



Why New Zealand dairy farms are not socially sustainable

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Prime Minister Helen Clark made the following bold claim in her 2007 statement to Parliament:

"I believe New Zealand can aim to be the first nation to be truly sustainable – across the four pillars of the economy, society, the environment, and nationhood" (Clark, 2007).

These are fine words but what do they really mean? In this comment, I explore the social sustainability of New Zealand dairy farms.

Since the Agenda 21 Report (United Nations, 1992) defined the three pillar model of sustainability which included social sustainability as well as economic and environmental sustainability, there has been a great deal of debate about what the term social sustainability means. This debate centres on what socio-political indicators should be measured (Littig & Griebler, 2005). Becker et al (1991) define it as the *"persistence and preferably improvement over time of desirable and necessary characteristics in people and their communities"* (Becker et al, 1991 p.4).

In 2007, Dr Michael Cullen, the then Minister of Finance, in a speech to the Auckland Chamber of Commerce, defined these desirable and necessary characteristics in the following statement:

"The things that actually matter to people are time with family and friends, a sense of contribution through work, being part of the community, the ability to trust each other, and having good health, just as much as financial situation" (Cullen, 2007).

The ability for everyone in a society to fulfil these simple goals, highlighted in Cullen's speech,

over time will mean that a society can endure and maintain sustainability. Using these aims, I will assess why the dairy industry is not socially sustainable. I have specifically chosen three goals where the industry fails to deliver social sustainability. These are as follows:

- Time with family and friends
- Being part of a functioning community
- Health effects

The first question that needs to be addressed is that of whether life as an employee on a dairy farm in New Zealand in 2012 provides a sustainable amount of quality time with family, friends and for the pursuit of personal non work goals. DairyNZ, the industry good organisation which is funded by a levy on milk solids, has created a website called 'GoDairy' for the purpose of promoting dairying as a career. On a page headed 'Life on the farm' a typical day's work on a dairy farm is described. It starts at five a.m., includes two one hour breaks and finishes at five p.m. Therefore a ten hour working day. The website goes on to say that sometimes there is office work to be done in the evening and some night's sleep can be disrupted by the need to help cows calve! In addition to these long hours is the fact that a typical dairy farm worker will work for 11 days and have a two day 'weekend' as exemplified below in a typical example of a dairy industry job advertisement.

Our client this upcoming year is working on a 750ha farm with cow numbers at 2000. Roster for this farm is 11 and 2 with shared Quarters (Agstaff).

These two facts combined mean the accepted industry norm is that employees are working ten or more hours a day for 11 consecutive days with

only a 48 hour break between stints. Therefore an average of at least 60 hours a week. Independent research paints a more extreme picture with an analysis of census data showing that 32 percent of staff in 2006 were working more than 70 hours a week (Wilson & Tipples, 2008). New Zealand led the world in the implementation of a 40 hour working week and the current accepted industrial norm is still 40 hours (Blackwood, 2007). In 1840, Samuel Parnell, widely credited with founding Labour Day, famously said:

“There are 24 hours per day given us; eight of these should be for work, eight for sleep, and the remaining eight for recreation and in which for men to do what little things they want for themselves” (NZ History Online, n.d).

The right to earn a living wage within 40 hours a week is a fundamental tenet in the New Zealand social contract based on Parnell’s simple principle that, to be a fully functioning person, one needs enough non-work time to do it! The dairy industry promotes itself as a family friendly working environment in its television and web-based advertising as demonstrated on the GoDairy website as follows:

“As a dairy farmer, you will know that you are doing something honest and worthwhile – for yourself, for your family, for your community and for the people who will benefit from the most important thing you produce – milk” (GoDairy 2013).

This family friendly sentiment is contradicted elsewhere on the same website by both their own admittance of what ‘normal hours’ are on most farms (GoDairy, 2012) as well as the census work hours data (Wilson & Tipples, 2008). The simple fact is that a worker cannot be an effective and fully functional member of a family when working the amount of time required by these jobs. Twelve years of personal experience in dairying has shown me that the level of exhaustion and lack of time, means that your family and partner miss out on a great deal. Couple this effect on the family, with the personal cost on the worker, and it is obvious that this level of work is not sustainable.

