New Zealand dairy industry: A dynamic and changing industry, based on the management of large scale dairy herds and efficient milk production from pasture

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In 2013 to 2014 New Zealand's over 4 million dairy cows reached a new record of 1,063 kg of milk solids/ha, which equivalent to 4,196 L/cow, comprising 5% milkfat and 3.8% protein, equivalent to 5,250 energy corrected to 40.g/kg produced during approx. 244 days in milk. There was a small increase in the number of dairy herds to 11,927 and herd size to 413 cows/herd. Just over fifty percent of herds had 100 to 349 cows, 28% had over 500, 12% had over 750 and 5% had over 1,000 cows. Dairying is traditionally dominated by the North Island, but the greatest expansion continues to take place in the South Island, which is characterised by larger herds and more seasonally inclement climate. This, along with more frequent drought in the North Island and higher milk prices in the last few years has resulted in an ever increasing diversity of production systems in terms of; feed types, equipment, housing, management and supplements being applied in addition to pasture. This has taken New Zealand beyond their typical marketing paradigms. Legislation around nitrogen leaching and management of water resources has dramatically increased the number of farmers building cattle housing, retaining dry cows on-farm and housing cows fully or for some proportion of each day to reduce nitrogen losses, pasture damage and improve cow welfare by reducing heat stress and providing better housing condition for cows. These are typically used during critical parts of the year, when soil conditions are excessively wet and/or dry and nutrient leaching from actively grazed pastures are greater. Investment in; housing, feeding equipment and genetics have increased the cost of production and business risk. In the current season, there has been an early forecast of lower milk price and close to the cost of production for many dairy farmers, resulting in less feeds being purchased. This along with a cold, late start to the pasture growing season may well have detrimental effects on dairy cow feeding, fertility and dairy heifer management, which have tended to be some of the more inefficient areas of this production system.

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