

Certifying the advisers

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Upgrading of whole-farm analysis and farm consultancy advice is the objective of a new certification scheme, thought to be the first of its kind in the world.

The Dairy Farm Systems Certificate can be gained by rural professionals after a study course and online examination.

In the past six months 14 have done so and a further 44 are part-way through.

The certificate is offered by the New Zealand Institute of Primary Industries Management (NZIPIM) and was formulated by DairyNZ and eight consulting firms.

It is part of the Transforming the Dairy Value Chain primary growth partnership train-the-trainer approach.

The objective is that dairy farmers can have access to, and confidence in, quality advice from rural professionals and organisations with accreditation in farm management, animal welfare, farm effluent systems, and environmental sustainability.

That in turn will contribute towards the PGP target of increasing profitability from productivity increases from an average of \$50/ha/year to \$65 by 2020.

DairyNZ programme director Kate Sargeant said the certification scheme was a way to connect existing and new research and development with the advice provided by rural professionals.

As research and trial work was done and written up it would be passed on

to certificate holders as professional development.

DairyNZ would now refer farmers to certified consultants to provide services such as a whole-farm assessment (WFA), sustainable milk plans, and interpretation of DairyBase reports.

Consultants completed a WFA with a farming client as part of their certification, and would continue to offer the WFA as a commercial service.

The WFA was a whole-of-system approach to identify the biggest levers that could be pulled to meet farm business and personal goals, Kate said.

The process combined financial and physical benchmarking with a discussion with the farm team and onfarm observation.

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A comprehensive report and agreed action plan were provided to the farmer following the assessment.

She thought the scheme's interaction between farmers, consultants, researchers, industry-good organisations, plus ongoing professional development, was unique to NZ.

Kate, an Australian, said the dairy industry there was looking closely at us.

The pattern and structure could be adapted to other industries, for example the red meat collaboration already underway here.

NZIPIM chief executive Stephen Macaulay agreed, saying the time was right to extend the farm systems approach into the sheep and beef sector and he was discussing it with the Red Meat Profit Partnership.

Such professional development opportunities had become part of the fabric of NZIPIM, to enhance the skills and knowledge base of more than 1000 members, 60% of whom had something to do with dairying.

Farm consultants made up 35% of the membership, so more than 200 members



Stacey Belton, farm consultant, AgFirst.

potentially would go through the Dairy Farm Systems Certification, he thought.

One early starter was Stacey Belton, AgFirst Waikato, only four years after graduation from Lincoln University with Bachelor of Agricultural Science with Honours.

AgFirst manager James Allen had suggested the certificate would be necessary for her to advise dairy clients, become a senior consultant and take on projects for DairyNZ and Fonterra in the future.

She found in-depth requirements on cow flow and shed structure, for instance, which had not been part of her training or experience before.

"The course work and questions also included new material on pasture management, which is one of my specialist areas."

Stacey said she took about five days over the WFA, including six hours onfarm, benchmarking from DairyBase, and three days writing the analysis.

As the farm was already in a higher echelon, the exercise was daunting to her.

After the WFA had been written up, Stacey and the farmer had developed an action plan, agreed or disagreed on focus areas and assigned tasks and due dates to different people.

But she agreed with the scheme designers when they said farms should be able to make improvements after a WFA that would generate \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year thereafter.

The lower gain would be from the easier improvements and the higher figure from a system change, she thought.

The 16 on-line module quizzes required a 66% pass rate, which Stacey achieved.

"It took about two months, in all, and the main cost to me was time." □



Kate Sargeant,
DFSC programme
director, Dairy NZ.