

# Countdown Downunder 1999–2001

## The Short Report



Countdown Downunder was created in 1998 to help farmers meet new quality standards, improve farm profitability and protect export markets.

By mid-2001, national cell counts were on the way down and the project had engineered a change in the culture of many of the people who professionally advise farmers on milk quality.

This short report summarises the major achievements of Countdown Downunder to June 2001. More information is available from Countdown Downunder.

### **Why are cell counts an industry issue?**

Australia's dairy industry is worth more than \$7 billion a year and contributes \$2 billion to Australia's balance of trade.

International expectations for milk quality are increasing with new European standards.

Since 1 January 1998, the European Economic Commission has regarded milk or milk products made from raw cows' milk with cell counts above 400,000 cells/mL as unsuitable for human consumption (Directive 92/46). Other importing customers are increasingly using this standard.

Broadly speaking, the more somatic cells in milk – the lower the quality. High cell counts interfere with dairy product manufacture, and indicate poor quality processes on the farm. Clinical mastitis cases on-farm can also cause substantial production losses.

All Australian milk must be below the 400,000 cells/mL threshold for Australia to maintain its reputation as a supplier of quality milk products. Otherwise dairy farmers will receive lower prices for their milk, and Australia may lose exports. In 1998 the Australian dairy industry set national targets and established Countdown Downunder to help Australia's 12,888 dairy farms achieve these targets.

The best dairy farmers aim to prevent mastitis infections and win premium milk payments. It requires them to follow quality procedures, getting many small things right on every day of every year.

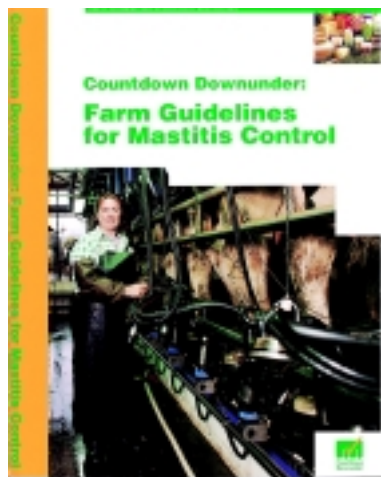
If a mastitis problem does develop, then identifying the underlying cause can be complex and time consuming. It can involve a host of different professionals including vets, milking machine technicians, factory advisers and others. Prior to Countdown, farmers complained that the people advising them often gave confusing and inconsistent advice – they didn't work as a team to solve the farm problem.

### **The industry targets:**

- **90% of the milk supply from Australian dairy farms with bulk milk cell counts of less than 250,000 cells/mL**
- **All milk supply with counts of less than 400,000 cells/mL.**



**Mastitis control is complex. Countdown offers a clear path forward.**



**Fact box**

- 8,795 copies of the Farm Guidelines sold
- 630 copies of the Farm Guidelines donated to libraries and stakeholders
- 46% of dairy farmers own a copy of the Farm Guidelines
- 500 sets of Technotes sold with 42% of professional dairy advisers owning a copy.

**Fact box**

- About 1,200 people regularly advise farmers on mastitis and milk quality
- 768 advisers are aligned with Countdown in June 2001, having participated in seminars, courses or other Countdown activities
- 844 advisers attended seminars in 1999 for an average of 5.2 hours
- 240 advisers attended four-day training courses
- 54 advisers attended workshops to prepare to facilitate the Countdown Downunder Farmer Short Course
- 268 advisers subscribe to Countdown-L
- 1,800 advisers receive bimonthly bulletins about mastitis issues

### **Defining best practice for mastitis control**

The *Countdown Downunder Farm Guidelines for Mastitis Control* form the basis of all Countdown's advice and training resources. They are a best practice manual for farmers. The Farm Guidelines describe how to prevent and control mastitis in a step-by-step seasonal guide and are published as a 122-page colour handbook. They were launched with the project in December 1998.

Countdown's development and the technical recommendations were guided by the Australian Mastitis Advisory Council. The Council included representatives from the peak bodies of the dairy industry and helped ensure each industry segment had confidence in Countdown's recommendations.

The scientific and technical accuracy of the Farm Guidelines was underpinned by the *Countdown Downunder Technotes*. Published in 2000, the Technotes were an essential reference for dairy advisers – they provided the evidence to substantiate the recommendations in the Guidelines. These two documents together have changed the way farmers and advisers talk about mastitis. Rather than worrying about technical uncertainties, there is now a sense that mastitis can be controlled by good management instead of waiting for a new 'silver bullet' technological fix.

### **Building a new extension frontline in each dairying region**

Sustainable change in mastitis control on dairy farms requires practical advice that farmers and their staff can integrate into their daily work, but it would not have been sufficient for the project to simply send this information direct to farmers. The Farm Guideline recommendations were most likely to be adopted when farmers directly interacted with the professionals who advise them, and when these advisers were skilled, provided consistent advice and worked with other disciplines to solve problems.

Countdown coordinators were appointed in each dairying region to help build the regional capacity to manage mastitis. They identified local dairy advisers and organised seminars to brief them on Countdown. As the project developed, many of these advisers went on to present seminars to farmers and to participate in 4-day Adviser Short Courses. These 'Countdown-trained' advisers became Countdown's frontline.

