

Conducting farmer workshops on improved herd management

This chapter presents a framework for workshops on improved herd management on small holder farms.

The main points in this chapter

- The target audiences for these workshops can be advisers or farmers, or preferably a combination of the two.
- The objectives of such a workshop should be clearly defined.
- The technical topics have been selected as the key learning outcomes from this manual.
- With farmers, the emphasis should be on visual images followed by practical examples of poor versus good farm practices.
- Farms to visit should be chosen with a specific purpose, such as to demonstrate a particular farming practice or set of practices.

This manual provides the topics for a workshop program specifically for farmers planning to import high-quality (genetic merit) stock onto SHD farms. However, farmers, being practical people, learn more from seeing and doing rather than listening and reading. This is called experiential learning. Therefore, to improve their understanding of the principles discussed in this manual, farmers need to be provided with practical examples of these improved management practices. In Australia, farmers hold regular group meetings, where they visit one another's farms, particularly those that have proven to be successful in improving adoption of on-farm practices. There needs to be a clear focus and set of objectives for these 'farmer discussion groups'.

The first phase in developing a focus could be via a workshop on improved herd management on small holder farms. This chapter discusses the planning and implementation of workshops to encourage better adoption of farm practices to better exploit the productive potential of imported dairy stock. Such workshops should include

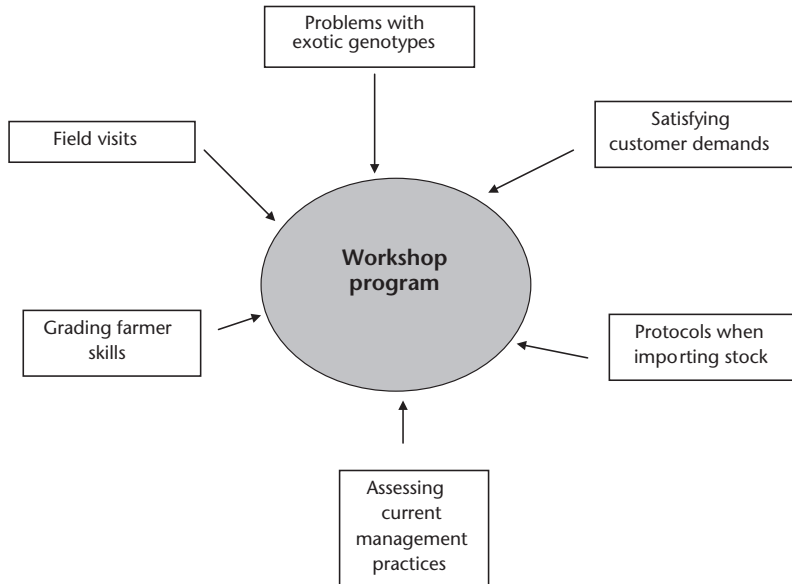


Figure 17.1. Key elements of farmer workshop program on improved dairy herd management

both local advisers and dairy farmers, so advisers can more easily develop follow up workshops and farmer discussion groups.

17.1 Planning farmer workshops

17.1.1 Workshop objectives

1. To develop more realistic expectations of the performance of imported dairy stock under traditional tropical dairy farming systems.
2. To better understand the differences in management requirements of indigenous, low production versus imported, potentially high-producing dairy stock.
3. To develop farming systems to minimise the adverse effects of the tropical environment on high genetic merit temperate dairy cows.
4. To develop a post-arrival farm management protocol for such stock.

17.1.2 Developing a workshop program

Prior to visiting local farms, the participants should be exposed to some of the theories behind the reasons for failure of previous attempts to improve the productivity of small holder farm though importing high-quality dairy stock. The following topics, discussed in previous chapters of this manual, could be considered in such classroom sessions:

Problems with exotic genotypes (Chapters 9 and 11):

- genotype by environmental interactions
- specially bred tropical dairy genotypes
- problems of confinement versus grazing.

