



The Macalister Research Farm, known as the Macalister Demonstration Farm since 2008, is a farmer-owned co-operative that was established on April 13<sup>th</sup> 1960. The brief was to acquire a commercial dairy farm on which systems of farming that had the potential for improving the productivity, profitability and sustainability of farms in the Macalister Irrigation District (MID) could be tested and demonstrated. The first Board of Directors was made up of Eric Rowley (Chairman), Robert Harvey, Robert Cowie, F. Jim Arnup, David Owen (Nestles), John Osborn, and George Noble. All but one of these directors served until well into the 1970s. In its fifty years the Board has had forty five different members and only twelve chairmen.

The co-op began with four hundred shareholders, each contributing around 12 pound and 10 shillings (\$25) for the purchase of 50 shares – thanks to the particular efforts and enthusiasm of inaugural chairman the Late Eric Rowley and Department of Agriculture Irrigation Officer the Late Ian Norman. (Since then, the co-op has issued similar share packages to a further 200 shareholders).

### ***The MDF has always worked directly with farmers***



After considering properties on offer at Riversdale, Winnindo and Nambrok (that was nearly purchased) the search for a suitable property ended in 1962 when the Board settled on 'Mourne Park' on Boggy Creek Rd, Riverslea. With an equity of about 10 percent, MRF purchased its initial farm (48 ha) for £22,200 from A.W. Hardie and began both its farming and demonstration operations. The farm was run down and Mr Hardie was happy to sell it as he fully expected to buy it back within a couple of years. The farm was officially opened on February 28<sup>th</sup> 1962 by the Hon. G.L Chandler, Minister for Agriculture who announced a grant of £1,000 to assist with the establishment costs.

### ***The MDF has undergone extensive development***



The first herd of 72 cows was purchased for £41/head with an average production of 285 lb (129kg) of butterfat. By spring of 1963 production peaked at 2.4 gallons (11 litres) /cow/day. Times were changing in the dairy industry reflected by the topic of the guest speaker at the 1966 AGM – “Milking performance – Man and machines”.

From 1962 until the early '90s, the Department of Agriculture ran most of the research and demonstration projects at MRF. And during this period, MRF directed

the profits from its commercial farm into agricultural scholarships and research grants. In 1973 the Board instigated a scholarship to pay the fees for a young farmer to attend Glenormiston Agricultural College. Three awards were made to Norman Ripper (Buchan), John Hatley and Judith Snell in 1974, 1976 and 1978 respectively.

A new sharefarmer's house was built in 1973 by local builders, Bennett and Missen and by January 1977 the farm was milking 150 cows at an average of 13.5 litres/cow/day at 4.8% butterfat. Mating resulted in 61% of cows and 72% of heifers pregnant after the first service.

August 1978 saw the Board approve the purchase of the property known as 'Moultons' on the southern side of Boggy Creek Rd– 48ha with 28ha set for irrigation. By November 1985 the farm was milking 185 cows that peaked at 19 litres/cow /day at 4.2% fat.

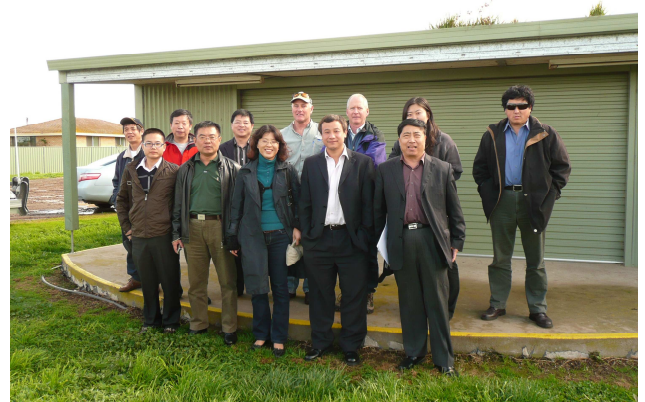
After considerable development Moultons was swapped with a cash payment in 1989 for the land adjoining the eastern boundary of the original farm. This was a 44ha block known as 'Fairchilds' that allowed an increase in herd size to 300 cows, and improved farm viability.

***Driving force - Founding Chairman Eric Rowley with Ian Norman (Dept. of Agriculture) at the meeting room opening***



In 1994 the Board received a grant to enable them to establish a Board Room with kitchen at the farm. This was officially opened by the inaugural Chairman, Eric Rowley, in September. A further grant enabled the construction of the current meeting room and this was opened in September 1996 by the Hon. Philip Davis, MLC.

