Incorporating data into grazing management decisions: supporting farmer learning

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Abstract. Pasture consumption is an important contributor to farm business profitability in pasture based dairy systems around the world, including Tasmania. Research, development and extension prioritizes further increasing pasture consumption in the Tasmanian dairy industry, through progressing technical innovations and providing services to support increased farmer adoption of proven practices. Increasing farmer adoption of best practice grazing management recommendations relies on the continued development of extension delivery to meet farmer information and skill development needs. A social research study identified some of these needs by exploring pasture management approaches and associated learning processes of farmers whose practices were more versus less aligned to recommended practices. The aim was to improve understanding of the grazing management learning process and implications for extension in the context of data made available through new technology. Qualitative interview data revealed that pasture managers whose practices are more closely aligned to recommended practices have used pasture measurement tools and carried out associated calculations intensively for an extended period (≥ 1 year), before adapting best practices to suit their farm management approach. Less aligned pasture managers were aware of the importance of grazing management, but were less aware they lacked knowledge and skills required to implement recommended practices. The data suggest there is ‘unconscious incompetence’ at play, and that these farmers had not engaged in a supported learning process. These findings suggest that introducing innovative ways to acquire pasture growth data will not result in practice change unless dairy farmers have progressed through the grazing management learning process and come to understand how to use data effectively.