

### **31- 7 dairy climate change**

Mounting concern about climate change prompted the International Dairy Federation to host a Climate Change Summit in Edinburgh, Scotland last month, bringing together more than 270 dairy farmers, scientists, service people and administrators from 40 countries. Stock and Land Dairy Editor Peter Austin attend that conference and filed this report.



Pic: Homer

**Cappo: Wiltshire dairy farmer David Homer said farmers around the world need to work together in addressing the issues of climate change**

**By Peter J Austin**

**World dairy responding to climate challenge**

DAIRY farmers in Australia probably had more to fear from the immediate effects of climate change than most others in the world, but Wiltshire, UK, dairy farmer David Homer says no dairy farmer on the planet was immune from these issues.

Mr Homer was addressing his comments to the 270 delegates from more than 40 countries at the first World Dairy Summit on Climate Change, organized by the International Dairy Federation (IDF) in Edinburgh, Scotland, in late June.

Mr Homer said the predicted impacts of climate change on temperature and even rainfall were much less concerning in many countries, especially in Europe and much of the United States.

But he said all dairy farmers still needed to actively work with governments which were busily framing regulations to deal with these issues.

Unless farmers were prepared to take an active role in that process, Mr Homer said, they ran the risk that regulators could develop and impose conditions that made it difficult if not impossible to continue farming profitably.

But also clear as the summit progressed was that, while controlling greenhouse gases was the primary concern in some countries, in others that was overshadowed by more basic needs for food security at a time of historically low global food reserves and sharply higher food prices.

Also the rapid economic expansion in some developing economies meant that large numbers of people in those countries were actively looking to switch from traditional starch-rich diets to much higher levels of protein – often through sharply higher consumption of protein-dense dairy products.

Dairy Australia's Steve Coats explained that climate change was already a reality in this country where significant changes in weather patterns over the last ten years had resulted in widespread drought.

Added to that were the drastically lower inflows into major water storages, most notably in the Murray Darling Basin where irrigation-based dairy production was the largest user of available water.

That position was now under challenge from governments, environmentalists and even local water authorities who were actively working to re-allocate more of the available water to their own specific causes.

Mr Coats said Australia had already reached the rainfall and temperature targets that scientists expected would not be seen before the middle of this century, a situation that would accelerate the regulatory programs now under development in this country.

Across the Tasman, Waikato dairy farmer and Dairy NZ director, Ted Coats, said farmers in that country had more to fear from a government keen to demonstrate its green credentials to the wider community than from the expected, physical changes in climate.

He said new legislation aimed at the farming sector would mean New Zealand farmers would be included in a national carbon trading regime by 2018, at which stage carbon prices would operate in a market totally free from government intervention.

He said estimates at this preliminary stage suggest that could reduce dairy farm profits by up to 10 per cent through addition to the cost of milk production of NZ40-50 cents a kilogram of total milk solids.

As a result he said land prices that were the backbone of agricultural wealth in that country could be expected to decline sharply.

United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) economist Pierre Gerber said livestock enterprises cast a long shadow through their substantial contribution to climate change, air pollution, land, soil and water degradation.

And he said the largest area of livestock production, for meat production, was expected to double by 2050 and would require multi-sector and multi-objective decision-making in dealing with the environmental impact.

More than 1.3 billion people in rural households around the world are dependent on livestock, and this sector accounts for 40 per cent of agricultural gross domestic product (GDP).

The take home message from the conference, Mr Homer said was that dairy farmers, wherever they operate, needed to work together to better tackle the issues of climate change.

Also apparent was the need for quality research across all dairy systems, independent of government influence, to provide reliable information as the basis for future regulations applicable to the dairy industry.<sup>1</sup>



**Cappo: Theun Vellinga (right) tells delegates that more production from fewer cows is the option for reducing total methane emissions.**

## **BREAKOUT**

No easy answers

One way to reduce green house gas emissions from dairy cows was to lift production from individual animals and so reduce overall cow numbers, Theun Vellinga from Netherlands agency Wageningen NL, told delegates at the IDF climate change summit.

And another option to reduce methane output, Mr Vellinga said, was to feed dairy cows like pigs, using protected proteins and starches that bypass the rumen yet still provide the nutrients needed to produce milk.

While these might have some appeal in Europe they drew an immediate, negative response from delegates from countries such as Kenya where animals also have a social role in denoting wealth and status in addition to their contribution to human nutrition.

And the suggestion that cows might be fed like pigs was immediately condemned by delegates from Islamic communities who said this religion allowed them to consume products from ruminant animals but anything linking dairy cows to pigs could effectively remove dairy products from the diets of as much as one third of the world's population.

**Peter Austin attended the Edinburgh conference as a guest of DeLaval.**