Dairy advisers who had not enrolled in Countdown's courses were not ignored. They received bimonthly information from the Countdown team, alerting them to the issues of the month, and encouraging them to use Countdown resources in their day-to-day work.

By June 2001, 5,500 farmers and milk harvesters across Australia had attended local meetings for an average of 1.8 hours.

In 2001, Countdown rolled out the Farmer Short Courses. Building on the Guidelines, the courses give farmers and milk harvesters the tools they need to take mastitis control to the next level, with a practical management plan for their own businesses.

Throughout the program, Countdown's key messages about mastitis control have been broadcasted via the 'sports pages' of *Australian Dairyfarmer* magazine and other media. From mid-2000 this included a set of five themed stories offered to all dairy media. The result has been a stream of hundreds of events and articles encouraging farmers to think again about mastitis control.

***The outcomes from Countdown Downunder***

Industry leaders and farmers say Countdown's advice is now an integral part of dairying in Australia. Independent market research in September 2000 showed that:

- ✓ 76% of dairy advisers had benefited from Countdown.
- ✓ 46% of Australia's 12,888 dairy farmers used the Countdown Farm Guidelines.

The decision environment that farmers and advisers work in has changed with many farmers now planning their mastitis control and milk quality management and looking for competent local advisers to help them implement their plans. A factory field officer in Gippsland described the nature of this change as:

*"... the best thing about Countdown ... [is] ... there is a whole lot of people out there on the same wavelength ... they're all working towards the same goal ... previously you wouldn't necessarily have that confidence."*

Australia's cell count is dropping. Herd cell count statistics (which are a surrogate for bulk milk cell counts based on milk recording data) showed a downward trend in cell count from 89% below 400,000 cells/mL in 1997/1998 to 92% by 1999/2000.

High achieving farmers from all states were honoured in the Weekly Times Countdown Downunder Milk Quality Award established in 2001. This national award recognised the 5% of suppliers across Australia who had the lowest average bulk milk cell counts and helped focus attention on milk quality issues.

Countdown continues as a new project commencing 1 July 2001. It has attracted strong industry support and will build on the achievements of the first phase of Countdown Downunder.



**Fact box**

- 5,500 farmers became aware of Countdown recommendations at 205 meetings
- 342 farmers have completed the 6-day Farmer Short Course
- Countdown articles have appeared in *The Australian Dairymonger* (circulation 18,700) for 30 months
- Farmers across Australia have seen more than 385 articles in local newsletters and newspapers.



**Project Leader**  
– Pauline Brightling



**Gippsland**  
– Carol Bradshaw



**NSW**  
– Dick Buesnel



**Northern Victoria**  
– Fiona Smolenaars



**Queensland**  
– John Miller



**South Australia**  
– Glen Beath



**Tasmania**  
– Ian Hubble



**Western Australia**  
– Peter Rosher



**Western Victoria**  
– John Penry



**Scientific Officer**  
– Anne Hope

## THE SHORT REPORT

### **Countdown Downunder outcomes were achieved by deliverables specified in the Project Brief**

<b>Original target output</b>	<b>Actual output in June 2001</b>
Publish 5,000 Farm Guidelines	11,000 Farm Guidelines printed and 9,425 distributed 46% of farmers owned a copy by September 2000
Publish 1,000 Technotes @ \$40	2,000 Technotes @ \$86 and 535 distributed 42% of dairy advisers own a copy
Promote key messages in <i>The Australian Dairyfarmer</i> and via articles prepared for use by advisers	15 columns (bimonthly for 30 months) 385 articles in stakeholder publications
Make Farm Guidelines available on the Countdown website	2,139 on-line requests for the Acrobat file
Identify stakeholders, including an estimated 700 advisers Send bimonthly newsletter to advisers	Database of 2,220 stakeholders including 1,200 advisers 2 professionally produced newsletters; average of 4 personal mailings; 5 Adviser bulletins
Have 525 (75% of 700 advisers) attend regional Adviser Seminars	844 advisers attended Adviser Seminars for an average of 5.2 hours
Have 7,500 (25% of 30,000 people on dairy farms) attend local farmer meetings	5,500 milk harvesters attended farmer meetings for an average of 1.8 hours
Design, pilot and run the Adviser Short Course for 150 advisers	240 advisers participated in the Adviser Short Course, completing 78 farm investigations
Design and pilot 18 hours of learning material and train local train local advisers in each region to deliver the Farmer Short Course. The Project Brief included no funds and had no expectation of delivery of the Farmer Short Course before June 2001	The Farmer Short Course is 21 hours of learning materials; 54 advisers trained across Australia; and 17 courses completed around Australia
Establish adviser networks	268 subscribers to the Countdown-L e-mail discussion list
Establish national udder health statistics	Regional and national Herd Milk Cell Counts from ADHIS milk recording data
Identify udder health research priorities	Priorities identified in Technotes and industry planning documents
Establish an agreed methodology and quality assurance in microbiology laboratories	Strategy for reliable and cost-effective mastitis diagnosis developed

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**[www.countdown.org.au](http://www.countdown.org.au)**

**Countdown Downunder, Level 6, 84 William Street,  
Melbourne, Victoria 3000  
Phone 03 9600-3506, Fax 03 9642-8133**