

**Dairy summit 1****Opinion piece – by PETER J AUSTIN**

DAIRY farmers are a resilient lot but are going to need all of that resilience as governments around the world tackle the challenges of green house gases (GHG) and their impact on climate change.

For Australian dairy farmers the biggest issue could be the extent to which our regulators are able to rely on locally produced, high quality information rather than simply accede to the temptation for ‘bolt on’ answers developed elsewhere.

As Scots academic and government adviser Maggie Gill noted at last week’s dairy summit in Edinburgh, those preparing new regulations are under intense pressure from elected officials, and the public, to act decisively on climate change.

And that means they may not be prepared to wait for the research that might fully qualify their decisions.

One of the immediate concerns is for the flood of figures used to support claims being promoted by different interests.

Another is the way some governments seem to be locked in a bidding war to show which cares most for the environment.

The Kyoto accord and subsequent meeting of world leaders in Bali calls for a six per cent reduction in greenhouse gases from 2008 to 2012 and subsequent to that the European Union has a target of 20pc reduction by 2020.

But the Netherlands (-30pc), Sweden (-25pc) and Denmark (-21pc) are already aiming higher.

By 2050 the UK aims for a 60pc reduction and, not to be outdone, Scotland proposes an 80pc cut.

The threat for Australia is that none of these countries has a dairy system similar to our own and yet this could be the source of much of the data supporting future dairy sector regulations.

That was highlighted at the Scottish Agricultural College dairy research centre near Dumfries last week where researchers outlined their work to minimize the released of nitrous oxide gas from pasture systems.

But as became clear after questions by one Australian farmer, no measurements for pasture yields were being taken, leaving open the possibility of a recommendation that might well reduce N<sub>2</sub>O but cut pasture growth figures which in Australia translates into reduced farm profitability.

Animal welfare issues are another major consideration in Europe where most dairy cows are confined under conditions seldom if ever seen in Australia, yet could still be a model for regulations imposed on our industry.

Australian dairy farmers have provided millions of dollars to research programs over many years but the priority now must be to ensure sufficient funds are directed to work that will provide relevant answers to questions related to greenhouse gas regulations in our own market.

On the basis of the targets being considered that work needs to take priority over all other research.

Wiltshire, UK, dairy farmer and Summit chairman David Homer said he was proud to be a dairy farmer and to be associated with this event that helped create awareness of the issues faced by dairy farmers around the world.

The challenge from here, he said, was to take a positive approach to the problems, work out the best solutions and then implement the required changes.