



Cow whisperer teaches farmers 'cowmunication'

By **MARK HOTTON**
 Agri-business reporter

READING cow body language and responding appropriately to the signals are vital skills needed to ensure animal health and welfare remained high, according to a leading international communicator.

Dutch vet Dr Joep Driessen has been brought to New Zealand by VetSouth and DairyNZ, and while in Southland has run workshops on cow signals and their meaning, and seminars on stockmanship for housing systems.

He developed his cow signals training programme, which has an emphasis on housed systems in 2000, and has taken the concept to more than 40 countries. The main emphasis was to train farmers to recognise what the body language of each cow was saying.

Cows needed sufficient amounts of feed, water, light, air, space and rest, and, if they received enough of those, they no longer had a reason to get sick, he said. Not having

those six elements, which are easily available in a pasture-based system, equally balanced in a housed system could destroy cow health and welfare, as well as a farmer's income. But one of the biggest disease threats to a farm was owneritis, where farmers failed to

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see the impact of their management mistakes, Dr Driessen said.

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If farmers spotted waiting cows, curved backs and empty rumens, then early steps could be take to resolve the problems.

Good housing design and simple management systems were also essential to ensuring housed cows remained healthy.

The concept was quite simple once clearly explained, he said.

VetSouth director Mark Bryan said Dr Driessen was highly regarded for his work, with much of the focus on the housing of cattle.

The idea that farmers should focus their approach around the cow sounded obvious but it could be easy to lose sight of that, he said.

Focusing on the cow was critical, he said. "Often people don't even think how a cow thinks or feels so if people can understand how a cow works that's fantastic, it makes a lot of difference."

The increasing popularity of indoor wintering sheds in Southland made his experience even more valuable. Farmers needed to consider how the cow saw and found the cubicle barns and Dr Driessen was able to bring that level of perspective, Mr Bryan said.

The day workshops aimed at general animal husbandry were designed to help upskill staff because it was recognised there were significant skill gaps in the industry. Some of that had been caused by the rapid growth in the sector in Southland, he said.

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Dr Driessen's website is www.cowsignals.com



Spreading the word: VetSouth director Mark Bryan with cow whisperer Dr Joep Driessen, from the Netherlands, who has been in Southland telling farmers how to work out what cows are thinking.