One major effect of the hours and conditions of work, and the second point that I would like to discuss, is that dairy farm workers and owners are often unable to commit to, and fully participate in, local community organisations and events. Dairy farming work routines require a level of commitment and presence that generally means that workers need to live on farm (Pangborn cited in Tipples, 2010). Sue Trafford expresses the reality of the dairy farming life thus: *“this can isolate workers from social activities although tiredness and unsociable hours often result in workers having little energy and time to socialise anyway”* (cited in Tipples, 2010). This leads to less functional communities and a downward spiral of nonparticipation and unavailability.

In the 12 years I was involved in farming in the Rotomanu/Inchbonnie area, the community lost three schools, a community hall, two churches, a netball club, twilight cricket, a basketball league, and the number of events at the remaining community hall dropped from upwards of 20 events a year, to one a year. While some of this change may be put down to the intensification of the local dairy farms, I believe much of this change can be attributed to increased work expectations. Compounding this is the growing transience of the work force with turnover rates amongst staff as high as 40 percent (Tipples, 2010) and unpublished data putting this figure as high as 60 percent with up to 15 percent leaving the industry each year.

In my time as a dairy farmer I witnessed a change - from a relatively stable local workforce to a high degree of transience, with each new wave of arrivals bringing with them a new set of problems. This pool of staff is increasingly less experienced and often brings with them many social problems, in particular, drug and alcohol issues. I observed Codeine and methamphetamine use added to the mix, along with increased alcohol and cannabis usage. As the divide between the owners and the workers has increased, the dishonesty (on both sides) has also increased; communities where houses went unlocked for generations and access to land was open, now drip with padlocks and ‘no trespassing’ signs.

What then of the health implications of dairy farm work given the long hours and high levels of stress that are accepted as the norm within the industry? This is the third and final point that I would like to discuss.

The negative health effects manifest themselves in many ways and have many causes. For the sake of simplicity, I will restrict myself to discussing three consequences that flow directly from the long hours and high stress involved in the job. This discussion is with the caveat that the three discussed are just a small sample from a very long list. The three most obvious problems are as follows:

- Accidents
- Obesity and medical issues
- Mental health issues

The dairy industry is a dangerous place to work. This is demonstrated by the Accident Compensation Commission (ACC) levy which is based directly on injury and death claims in a sector. It is \$3.01 in the dairy industry whilst in the coal mining industry (which is perceived by the public as a dangerous industry) it is much lower at \$2.23. The reasons for this are many, but analysis of slips, trips and falls data has identified that stress and fatigue are an underlying contributing factor in many ACC claims in the industry (Bentley & Moore, 2003).

The recent accident prevention television advertising campaign: "Rural People Die on Rural Roads" highlighted the high death and accident rate amongst rural people. The rural macho culture combined with fatigue, and often alcohol, is a deadly mix. The Waikato Child and Youth Mortality Group in their hard hitting report *Preventing Rural Deaths* states "...fatigue, for example, is one of the most significant risk factors and is something dairy farmers or sharemilkers have to deal with every day" (Waikato DHB, 2012).

Obesity and other health problems are linked with high stress and lack of sleep. Research at the Harvard Medical School states quite bluntly that there is a causal link between weight gain and sleep deprivation (Patel 2008). The industry's own research has shown that health outcomes are poor amongst dairy farmers. In a

survey of 800 dairy farmers, DairyNZ found the following:

- 67 percent had not had tetanus injections.
 - 79 percent did not wear helmets on bikes.
 - 27.5 percent experienced pain that interfered with work or sleep.
 - 9.6 percent were smokers.
 - Blood glucose levels (an indicator of potential to develop diabetes) averaged 6.2 mmol/litre (normal is 3.6 – 5.8 mmol/litre).
 - 44 percent had systolic blood pressure > 140mmHg (desirable level is 90 – 119 mmHg).
 - 48 percent had cholesterol > 5 (desirable level 4).
- (Inside Dairy, 2011)

Lead researcher Mark Paine of DairyNZ stated *"This information is just one element. There are more insidious issues emerging around chronic stress and fatigue on farms..."* (Inside Dairy, 2011).

