

Return on Investment (ROI) the mothership

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If the Return on Investment (ROI) doesn't add up, Scott Aitchison walks away from the equation.

So, when the Morrinsville dairyman started talking about probiotics – a subject which has faced its detractors – it could have been a short conversation. Except for an honest discussion about the \$13,800 he was about to invest for no immediate return – the long game that he was prepared to play for good reason – and the fact that he had two herds to run direct comparisons between.

Scott lived in Sydney for a decade rising through accountancy positions to become the Chief Executive Officer for a clothing retail company with a \$25 million turnover and 65 staff.

A life with numbers – a love for the cows

He's made his life based on numbers, but his heart remained in dairying and in 2015 he returned to New Zealand with his Australian-born wife, Emma, ready to pursue farm ownership.

In 2017 the couple bought 82.35 hectares 20 minutes north of Morrinsville and today they milk 250-300 cows on their home farm. Scott also took on a contract milking position in 2018, milking 500 cows on the neighbouring property for his parents, Bruce and Robyn.



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His brother, Stuart, also farms in the area – giving Scott another herd comparison.

Scott was introduced to probiotics through Probiotic Revolution's Calf Xtreme, a daily potent in-milk powdered probiotic additive for calves. The Calf Xtreme fulfilled its ROI promise at just \$9 a calf to weaning.

“When my brother came down and saw how bonny and shiny my calves were, he asked to borrow some Calf Xtreme for some calves he was having trouble with,” Scott said. “Within four days he rang back and asked where I got it from and what it cost, and he's been using it ever since.

He's not a guy to change things. For him to invest in a product, I knew it wasn't just in my head that it was working well.

“Then I was having a coffee with Matt [Collier, Probiotic Revolution] one day and he mentioned the Direct Fed Microbial (DFM) product, BioRumen DFM, for the cows. My first question was, ‘Am I going to get a return on it?’ Because every calculation I do is about ROI.

“Matt replied, ‘I'm asking you to spend 18 cents per cow over 280-310 days and you're not going to see a ROI in the first year. But by year two and three you will see production increases and health improvements’.

Scott said while he was aware that there was science that says cows on high-spec probiotics can reduce their Dry Matter intake by .5kg/day without compromising fat production, he thought it would be hard to do in New Zealand because of the unreliability of its pasture.

“But, I thought, ‘Hell, I take probiotics myself, so why not try it in my cows.’ Cows are athletes and the more you give them, the more they will give back.”

Patience for the ROI win

Scott made the decision to try BioRumen DFM on the home herd – and not his contract milking herd – because the management on both properties was the same. He wanted a direct comparison.

The BioRumen DFM was introduced to the home herd on July 1, 2021.

Both herds are F16 Friesians and they are in a drought and flood-prone area. They are fed (per cow per year) two-and-a-half bales of grass silage, one tonne of maize silage (5kg per day), 700kg supplements in-shed (25% Palm Kernel, 25% kibbled maize, 25% Tapioca, and 25% Soya Hulls – varying percentages, depending on the season, which equates to 6kg per day), and 1kg of hay (in challenging weather events).

The home herd averages 450 to 500kg of Milk Solids (MS) per cow.

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The contract milking herd averages 420 to 460kg MS per cow.

“I didn’t see any results at all at first. But by September I started seeing some intangibles, and because I run both farms identically side-by-side I couldn’t write off that the Somatic Cell Count (SCC) which was something I’d always struggled with on the home farm went from 216,000 to 141,000 over the season and was no longer a problem.

“The season before I’d picked up between 20 and 30 cows’ feet on the home farm to address lameness. Last season I picked up less than 10 cows.

“I did not see an obvious condition maintenance impact in 2021, but when the season changed from winter to spring the cows’ coats on the home farm became shiny and slick a good eight to 10 days earlier than the

cows on the other farm. They were all intangible things, but it showed me that it was working.

“I can’t say with confidence that it made any more cows cycle. I can certainly say with confidence that the cows that were cycling had extremely strong heats, and they were astronomically more active than the cows on the other farm.

“From a submission perspective for the six-week period I mated marginally more cows on the home farm, but from this year’s calving, I do believe my conception rates were a lot greater on the home farm. I used the same AB bulls, the same technician, the same vet – the only difference was the BioRumen DFM.”

From December 2021, the home farm’s persistent production curve started to outdistance the contract milking herd and bring home the results Scott could count.

“When the grass started getting tight through that time, the home farm production dropped (month-on-month) from mid-December 2021 8%, 14%, and 16% respectively.

By comparison, the contract milking farm dropped 13%, 18%

and 29%, and half the contract milking herd also had a summer crop of chicory.”

Second year brings production record and ROI

This season the results are clear, even though they have had a tough, dry start to the season, slow grass growth, and a shortage of supplements.

Scott set a new farm production record in September on the home farm at 2.42kgMS/cow/day.

“On the contract milking herd, the cows averaged 2.16kgMS/cow. Literally the only difference right now is the BioRumen DFM that is going into the home farm and not the other one,” he said.

“Without giving the exact figures, I could confidently say that my production for the month of September would be up by an average of .2kg MS per cow per day.

“When you apply the ‘budgeted payout’ of \$9/kg MS to an average of 220 cows [200 cows in the vat and at the start of September and 251 by the end of that month] the home farm contributed just shy of an additional \$12,000.

“Which, when you’re talking ROI, that September advantage has paid for 87% of my whole year’s spend in that single month. I believe BioRumen DFM is the largest single contributing

factor to that increased production.

“Obviously, if I can continue to feed my cows to a higher peak, the longer my milk curve will stay up and it will continue to pay for itself over and over again in the coming months.”

He says he also feels the cows on his home farm are half a condition score ahead of the 500-cow farm, and that the cows on the home farm transitioned faster after calving.

“Looking at my cows on the home farm they have their shiny summer coats already and they look like they’re ready for mating, which is remarkable considering the shite weather we’ve had. Whereas I would say for the cows on my bigger farm, they are still in their winter clothes, and they certainly don’t look ready for mating.

“My brother has been farming his whole life in this area and he visited the other day and commented on how good my cows are looking on the home farm, and how much condition they have maintained in a tough start to the season compared to his herd. I can only attribute that to the fact that my cows have been getting the BioRumen DFM.”

"I MUST SEE A RETURN ON A PRODUCT, OR I'M WALKING AWAY FROM IT"

Sold on BioRumen

He says he’s convinced the BioRumen DFM is giving him the ROI he can justify going forward.

Scott said, “From a miserable farmer’s perspective I must see a return on a product, or I’m walking away from it. Because I know there are heaps of other products, I could invest that money in that I could get a return from.

“The BioRumen DFM gave me intangible signs it was working from the start, and Matt said I’d see better results in the second year. That has happened.

“For me to commit to spending close to \$14,000 in the first season without achieving anything in the vat – I think – speaks volumes in relation to how good I hoped this product would be for my operation.

“I believe that if you look after your cows, they will look after your wallet, and I am seriously looking forward to the rest of the season comparing the two farms.”

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Why it works:

The lower gastrointestinal (GI) tract drives 70-80% of a mammal’s immunity, and that micro-encapsulated coating in BioRescue allows the probiotics to be delivered to the rumen where they come to life in the lower GI tract and outcompete pathogenic bacteria.

Combined with good bacteria and live active yeast, this natural product provides a powerful fuel for a cow’s immune system as well as gains in feed conversion efficiency. Importantly, the yeast keeps, or returns, the rumen’s pH to/at an ideal 6.7 (which is often destabilised during stress and transit).