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High-flyers target dairy mega-merger

By MICHELLE SUTTON

A campaign attacking New Zealand's \$10 billion dairy mega-merger will be launched tomorrow.

On June 18 the nation's 14,500 dairy farmers will vote on whether to merge 95 percent of New Zealand's dairy industry into the Global Dairy Company.

However, a group of high-profile dairy officials and businessmen plan to offer an alternative to Global and circulate on the internet information against the merger.

Led by Dairy Farmers of New Zealand former chairman Mark Masters, of Taranaki, the group is called Farmers for a Better Dairy Deal.

Mr Masters said yesterday the group was concerned industry leaders were giving dairy farmers information only in favour of Global. "We sincerely believe that Global is not the right approach," Mr Masters said. "In fact, it may be the worst of all worlds."

The merger's key players, New Zealand Dairy Group and Kiwi Co-operative Dairies, needed support from 75 percent of dairy farmers to form Global, which would be New Zealand's largest company.

Mr Masters said an alternative solution to the merger would be available tomorrow on the group's webpage, www.dairynz.org The group also hoped to send information to dairy farmers by other means.

Global had been asked on Friday for a mail list of the country's dairy farmers but there had been no response, Mr Masters said. He rejected speculation that the group had backing from big business or was linked with the Business Roundtable.

Farmers behind the campaign included former Dairy Group director Hillary Webber, producer board project team leader Tony Baldwin, Act MP Stephen Franks, former Federated Farmers president Malcolm Bailey, economist Gareth Morgan and Agriculture NZ adviser and Victoria University's Professor Ian McIntosh.

Dairy farmers from Southland, Taranaki and Waikato were supporting the campaign and the dissemination of information.

A spokesman for Global said it would not comment on the fringe group until tomorrow. He was unaware of any request for a mail list of dairy farmers.

At the weekend most Southland dairy farmers received a box of information about the final merger proposal. A mega-merger attempt in 1999 failed.