

Feed factors disrupt mass shipment of cows south

Shipment of several thousand dairy cows from the North to the South Island has been delayed by up to a month this winter with potentially far-reaching effects.

The latest big migration south – estimated to involve anywhere from 25,000 to 40,000 head – has been disrupted by several factors, including widely publicised feed shortages throughout the South Island.

Many of those involved in the southern dairy industry say the impact could be felt long after the herds finally get to their new farms, especially if winter conditions are difficult.

Rain in May was enough to

spark some feed recovery in the south, particularly for winter crops, and by early June autumn's near-panic over lack of grazing, hay, silage and grain seemed to have abated slightly.

Sources say key facts remain:

Winter feed is at a premium; 'More than a few' of the 100-odd new South Island conversions triggered by the lifting of the moratorium earlier this season are not actually finished;

Autumn-sown grass has struck poorly, or not at all.

Held back

Cows destined for southern farms have been held back on grazing all over the North Island,

including places like Tolaga Bay, Wellsford and King Country.

And the window for getting them moved in journeys that can last up to 5 or 6 days is closing quickly. Shipping cows after 250 days pregnancy breaches animal welfare codes of recommendation.

There is a positive side, however, says *FarmWise* consultant Jack Ballam of Southland:

"If many of those cows had come down earlier, our current feed shortages would be much worse.

"They're obviously being well fed up north prior to transport, so in most cases delaying shipment has been a good management decision, as long as they don't get too close to calving."

The long haul

Stock agents, transporters and trans-Cook Strait carriers like *Strait Shipping* say most farmers realise how important it is to prepare their stock properly for the long haul, if only because dairy cows are worth so much money this season.

But *MAF Enforcements* animal welfare adviser Earl Culham of Auckland says he and his team remain very concerned about both the transport of these herds, and what they will be wintered on when they arrive in the south.

"Our information suggests some of these cows moving south are also much lighter in condition than they should be, scoring at CS

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(From facing page)

3.5 versus the 4.5-plus recommended at calving.

"We had people on both sides of the Strait early in June for another welfare blitz. We didn't find any offences on the wharves with regard to dairy cows moving south – the animals most at risk of being transported in defiance of the code at that time were cull sheep and cull cows, most of which were headed in the opposite direction.

"We are concerned that corners may be being cut at the lairages, where cows are supposed to be taken off the trucks, watered, fed and rested for 12 hours.

"We will continue to monitor long-haul transport."

Pre-trip guidelines

Mr Culham says companies like *Otorohanga Transport*, of which Strait Shipping is a subsidiary, are to be credited for providing farmers with clear management guidelines for pre-trip conditioning their herds.

Wrightson regional dairy coordinator for the southern South Island, Andrew Cottam says 9

times out of 10 every effort is made to ensure southbound herds are in as good a condition as possible.

For farmers, that means hard feeding, ensuring adequate treatment with magnesium, boosting trace elements, and vaccination if necessary.

"Most of those involved are fully aware of the importance of animal health and metabolic requirements. And the transporters have got very good at their job. They know their business, they know the roads, and they are very particular. The arriving cows I've seen this season have hardly had a knock on them."

Brian Williams, South Island stock manager for Strait Shipping in Picton, says recent purchase of a third and much larger ship from Ireland means stock capacity across Cook Strait has been much higher this winter.

The 128ft *MV Kent*, capable of carrying 4 times as many unit-loads of stock as the company's other vessels, began work mid-May and has resulted in better, faster, more efficient shipment of dairy herds, he says.

"It's not cheap for farmers to shift them. So it has to be done properly.

"These days we're finding the animals are definitely in better condition for travel. In turn we try to do the best we can by the stock, and we make sure we have top farmers to rest them when they arrive this end."

Herds headed to the deep south are offloaded at grazing in Marlborough, Canterbury and North Otago, he says.

Cow condition

Consultants like Geoff Campbell, *FarmWise*, Otago, are more concerned about calving and the weeks after, not to mention conception rates for next year.

"There has been good feed recovery of winter crops in many areas south of Dunedin," he says, "but the infrastructure is just not in place for the sort of huge growth we're experiencing. Some farms are just not finished.

"My biggest concern now is straight cow condition.

"New herds coming from up

north have to be well fed when they get here, on good grazing.

"It takes time for them to adapt to local conditions.

"There's still room for farmers to plan ahead for spring, especially if their new grass is not all that good, or their winter grazing has not been adequate.

"They may need to look closely at the need for high-energy feed supplements post-calving.

"And if they have good grazing for young stock in the North Island, they should leave those animals there for now, until local conditions fully recover." D

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