

# BETTER WINTER GRAZING OUTCOMES

J I Kerslake<sup>1</sup> K M Wilson<sup>1</sup> and J M Mitchell<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>AbacusBio Ltd and <sup>2</sup>Farm Environment Advice

## Summary

The key factors associated with successful grazing outcomes include:

- a clear understanding of expectations and what is and isn't reasonable in each business
- effective planning and timely communication
- a clear understanding of who is needed in your team and why
- an ability to have constructive conversations and learn from them.

## Better relationship management = better grazing outcomes

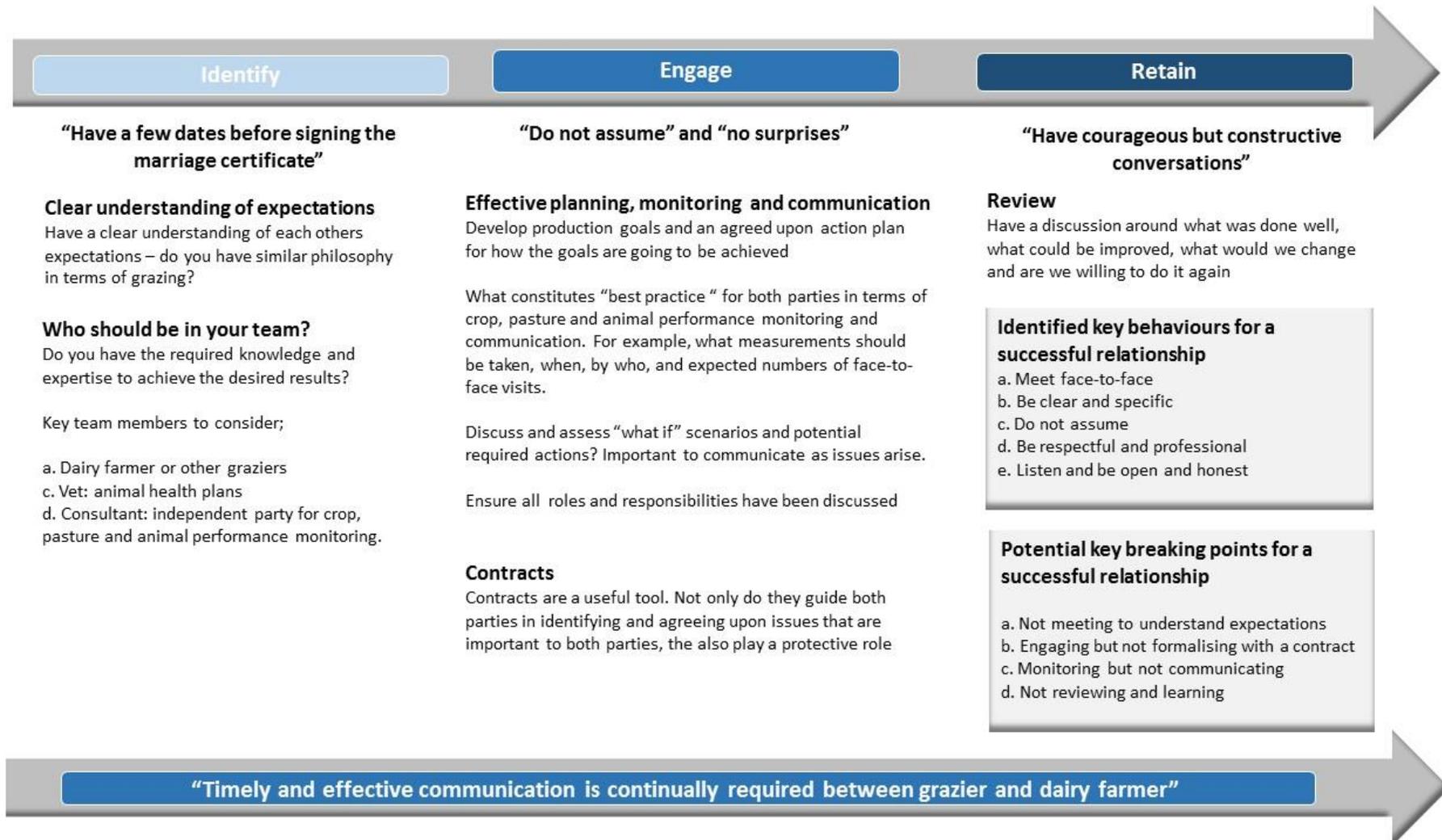
“We have a good relationship” is often one of the first answers given when you ask a dairy farmer and grazier how good grazing outcomes are achieved. “What does that really mean?” and “What are the key things that they both do, or don't do, to ensure success?”

