

The future of New Zealand Dairy: more with less

by Aalt Dijkhuizen

New Zealand and The Netherlands are world leaders in dairy. New Zealand has developed a unique extensive dairy system with a low cost price. The Netherlands has gained a reputation for highly productive and efficient dairy farming using the latest technologies. Can the two countries develop systems that will satisfy growing demand while being more environmentally sustainable?

The global context of agriculture & food is changing dramatically. Demand from fast growing economies in Asia is expected to double over the next decades and there will be increasing scarcity of raw materials and land. To be leaders in green dairy New Zealand and The Netherlands should work together and learn from each other -make the boat go much faster! The Dutch can learn from New Zealand's efficient pasture management methods. NZ farmers manage to keep their cost low by making maximum use of the pastures. More grazing, particularly over summer months, appeals to Dutch customers, and farmers are paid a premium if their cows graze in the field.

New Zealand is a strong global brand. It's beautiful, green and friendly. That image is a major asset -maintaining a green image is easier than rebuilding it, as we experienced in The Netherlands.

New Zealand and The Netherlands are increasing total production which may lead to more pollution. Dutch farmers already have been forced by government regulations to dramatically reduce pollution which has made farming economically more difficult. New Zealand has not yet implemented such drastic regulations, but the sector's impact on the environment suggests that regulations will become much stricter in the years to come. The current NZ measures (such as fencing) can only be a first step in the right direction considering the ever-increasing number of dairy cows.

I believe that New Zealand farmers should take the initiative and lead the way towards green dairy rather than wait and see, and be at the mercy of regulators. A number of farmers are already doing this and running highly productive farms. At the moment New Zealand dairy farmers – like their colleagues in The Netherlands and elsewhere - are going through tough times and prefer to keep their costs low and limit investments. But investing now in new methods will make the sector more competitive in the years to come.

So what exactly can The Netherlands and New Zealand learn from each other to make dairy greener and more efficient? In The Dutch barns are a major instrument for increasing production and efficiency and reducing pollution. Research shows that housing cows in sheds for a part of the year improves the wellbeing of the animals,



particularly in cold winters like those of the South Island. Milking, feeding and treating cows can be done most efficiently in barns. Cows in The Netherlands are constantly monitored for health and stress levels and score well. This setup is key to the high milk production of the Dutch cows: double that of cows in New Zealand.

Most importantly, barns dramatically reduce pollution. The effluent that is now the major polluter of NZ ground water and seriously affects some waterways can be caught and distributed evenly when needed. If the dairy sector wants New Zealand to stay green, barns are the way ahead.

If worldwide production per cow increased to the levels of Dutch cows, the world would need 20% fewer cows (66 million cows) to meet the predicted doubling in demand. That would result in a reduction of 750 million tons of feed consumed, which would free up 155 million hectares of agricultural land and save 165 million litres of water. I know it's not easy to double production per cow but a substantial increase over time is possible, and necessary from an economic and an environmental perspective.

I'm not arguing that New Zealand should completely abandon its unique dairy system. I argue for a hybrid system, combining the best elements of the NZ and the Dutch systems. NZ and Dutch research institutions and enterprises can work much closer together to achieve that objective. Both countries have extensive experience and brilliant scientists who can team up to create a system of dairy farming that is both green and competitive. Together we can secure a bright future where farmers, consumers and the environment will all be winners.

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