averages at 850mm, with studying the climate a high degree of reliability. I'll build a dam and stress test the new bores.

- How do we value the land!?

Response: That's your job. I only know it's good value and after 25 trips to New Zealand, I reckon it's better value.

Finally in the end the banks seemed happy, after inspection, so we proceeded.

Differences to Gippsland

Given the area we farm in Gippsland is traditional dairy country, the hoops that are put up (checks, balances and the understandings of the industry) would make it substantially easier to obtain funds for an operation similar to this in Gippsland.

However, obviously we felt the advantages of cheaper land and less competition outweighed the difficulties we had to overcome in regard to financing this operation.

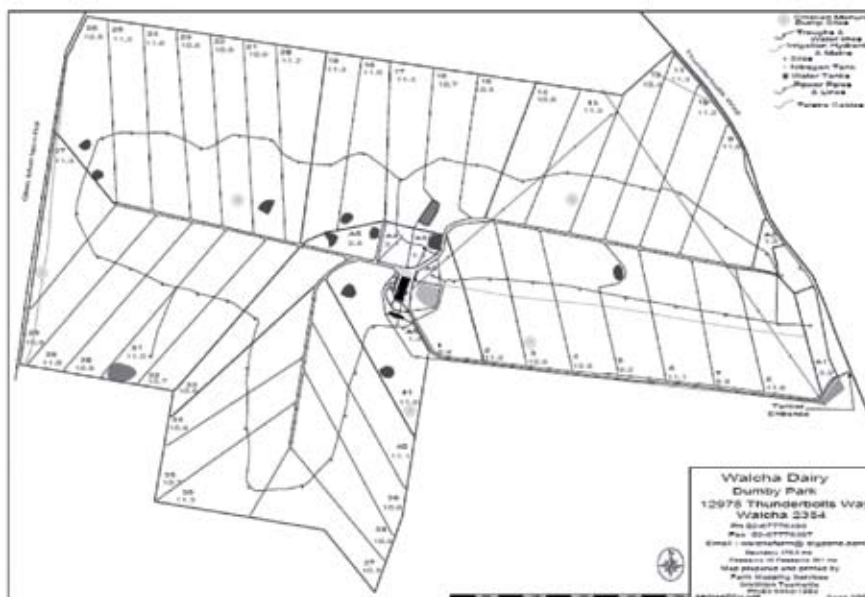


Figure 1. Map

The first steps

1. Go to the airport, brought all the gear we needed for mapping. 1 motor bike, plus borrowed one and lots of small gear (hammers, posts, nails)
2. Determined where the shed would go and if any of the current fences were of value.
3. Set about mapping with the plan of having minimum distances for cows to walk.



Existing pastures were sprayed and burnt before sowing higher performing species.

Development phase

- This involved setting up pastures, laneways, water systems and shedding.
- Sprayed then burnt existing pastures and drilled new high-performing pastures. 90% of this was Vatbuster containing late-flowering perennial ryegrasses (perennial ryegrass, meadow-fescue crosses) and white clover. The results from this over-sowing have been excellent. The ryegrass meadow-fescue crosses that have been trialed have performed well and have exhibited excellent growth and plant density.
- Ripped in water lines, made troughs and purchased tanks. This job took a while given only two troughs per day could be made. It was important to consider the cold overnight temperatures and a fair effort was put into trying to minimize the effects of freezing.
- Laneways were designed to have minimum corners, wide gates and maximum flow.
- Constructed shedding. No matter how many sheds you look at, there is always more to learn. My thoughts are that you normally

learn when doing the job and a lot of looking can sometimes confuse you. Maybe stop and milk a whole milking at some of these sheds to really understand how things work. However, in the end we were pleased with the outcome of the shed and general construction layout.

Reflection and comparison to Gippsland

Certainly a bit of learning has taken place; we probably underestimated the value of our local contractors who can construct excellent laneways and fencing systems with less overseeing than we found in this development. Very few, if any, had any dairy experience at all and most of that was just driving past a farm on the north coast of NSW on the way to the beach!

We had plans drawn up, however I believe further planning (particularly in the areas of water, plumbing and electrical) would have been a benefit.

The lack of heat in Walcha over the summer period compared to Gippsland, gives major advantages. The hottest ever days in 100 years of history were still ten degrees cooler in Walcha, giving a major advantage for perennial grasses that we are planting. Comparatively, in the winter, daytime maximums are similar, however, nighttime temperatures in Walcha are five degrees cooler than Gippsland. This has the effect of cooling the soil and lowering growth.

Rainfall, based on weather bureau statistics, favor Walcha with greater summer rainfall than most of the Gippsland region. This would be approximately double during the key January-February period.

Operational stage

Eight hundred cows were trucked from the southern Riverina and Goulburn Valley regions to the farm; a journey of approximately 1,200 km. All of these cows were in milk, so the plan was to have these cows arriving on the Walcha dairy in the early morning. This required loading around midday and having the cows arrive around 6am the following morning.

Most of the shifting of the animals was carried out successfully; after a few weeks the cows had adjusted well to the new environment.

Feed cover has been excellent. The feeding regime for the first eight months has been pasture plus various grains. Pasture growth rates have varied from about 15-80 kg DM/ha/day. With this, a reasonable amount of conserved feed has also been harvested. In May 2009, pasture growth rates have been approximately 50 kg DM/ha/day, which has exceeded all expectations and budgets.

The challenges we have had to face have been mainly animal health issues. This primarily has been lameness in cattle. These have been treated with the glue-on blocks using bovy-bond from Innovative Farm Imports. Like anything, the earlier we put these on the better they work. Additionally, a need to implement a clear written mastitis protocol has been identified. Although cell counts have remained in the premium band (under 200,000) the numbers being treated have been higher than Countdown Downunder guidelines.



John Crittenden, manager, putting the first cups on.



Pasture trials established under grazing to give direction for future sowings.

As we stand now, eight months into operation, the results have exceeded expectations. Pasture growth has been good, milk production has met targets, the management of the property has been effective and labour secured has also proved to be effective at accomplishing all the jobs required to a high standard.

Pasture plans

- To oversow late flowering high-producing perennial ryegrasses, such as Banquet II, and ryegrass meadow-fescue crosses (Matrix, Revolution Ultra and Helix) when deemed production too low. In my experience, early flowering cultivars are not suitable in the dairy system.
- Production target: 10 tonne DM per ha, 7 tonne DM per ha consumed.

- Will use Gibberellic Acid during late autumn and winter.
- Will use liquid nitrogen from June to August.
- Complete NPKS used at other times of year when moisture available.
- Further plans will evolve with more experience in the area.
- Budgeted on three year lifespan of perennials.

The present and future

We are confident and pleased with the results to date and are now cautiously waiting to see what the financial outcomes are for the first full financial season. This will then provide an indication as to whether we should pursue further developments of this kind in this region.