The authors are aware of three studies to date that have attempted to answer these questions. The first is a Kellogg's Rural Leadership Programme project whose aim was to identify the main factors involved in producing a mutually beneficial business relationship between dairy farmer and grazier (Serra, 2013). The second is a current heifer grazing project whose aim is to improve the growth of young stock, in-calf rates and dairy farmer-grazier relationships (Brazendale, 2014) and the third is a current sustainable winter dairy grazing project whose aim is to identify information requirements and useful tools for the dairy winter grazing community in terms of business feasibility, relationship management, on-farm management and environmental risk and responsibility (Kerslake, 2014).

All three studies worked closely with dairy farmers, graziers and rural professionals and have identified a number of key factors associated with relationship management and better grazing outcomes. These studies also found useful resources or created tools in an attempt to address some of the issues identified.

The aim of this paper is to discuss some key considerations found across all three studies, and increase awareness of currently available resources and tools that could help dairy farmers and graziers improve their business relationships. The key considerations that will be discussed include having a clear understanding of expectations, effective planning and communication, who should be in your team and the importance of reviewing and refining (Figure 1.)

**Figure 1.** An illustration of key factors associated with better grazing outcomes



### ***Clear understanding of expectations***

A big part of achieving good relationship management is understanding what “success” looks like for both parties. In addition to this, it is also important to understand what is, and what is not, a reasonable request within each other’s business as the season progresses.

“Have a few dates before signing the marriage certificate” has been a saying often bandied around at discussion groups. What people mean by this, is that it is worthwhile taking the time to meet face-to-face to discuss each other’s expectations and farming philosophies before reaching an agreement. The aim of these conversations will be to ensure that each party has a clear understanding of what is important to the other party’s business and that they identify any potential differences in opinion that will either result in further questioning and negotiation, or the finding of a “non-negotiable”, resulting in the early realisation that the relationship may not work. Some examples of important discussion points would be around previous business relationships and how well they did, or did not go, and why; how stock would be managed in terms of grazing and health, expectations in terms of performance, monitoring and communication; potential “what if” or adverse event scenarios that may occur during the season and pricing. Discussing these various factors should give both parties a good overview of how flexible and reasonable each party is willing to be.

In terms of resources or tools, the heifer grazing project has created two questionnaires, one for the dairy farmer and one for the grazier. These questionnaires are designed to help farmers identify key questions that they may like to ask the other party to see if they are a good fit for their farm system or identify points for further discussion or negotiation. The resource is located on the following webpage, <http://www.dairynz.co.nz/what-we-do/research/key-projects/heifer-grazing-project/>.

### ***Effective planning, monitoring and communication***

If both parties decide they are a good fit for each other’s business, the next stage is to develop an effective plan, and if desired, the signing of a contract.

---

Notes:

“Do not assume” and “There should be no surprises” are the common statements bandied around at discussion groups when this topic arises. Effective planning involves having a clear and agreed-upon production goal and an action plan for how you are going to get from where you are as of now to where you need to be then. Important aspects that overlay these goals and action plans are: how and when are you going to monitor performance? What and when should there be communication? And who is responsible for what roles? “What if” or adverse event scenarios should again be discussed, but with potential actions, required communication and responsibilities noted down.

