

A Strong industry voice

You would have to look hard to find someone with a more fervent and long-term view of the dairy industry. Profitability and sustainability are two of the watchwords for her family's own dairy enterprise. While, for the industry as a whole, it's about capturing new people and creating relationships with customers. We recently caught up with the human dynamo that's Lynne Strong.

MOST dairy farmers see the processor they supply as their end customer, but for Lynne Strong it's the consumer, the person buying milk, cheese or yoghurt at their supermarket, who needs to be wooed.

Lynne, who with husband Michael and son Nick runs Clover Hill Dairies at Jamberoo, about 10km inland from Kiama on the NSW South Coast, also feels the industry risks stagnation unless new blood is injected into it and people are made more aware of the nutritional value of dairy products. She feels so passionately about these issues that much of her time is spent inducing non-farming school students to consider careers in dairying.

She has thrown her support behind Picasso Cows, an innovation for primary school pupils, who learn about milk and the dairy industry as they paint almost life-size fibreglass cows. The other schools program Lynne advocates is Cows Create Careers, where secondary students foster and look after heifer calves while learning about possible futures in dairying.

Both programs have had Dairy Australia backing, but neither would have been as successful as they have without people like Lynne. In fact, one of Clover Hill's apprentices first came into contact with dairying when Lynne gave a Cows Create Careers presentation at her school.

But this is only one side of Lynne Strong. She is not only a dairy farmer, passionate dairy industry advocate and guest speaker at schools, women's forums and conferences (she even addressed the ACCC inquiry into grocery prices), she is also a trained pharmacist.

And Lynne says it was working as a

chemist that taught her the importance of nurturing a connection with customers.

"I suppose the best thing that happened to me when I decided to come back on farm and start those customer-building relationships, was how important the person who buys your product is and how important it is to build relationships with those people," she told the *Journal*.

"So I've come back to the dairy industry. I was really hands-on in the first couple of years, but we've put a team of people

special cows to us. We have complete confidence in her.

"This is a girl who's also doing 3-unit maths, she's a bright girl ... I'm sure she's going to finish up in a management position for us."

Lynne says she is really excited by the success of programs like Cows Create Careers.

"We've got people coming into the industry who don't have a background in it. They see the industry as exciting. They see

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around us, who could certainly do what I did on the farm, and used my skills and gone out to develop all those marketing programs and recognise we need young and exciting kids.

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One of those non-farm kids was Emma Visser, who heard Lynne speak at Illawarra Christian School and was inspired to seek work experience at Clover Hill. She has since become a trainee in agriculture, including it as part of her HSC.

"We've had Emma here now for a while," Lynne says. "She can milk by herself. She can run the dairy on both farms by herself, so there's a girl who can put through 230 cows on one dairy and then turn around and come and do the night milking on another farm and put through 190 very

it as sexy and they come in with different skills that we haven't been able to attract in the past.

"I find that these kids come onto the farm with no preconceived ideas; they're just there to learn. They'll tap into anything that allows them to expand their knowledge."

Unlike these newcomers to the industry, Lynne is a sixth-generation dairy farmer. Her family moved into the Kiama area in 1831. Her father almost broke the chain when he sold the family dairy farm at Dapto in 1958 and moved to Cowra.

"It just so happened I met Michael [a fifth-generation dairy farmer] before I went to uni and that's how I got back into dairying."

Clover Hill is one of the highest producing herds in Australia, with annual volumes of around 12,500 litres/cow on a pasture-based system. The home farm has

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Winning Clover Hill team: Apprentice Emma Visser and the Strong family – Lynne, Nick and Michael with the Landcare trophy. Photo courtesy Michael Petey, The Land

an effective size of just 50 hectares because another 50ha is remnant rainforest and has been fenced off. Another approximately 350ha is leased in various nearby blocks that almost make up a continuous parcel of land.

And with land prices hovering around \$70,000 a hectare, leasing land (often from cashed-up city dwellers who have since become disillusioned with their rural idyll) makes more sense than buying.

"It allows you to use that money for your milk business rather than building up your real estate capital. And that allows you to grow."

Lynne says that having a highly productive herd in an environmentally sensitive location allows them to maximise their use of land, while also being able to protect delicate land systems.

"Our business is highly intensive," she says. "We run four to five cows to the hectare and that allows us, using high quality Holstein genetics, to get a lot of milk from the cows.

"And the more milk you get and the more cows you run per hectare and the more efficiently you do that, means more land you have to put over to protect.

"We certainly believe that milking Holsteins allows us to do that."

Environmental protection has certainly been a priority. And a successful one. Clover Hill was named Landcare Primary Producer of the Year in September against tough competition.

For the past four years the farm has seen riparian protection, creek crossings installed, reductions in water and energy use, effluent recycling and the planting of 4000 trees – all with the help of \$250,000 in funding from various government bodies that was matched dollar for dollar.

Lynne says Clover Hill's water efficiency is second to none, with 125,000 litres of milk per megalitre of captured water, compared with an industry average of 3250L/ megalitre.

All these environmental efforts are to ensure their business remains profitable and sustainable. And high milk production per cow is essential to maintain this.

"The people who produce a lot of milk out of cows are often made to feel guilty," Lynne says. "And when you're starting to talk about climate change... For example, milking three times a day; so producing

more milk from less cows has the potential to drop methane by 30 per cent.

"If you can calve a cow down when she's two years old, rather than three years old, you're ensuring that you're reducing her non-productive years as a greenhouse gas emitter.

"I think as Holstein breeders we should be very proud of the fact that we do have a strong focus on breeding feed-conversion-efficient cows. And this is what we're focusing on in Australia.

"We've only got 7 per cent of land in Australia that's arable, so the only way to go is highly intensive. That's what high-producing Holsteins do, so we need to be proud of what we're doing."

As you may have already gathered, Clover Hill Dairies milks up to 450 cows three times daily in two dairies. The home block has a 14-a-side double-up, while the other is a 12-a-side swingover, fully computerised and using NLIS tags to match feed with milk volume.

"On both the farms our milking capacity is limited by the size of the dairy and that's effectively capped the number of cows we milk," says Lynne.

"The Holsteins are obviously the best option under that scenario. They have the capacity to produce the highest amount of milk volume and, obviously, have the broadest genetic diversity."

But what, aside from a love of the breed, inspires her fervour for dairying?

"Dairy farmers produce one of nature's perfect nutrient cocktails," she replies. "In a future where food security is threatened, we can offer consumers a convenient and accessible nutritional package as part of the staple daily diet at an affordable price. And I believe this promises a bright future for our industry.

"We [the dairy industry] are very advanced in our dedication to address the risks of climate change. We have great leadership in NRM [National Resource Management] at Dairy Australia. The dairy industry is yards ahead in the way we are addressing things. Obviously, we've got a heavy environmental footprint ... but we're addressing that with research and science. I think the dairy industry offers a great deal to consumers."

We couldn't have put it better, Lynne. ■