***The MDF hosts international visitors***



In the early '90s, when the Department of Agriculture's priorities changed and it (the Department) was unable to conduct projects at MRF, the Co-op appointed its own project manager – initially on a part-time and later a full-time basis – to maintain its important research and demonstration role. At the same time it successfully sought external funding (particularly from the Dairy Research and Development Corporation) to help finance its research and demonstration programme

This led to two major split-herd projects being conducted at the farm – a stocking rate demonstration that compared the costs and benefits of two levels of stocking on irrigated pasture, over three successive seasons – and a supplementary feeding demonstration that compared the costs and benefits of two levels of supplementary feeding, again over three seasons. Both demonstrations provided Victorian farmers with valuable information for use in deciding on stocking

rates and supplementary feeding programmes for their own farms.

At the same time MRF made its entire farm available to the Department of Primary Industries for a full-scale study of the movement of water and nutrients on to and off the farm. This project has thrown valuable light on the causes and extent of nutrient loss from farms, and procedures that can be put in place to retain water and nutrients on the farm, and minimise environmental impact.

In 2002, the Board took the opportunity to further improve the farm's long-term viability by purchasing another adjoining farm of 47 ha known as 'Gradys' to allow herd size to eventually increase to 500 cows. At the same time it made substantial changes to its dairy infrastructure by extending to a 30 unit swing-over herringbone and constructing a new large round yard to facilitate the proposed increase in herd size.

### ***The MDF keeps the dairy farming community informed***



Because these most recent capital developments and associated borrowings coincided with difficult times for both the industry (through drought and price-downturn) and the farm itself (through management difficulties), MRF had to delay the commencement of any new, major research and demonstration projects until it had reasonable prospects for restoring its level of profitability and returning to a position where it

could again attract industry support. Nevertheless, during this period of reduced activity, MRF still continued to monitor and regularly report on all management decisions made on the farm and their outcomes, for the benefit of Victorian dairy farmers. 'Gradys' was sold in 2007 and some of the proceeds allocated to improvement of the home farm through laser grading.

### ***The MDF engages with the community at all levels***



The Board successfully negotiated with Dairy Australia for the employment of a part-time project manager, whose task will be to oversee the management of the commercial farm and to conduct, monitor and publicise a range of meaningful demonstration projects on the Farm, for the benefit of dairy farmers in Gippsland and other industry stakeholders. Frank Tyndall took up this position in 2006 and funding has been further extended until 2012.

Over 50 years, the MDF has conducted numerous research and demonstration projects dealing with most issues relating to the management and operation of dairy farms in Victoria, but particularly to those dairy farms in the Macalister Irrigation District. Projects range from the demonstration of treated pine posts with high tensile wire, and early chemical weed control in the 1960s to the demonstration of high tech irrigation systems fifty years later.

### *The MDF is involved in many different projects*



As part of its philosophy the MDF actively seeks to partner with any reputable organization or agency in the development and delivery of new projects and resources to advance the skills of MID dairy farmers.

A sample of some of the projects conducted since 2000 are:

- (i) Profitable Dairy Farming Systems Demonstration (High vs Moderate input feeding systems);
- (ii) Demonstration of Whole-Farm Irrigation and Nutrient Management and Nutrient Reduction Plan (main site for a national project on nutrient and water movement on and off the farm)
- (iii) Demonstration of Fixed Sprinkler Irrigation
- (iv) Community Water Grants project to reduce drainage losses from the farm
- (v) Perennial Ryegrass evaluation trial
- (vi) Demonstration of Occupational Health and Safety on the farm
- (vii) Demonstration of Bovine Johne's Disease eradication programme
- (viii) Production of all farm financial statements for use in benchmarking throughout Australia
- (ix) Demonstration of best practice management of dairy effluent ponds and their nutrients, and impact on profitability
- (x) A demonstration of the pathway for increasing profitability and sustainability.

- (xi) Sub-surface drip irrigation for dairy pastures project.
- (xii) Assessment of carbon emissions generated by the farm and an exploration of carbon mitigation and carbon offset options.

The MDF seeks input annually from shareholders and stakeholders about the sorts of programmes and projects to be developed. This is overlaid over the strategic direction set by the Board to determine project priorities.

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The MDF is recognized by funders and dairy industry groups as a credible and reliable organization that has a strong history of delivering projects that are relevant to local farmers and meeting the expectations of project partners and stakeholders.

In 2010 the Macalister Demonstration Farm was awarded the inaugural fonterra Dairy leadership Award at the Regional Achievement and Community Awards for industry leadership over fifty years.

### **Chairman, Trevor Henry, accepts the Dairy Leadership Award**