This research in itself is a damning indictment. On the basis of health alone, it raises doubt that the dairy industry may not be sustainable for many communities and individuals in its present form and with its current culture. There is also the possibility that many of these problems are being masked by the continued importation of foreign workers (Trafford & Tipples, 2011).

Finally in the section on health, we must discuss mental health, an issue that is just starting to come to the fore in dairy farming circles. The Ashburton Guardian led their news on 20 August 2013, with the headline '*Rural suicide rates massively higher than cities*'. This was a response to both the growing disquiet in rural areas about the subject, and the release of a Ministry of Health (MoH) report, *Suicide Facts* (MoH, 2012). The report revealed the total suicide rate for those residing in urban areas at 10.8 per 100,000 population compared to 15.9 for those living in rural areas. This was the first time MoH has reported the figures with the urban-rural split. Again, bitter personal experience showed me that the toll is too high: two suicides, two children under five killed in

farm accidents, three deaths in car accidents. These combined with numerous major and minor accidents, are part of my memory of the 12 years I spent in the dairy industry. Sustainable? I think not.

The on-going tendency of the farming sector, founded in the traditional staunch rural attitude, is to “tough it out” (Lueders Bolwerk, 2002; Rosmann, 2010). Add to this a culture of silence where the issues creating stress and depression are often not addressed. Therefore solutions are not often found (Spiers, 2011). In 2008, a local doctor, in a personal communication with me said “*Depression is endemic in the dairy farmers in my practice*”. He went on to say that he felt that he was only seeing the “*tip of the iceberg*”.

At this point I feel that I want to relate some of my personal experience. I worked and lived in a small semi-isolated dairy farming community for 12 years. The community was made up of about 30 farms and about 70 households. In that time, five people had major mental episodes which required extended periods of hospitalisation. Local health professionals were so concerned they called a public meeting where the issue was discussed. A group of ten locals ‘came out’ and shared their personal stories of their struggles with mental ill health. At one infamous local school board meeting in 2005, the eight members of the board (including myself) compared our experiences and dosage rates of the anti-depressants we were taking. Whilst none of this necessarily confirms a causal relationship between the dairy industry and poor mental health, it certainly gives rise to concerns about that relationship. Some in the industry may argue that ‘*it is no worse than in any other industry*’ or ‘*it is just a reflection of what is happening everywhere in our society.*’ These attitudes may well be valid, but the fact remains that mental health is a problem in the industry. Where ever the cause may lie, it adds to the social unsustainability of the industry to the detriment of the many of the individuals that work in it.

In writing this piece I have tried to find evidence that the New Zealand dairy industry is addressing this issue. Apart from the rosy view portrayed in their “Go Dairy” advertising

campaign I have found nothing. By contrast, I have found several reports and documents that point to the fact that the human side of the industry is in crisis (Speirs, 2011; Inside dairy, 2011; Lueders Bolwerk, 2002). The only thing preventing a total social breakdown within the industry, is its ability to recruit new “cannon fodder” from the unemployed and migrant labour pools (Tipples et al., 2010). This means that the level of burn out, ill health and dysfunction within the industry is masked. The industry as a whole and in its individual parts fit perfectly Coser’s (1967) description of “*greedy organisations*”. These “*make total claims on their members*” and “*attempt to encompass the whole personality*”. In their greed they insist on “*exclusive and undivided loyalty*” and try to “*reduce the claims*” of their workers and members. “*Their demands on the person are omnivorous*” (Coser, 1967).

Now as I look back as a ‘survivor’ of 12 years in the industry, at my own struggles with depression and obesity, the breakdown of my relationship, the family time and opportunities that my children missed, I know that I traded my health, my future and my children, for half a million dollars. That cost was too high.

I have painted a pretty bleak picture of the dairy industry as it behaves at the moment - but it is not without the possibility of redemption. DairyNZ continues to fund research into these areas and is valiantly trying to change farmer behaviour. Many small groups of volunteers and professionals spend countless hours picking up the pieces. While there are many ‘decent employers’ and ‘happy workers’, the fact remains that the industry retains its ‘dirty secret’ – a festering underbelly of dysfunction and disaffection. Until this is addressed the industry will remain socially unsustainable.

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