

Farmers face crisis as dry spell continues

by Elaine Fisher | 9th January 2010

It may not be what the holidaymakers want but dairy farmers are praying for an end to the golden weather - and soon.

The driest November on record and weeks of almost continuous sunshine in December has forced many farmers to reduce milkings and use supplementary feed as pastures turn brown, said Derek Spratt, dairy farmer of Pukehina and chairman of the Bay of Plenty Rural Support Trust.

"We need a change to rain coming from the north, from the Pacific Islands. Rain from the south or even Australia isn't reaching the North Island. On our farm we have had just 34mm of rain since the beginning of November," said Mr Spratt.

Cows on his property have been milked every 16 hours instead of every eight since December 1.

"The last time we went to 16 hour milkings was two years ago and that was in February."

Mr Spratt said many other Bay of Plenty farmers were milking once a day, affecting their milk production and consequently incomes.

The long dry spell had also adversely affected turnips, grown for supplementary feed, but maize and sorghum crops in general appeared to be doing well.

The Rural Support Trust, Federated Farmers and the Ministry of Agriculture were monitoring the situation day by day and Mr Spratt said Galatea and Reporoa, both hard hit by last year's drought, were again of concern.

"We are advising anyone who is struggling to talk to their bank managers, accountants and neighbours because help is available. It's vital farmers don't bottle up their concerns at times like this."

Animal welfare was the focus for most farmers and in some cases all their income could go on stock feed, leaving little for their own families.

The situation is not so grim for the avocado and kiwifruit industries but orchardists are also hoping for rain.

John Schnackenberg, chairman of the Avocado Industry Council, said weather conditions were perfect for the current harvest.

"The fruit we are picking now is 12 to 15 months old and size is not too much affected by dry weather."

However, rain soon would be an advantage for the next season's crop. "Many orchards have irrigation and growers do what they can to conserve soil moisture by applying mulch around trees," he said.

Mike Smith, chairman of the Green Growers group, said the deep rooted nature of kiwifruit meant most vines were not suffering.

"However, orchards in areas which normally have a high water table may be struggling."

Peter Ombler, president of New Zealand Kiwifruit Growers Inc, said high sunshine hours could have a positive impact on the taste of kiwifruit but growers would still welcome rain in January.

However, it was the cold spring of 2009 and its impact on fruit numbers that was causing most concern, and it appeared crop volumes would be down on the last harvest, he said.

"Given the tough economic conditions of 2009, kiwifruit came through it very well and is one of the year's few success stories."