Timely and effective monitoring and communication is a re-occurring statement through all studies when relationship management is discussed. In the survey conducted by Serra (2013), it was found that both dairy farmers and graziers thought that the top three drivers of a successful business relationship were good communication between parties, long-term and on-going relationship and maintaining regular contact with the other party. Conversely, dairy farmers thought that the top three drivers for unsuccessful relationships were graziers not having the skills to feed dairy cows, lack of a monitoring system and wrong assessment of feed at the start. Graziers also thought that the wrong assessment of feed available at the start was important in terms of unsuccessful relationships, along with the arrival of cows at a lower body condition score than stated, or lack of regular communication. These findings re-emphasise the importance of “no surprises” and why a monitoring and communication plan over the top of production goals and management plans are very important for a successful relationship.

In terms of resources or tools, there are roles and responsibility checklists and grazing contracts available. Both of these resources are useful in terms of “jogging the mind” of the various aspects that should be planned or discussed. Working through these can help ensure important aspects are not over-looked. They can also help parties bring up potentially “uncomfortable” topics or issues that they find difficult to discuss.

The heifer grazing and sustainable winter grazing projects have both created a roles and responsibilities checklist for various tasks associated with grazing. This simply involves a list of tasks associated with managing stock pre- and post-arrival and pre-departure, transitioning, day-to-day management, animal health and reproduction and a space to assign the task to either the grazer, stock owner or third party. These resources can be found at the following websites, heifer grazing responsibility checklist: <http://www.dairynz.co.nz/what-we-do/research/key-projects/heifer-grazing-project/> and winter grazing responsibility checklist; soon to be available on a winter dairy grazing webpage on B+LNZ website (<http://www.beeflambnz.com/farm/>).

Federated farmers have recently reviewed their grazing contracts and have combined their current contracts (dry stock, heifer, and winter grazing) into one. While contracts are traditionally viewed as playing a protective role, as mentioned above, they can also play an important role in ensuring that all potential issues are discussed. While contracts are not fail-

proof, and surprisingly not commonly used, they can help both parties form the foundation of a great working and long-term relationship by ensuring all issues are discussed, allowing no room for assumptions or surprises. Federated farmer contracts can be found at the following website, <http://www.fedfarm.org.nz/services/Contracts--Agreements/>

### ***Who should be in your team?***

A big part of achieving good grazing outcomes is having a clear understanding of current strengths and weaknesses of the skill sets within the business relationship, and if help from a third party is required. Between the dairy farmer and grazier there should be a reasonable cover of the skill level required to create successful outcomes. The third parties that are often used are stock agents, for sourcing graziers or grazing; vets, for creating and monitoring animal health; and farm consultants, for independent measurement of available feed and condition of stock upon arrival and departure, or negotiation of price. In terms of communication between the dairy farmer and grazier, third parties are often viewed as getting in the way or creating an unnecessary risk in terms of miscommunication, with most dairy farmers and graziers preferring to communicate directly.

### ***Review and refine***

It is important at the end of grazing that both parties meet face to face and have an open and direct conversation about how things have gone. This conversation should either occur at certain points during the grazing period or not long after the grazing period. Key points to discuss include what was done well, what could be improved and refined for next time.

### **References**

Brazendale R and S Dirks. Heifer Grazing project. Funded by New Zealand Dairy Farmers, led by DairyNZ, with in-kind support from B+LNZ and LIC.

[www.dairynz.co.nz/heifergrazing](http://www.dairynz.co.nz/heifergrazing)

---

Notes:

Kerslake J I, K M Wilson and J M Mitchell. Sustainable Winter Grazing project. Funded by Ministry for Primary Industries Sustainable Farming Fund, DairyNZ and B+LNZ. Information requirements and resources for graziers for business feasibility, on-farm management, relationship management and on-farm environmental risk and responsibility. Winter Dairy Grazing webpage to be available soon on B+LNZ website (<http://www.beeflambnz.com/farm/>)

V Serra Postiglione. Wintering in Canterbury and North Otago. Business Relationship between Dairy Farmers and Graziers. Kelloggs Rural Leadership Programme Report. [https://researcharchive.lincoln.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10182/6213/Postiglione\\_2013.pdf?sequence=1](https://researcharchive.lincoln.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10182/6213/Postiglione_2013.pdf?sequence=1)