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Evaluating the Usefulness of a Comparative Farm Programme: The Opotiki Case Study.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Agricultural Science in Farm Management at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

Bay Milk Products comparative farm programme was designed with the goal of achieving an increase in milk production from its suppliers. The company had identified the need to increase milk production to improve the efficiency of the dairy plant's utilisation. This goal has changed in the last year and now focuses on profitable milk production (as the plant has reached maximum capacity). Some evidence (Deane, 1992; Johnson 1993) suggests that comparative farm programmes do not bring about an increase in production on farms surrounding the comparative farm. This study investigated the issues of attendance at comparative farm field days from the farmer's perspective.

A simple mail survey was used to establish farmer attendance at the Opotiki comparative farm field days. Four farmer case studies (two attenders and two non-attenders) were then used to enable the researcher to gain a farmer's perspective of the issues surrounding the comparative farm programme. These issues were then addressed in a mail survey so that all farmers in the Opotiki area could rate, score, agree/disagree with the issues the case studies had identified.

The study has shown that nearly all suppliers, no matter whether they attended the comparative farm field days regularly or not were aware of the programme. 24% (n=117) of respondents were in attendance at each field day. 17% (n=82) of the respondents to the second mail survey considered themselves regular attenders of the comparative farm field days and found the field days to be worthwhile. All of the regular attenders used some of the information generated from monitoring on the comparative farm back on their own farms. Evidence from the case studies suggested that the non-attenders to the field days were also using information generated from monitoring on the comparative farm. The non-regular attenders came in contact with this information through reading the monthly company magazine Update, which contained detailed information from the comparative farm and which 94% of all respondents indicated they read regularly.

The comparative farm programme was considered to be a useful source of information for farmers. This usefulness of the comparative farm programme presumably reflects benefits that the farmers believe they are receiving. However using only production orientated parameters to evaluate a comparative farm programme overlooks other benefits of the programme. The study has identified the need for a more indepth investigation into defining criteria which can be used to evaluate comparative farm programmes. In particular there is a need for more research in the area of what information farmers are using to make changes on their farms, and how this information is used.
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