EFFLUENT UPDATE

By Sue Edmonds

There's more and more of it, so why aren't farmers seeing dairy effluent as a productivity tool, and not just something to be got rid of cheaply?

With herds getting bigger, and fertilizer a lot more expensive than in the past, dairy effluent is a huge resource to farmers. Spread wisely and widely it can hugely reduce the amount of chemical fertilizer required each year to grow sufficient pasture to feed all those extra mouths.

Very expensive and well equipped farm dairies have been popping up all over the country in the last few years. But the emphasis is on what goes into the shed and the vat, and not on making the best use of that mucky stuff that comes out during washdown. Somehow, when the budgets are drawn up, effluent management gets stuck at the bottom of the list, and there have been plenty of eager salesmen offering cheap pumps and irrigators which purport to solve the problem at little cost.

In this part of the country, effluent management is a 'permitted activity', and some farmers seem to consider that that means they can do anything they choose. But at the same time there are clear 'no-noes' put out by regional councils over how much can be spread at a time, to what depth, and in what conditions.

And when regional councils conduct inspections, whether on land or from the air, it's very obvious that things aren't being done right by a significant proportion of farmers.

To date their response has been that there is no reliable source of information to tell them how to get it right. And without having to go through the rigmarole of getting a resource consent, the salesman offering the 'best' price usually gets the contract.

In fact there are a hundred variables which need to be taken into account when designing an effective effluent system. What sort of soil is the farm on? How many cows? How big is the pump and the storage system. How wet is the climate, and how often are soils sodden? And how fast does the irrigation system spread the stuff, and does it move frequently enough to just apply the approved amount each time. What are the cows being fed on? If there are lots of supplements there will be more solids produced, and these will have an effect on how well the irrigators and pumps work. And even if there is a huge pond to hold it, when the time comes to empty it, how thinly and widely is it spread? Last, but by no means least, how big an area do the pipes cover to allow irrigators to be attached?

An early figure bandied about was three hectares per hundred cows. These days AgResearch are planning to irrigate effluent over 130ha of their new Tokanui 200ha dairy platform.

Eighteen months ago Environment Waikato began to look for a solution. Herding together a large number of effluent equipment sellers into a room, they challenged them to work out a way of getting reliable information to individual farmers.

A steering group was formed, and work is continuing on the creation of a Code of Practice, and an industry body which would set rules for accreditation, leading to the creation of a recognisable 'mark' which could be used by those who meet the

knowledge and design standard. The idea is that this will be similar to the already accepted Fertmark and Spreadmark.

It will be designed as a voluntary scheme, and farmers will be able to access lists of accredited suppliers from recognised central websites etc. However, they will still be able to make their own minds up as to whether to 'play safe' or take anyone's word for what will work best on their land.

In the past there have been systems sold to farmers which barely hold the output from one milking. Thus, in wet weather they are almost certain to be breaking the rules. It is hoped that by creating an accredited supplier scheme, future systems will be designed for the farm and the conditions under which they will need to operate.