Importing cows and heifers from other countries (Chapter 1):

- major shortfalls in management
- genetic merit of imported stock
- importing young heifers
- the renewed interest in embryo transfer technology.

Satisfying customer demand (Chapter 2):

- what the customer wants
- what the customer needs
- what the customer gets.

Developing management protocols (Chapters 1, 3, 4 5, 6, 17 and 18):

- management prior to departure (quarantine regulations)
- management during transport
- management immediately post-arrival
- transport to the new home farm
- realistic expectations of imported cow performance
- preparing the farm for the new arrival (shed, drinking water, feed, animal health)
- key aspects of herd management
- traditional survival versus improved production management
- preparing a troubleshooting guide or checklists for post-arrival protocols
- farmer and adviser training programs
- managing the progeny of imported stock.

Assessing current farm management practices (Chapter 18). This session is to prepare participants for field visits to selected farms and covers:

- feed production
- feeding management
- herd management
- housing
- milking management
- general farm management.

This would be followed by an open session on dairy production technology. The topics for this session can be based on those listed in specific expectation forms from workshop participants. It is important that these be considered because farmers (and advisers) may have particular practical issues that they hope can be solved during the workshop.

17.1.3 Practical issues

For this workshop, a series of visual images of poor versus good management should be developed (such as those in Chapter 19 of this manual). This should form the basis of any troubleshooting guide covering both post-arrival management and good farming practices. DVDs would provide better visual images than still photographs. Appendix 4 presents a glossy four-page ‘easy-to-read’ brochure, which could be translated into the national language of the targeted country.



Dairy advisers from Thailand collating information from a farm visit.

The workshop material should differ depending on the key audience and following discussions with extension specialists in the various countries for which this program is to be designed. As well as a simple set of PowerPoint presentations, technical workshops for government advisers and trained herd managers could include distribution and discussion of this manual. However, technical packages for all farmers receiving the imported stock should be based on simpler material such as visual images and glossy reference cards. The importance of language for communication, such as subtitles and dubbed sound track on any specific DVDs for each target country, must be taken into consideration.

Examples of expectation forms to be filled in by each participant at the beginning, and evaluation forms at the completion, of workshops have been presented in Appendix 3. These are very important, firstly because workshop participants may not all be aware of the workshop's emphasis on improved management practices and, secondly, this can help plan an 'open session' on the last day to discuss specific issues on dairy production technology.

17.2 Associated farm visits

A key element of any farmer workshop is a series of farm visits, preferably to farms with different levels of herd and feeding management, so participants can see for themselves what constitutes poor and good farm practices. It is one thing to develop a series of best management practices (BMP), but another to see attempts to adopt them and, of more importance, to understand the reasons why farmers fail to achieve them. This failure could be due to:



Advisers from Indonesia interviewing a farmer about his herd management.

- ignorance; farmers don't know about them
- lack of resources; farmers don't have the money or facilities to adopt them
- lack of incentives; farmers do not see the need to want to adopt them
- lack of service provided by government advisers or local agribusiness providers.

Unfortunately, many of these BMPs are like insurance policies in that farmers take the attitude that 'if it isn't broken, you don't need to fix it', particularly if it costs money to modify facilities or purchase additional equipment. Such issues should be discussed back in the classroom following the farm visits.

Selection of suitable farms is paramount when planning the visits. Close proximity to the workshop venue is important. Each farm should be chosen with a specific purpose, such as to demonstrate a particular farming practice or set of practices. Ideally, farmers should have good records so they can provide useful background on these observed practices, such as their herd reproductive performance and their cost of production. Clearly, selected farmers should not be intimidated by large groups of inquisitive visitors. Inviting farmers back to the workshop is useful so they can further explain their management decisions during the debriefing session.

Forming small groups of workshop participants with specific tasks allows a lot more information to be collected on farm than if the visit was less structured. These groups could meet back in the classroom to prepare a short presentation summarising their observations and interpretations.

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