

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS READ THE MANUAL

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Introduction

We have named our workshop ‘When all else fails read the manual’ because as New Zealanders, that is what we tend to do. In fact if we can struggle through without the manual, we will. We believe farmers are no different to the average New Zealander. We run multi- million dollar businesses without committing anything to paper, carrying all the information we need around in our heads to run our farms.

Several years ago we proceeded to formulate a Farm Manual for our dairy farming operation, and over time this has become a very useful tool as part of our farm management system.

How it all began

It all began for us when the Alpine Dairy Company – who we were supplying – was the first dairy company in New Zealand to introduce a Total Quality Management plan, similar to that used by Fonterra today. This plan did away with the MAF dairy shed inspections and put the responsibility back on the farmer to monitor and carry out regular inspections on his dairy shed and plant. As a then recently converted sheep farmer I was amazed about how much I learnt about dairy sheds and potential problems by following this system.

It was also around this time as a farming couple that we began to become aware of growing environmental issues and locally by a group called the North Otago Sustainable Land Management Group (NOSLaM) and the Otago Regional Council, were given an opportunity to look at the environmental risks that potentially may affect our farm and to write an environmental plan complete with Best Management Practices and monitoring procedures. This involved completing a Hazard Analysis Response Table (HART Chart), which identified the potential environmental risks specific to our farming operation. We looked at how we could eliminate or best manage these risks and set up an ongoing monitoring programme to ensure that Best Management Practices (BMPs) were followed. The manual covered BMPs for areas such as effluent disposal, fertiliser application, monitoring ground water quality, disposal of dead stock, chemical storage, handling and application, fuel storage, regrassing and soil conservation.

It soon became apparent through the formation of the policies that we wrote to provide instruction on how we were going to carry out the BMPs and the recording of outcomes, that there was a definite advantage to our farm system and to all those team members involved in it. This now meant we had a simple environmental plan and a cowshed TQM system that everyone understood and took ownership of. Instead of just doing tasks because they were told to do them, our staff now

understood why these things need to be done and what could happen if they were not done and on time.

Once we had the environmental farm plan up and running, we decided to take it a step further and work towards the internationally recognised ISO 140001 certification. This involved being audited by a person from SGS, an international auditing company. His comments during the audit were very useful in refining our environmental plan. He said that we meet all the criteria but encouraged us to simplify the recording as much as possible. This we took on board and as the manual evolved to cover all areas of our farming practice. We applied his advice and tried to keep it simple and straightforward.

During the next year, we wrote policies to cover all areas of the day-to-day farm running. This included many policies ranging from calf rearing, to our drying off procedure. Sections were included to cover our OSH and ACC requirements.

Why have a manual?

You may well ask the reasons behind why we began a manual. The easy answer to that question is we wanted to produce a single reference point so that if something was needing done or went wrong and we were not on farm, our staff would know where to look to find out what to do, responding to that situation in a way that we would want them to. This gave us the freedom to get off the farm and yet have the confidence that it would run the way it always had. One of our principles in our farming life is that 'it is always easier to lead than to be pushed' and hence we have never felt pushed by any of the changes that have been brought into the dairy industry whether by OSH or Fonterra with regard to farm safety, milk quality, animal welfare or environmental issues.

What are the benefits to our staff and ourselves?

Our farm manual has proved to be a great educational tool. One of the first tasks our employees get when they start to work for us is to read the manual. This gives them a broad overview of how we farm and also of how we want to farm. Often it can stimulate good discussion, clarifying the way we do things and also the reason we do them. The net result of this is that our manual sets the whole tone of how we want to farm without us saying a word. It tells our staff what is important to us e.g. milk quality, the things we are passionate about e.g. our farm environment and the areas that are non-negotiable e.g. animal welfare and health and safety.

As a reference tool it is used continually: our permanent staff checking to see when our last TB test was done when filling out TB declaration docketts, to when we are going to remove the bulls from the herd at mating; our casual staff checking that they have the correct cleaning procedure for cleaning the plant at the end of milking;; our Lincoln and Massey students have found it a great resource for writing their farm reports. As time goes by and I have less to do with the day-to-day

running of the farm and things are continually changing, then I find myself sneaking into the workroom to have a quick look at the manual to refresh my memory as to irrigation run times etc.

The manual is invaluable in times of breakdown or emergency. In it is what to do in times of trouble – such as what to do if you suspect you may have put antibiotics in the milk and what to do if in fact we ever have to dump a silo of milk. Telephone numbers of all the various breakdown people – from our electrician, milking machine service agent to our relief milker and dairy company field representative and even a couple of friendly neighbours who would give advice in times of emergency or breakdown.

How does it work?

We have two identical farm manuals; one is kept in the workroom at the dairy shed and the other, the master copy, in the farm office at our home. This is so that the farm manual is readily accessible to any member of our team at any time. It also means that record keeping such as monthly shed checks, effluent irrigator runs and fertiliser application can be recorded at the cowshed by whoever is doing the job, e.g. all our fertiliser application is recorded by our fertiliser spreading contractor. The records are then periodically photocopied and transferred to the master copy and animal health treatments are entered on to the computer, into the DairyWin programme. As our farming and industry practices evolve, or simply our service representatives change and phone numbers need updated, then Julie is responsible for amending and keeping the changes current. To ensure that our staff are kept familiar and fully aware of changes they are required to read the manual once every six months, and any major procedure changes are discussed at staff meetings.

Where do you start?

A good place to start is to make sure that your Fonterra ‘Best on Farm Practice’ folder is kept up to date, and your staff know what it is, how it works and why we keep it.

The folder covers such areas as monthly shed checks, animal health recording, basic contact telephone numbers, plant cleaning procedure, and rubber ware replacement. It also provides an environmental section with templates for you to add your own information specific to your farm on how you manage the environmental risks on your property.

If you already have your ‘Best on Farm Practice’ folder up to date and want to take your farm manual further, it is simply a matter of making a list of all your current farming practices and then writing a policy on how you want each of those carried out. This can be a really useful tool in analysing the way we do things, as when we have to commit them to paper we will find ourselves asking ‘Why do we do it that way. There must be a simpler way’.

This may sound a daunting task, but remember it does not all have to be done at once. The important thing is to start. Allocate some time, start on the most important policies to you, the ones you want your staff to know and own, and work from there. Remember this is a living book and as

time goes on our farming practices will change, and as they do we need to make the changes to our manuals. The one thing that is a total waste of time is a huge document that gathers dust and is totally unrelated to the way we farm.

A farm manual is not something you can copy word for word from somebody else. The ideas are OK but it needs to be tailor made to work effectively as we all do things differently.

Conclusion

I read some months ago of an American business executive who said for 10 years after entering university all he wanted was 'freedom'. Then for the next 10 years as he started his business career all he sought was 'systems'. Then he came to realise that systems are freedom.

So even though preparing a farm manual may seem an onerous task it will ultimately free up time rather than take time and will make farming less stressful.

So remember:

- Keep it simple
- Keep it relevant
- Keep it up to date.