

Proper planning and records can boost production

Feeding, mastitis therapy and how to produce more than 10,000 litres a cow a year were just some of the topics discussed at the Large Herd Seminar in Gloucestershire, *Simon Wragg* reports

Putting down on paper a structured plan for early lactation therapy (ELT) is helping vets, producers and farm staff cut down mastitis in participating herds.

Vet Tom Clarke of Synergy Farm Health told delegates a structured plan can reduce mastitis significantly, helping cut the £200m estimated

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TOM CLARKE

losses incurred by the UK dairy sector annually.

“Sixty percent of infection picked up in the first 30 days of lactation comes from the dry period. A vast proportion can be attributed to cow environment and, in particular, stems from teats not being sealed properly,” he said.

Mr Clarke advocates identifying the type of mastitis present.

“Not only will this indicate where the problem originated, but also which tube should be used when sealing the teat,” he added.

“We need to pay more attention to sealing teats properly – there’s no need to push the tube right up inside the teat which, in my opinion, only increases the risk of making a problem worse. Instead, ensure the end of the nozzle just passes the 2-3mm closing of the teat end itself.”



Strong early heifer growth has been shown to have a direct effect on improved milk yield in the first lactation by up to 1,000 litres/animal.

Cow health records should show which herd members are at greatest risk, and more attention should be given to this group of animals, he added.

Early lactation still accounted for 40% of mastitis. And regular milking routine, including good parlour hygiene and flushing of clusters, was essential.

“Put the fresh calved group through before the main herd members and leave the high cell count cows till last.

“Make sure those staff doing the milking know the routine and stick to it, including relief cover.

“If you employ foreign labour, have the mastitis control plan written down in their language. There’s no excuse for not following it in my mind.”

Dorset producer James Yeatman has implemented ELT with Mr

Clarke’s help on his 300-cow spring block calving herd with success. “SCCs are between 30,000-80,000 cells/ml consistently,” said Mr Yeatman.

“My herdsman Gary Jane and his partner, Paula, have put together a good milking routine and stick to it.

“We foremilk all cows and have had to persist to get the relief cover to also do it. Mastitis is identified early and we achieve a cure rate of 65-70%.”

Early lactation cow comfort is paramount to reduce mastitis risk. Improvement to cubicle lunging room and use of semi-deep sand beds helps keep bacterial load down, explained Mr Yeatman. “Cows are block-calved in spring and rotation of calving paddocks helps cut mastitis risk further.” fwlivestock@rbi.co.uk



Structured feeding keeps costs under control

Feed is the single largest cost in rearing replacement heifers, but rather than looking to cut costs, adopting a structured feeding programme will deliver good growth rates, healthy heifers and improved milk production in the first lactation.

Alex Bach of the Spanish Department of Ruminant Production, told delegates feed targets for rearing heifers had to be set. "For each stage of growth the heifer needs a different diet. If a heifer under performs in early life it can have a life-long effect on her production," he said.

There was a simple rule to be followed, he said. "As a heifer grows, decreasing energy and protein in the diet in line with her needs

gives you maximum economic advantage."

Heifer calves should be reared on a quality replacer or whole milk. If using replacer it should provide 20% fat, 27% protein and be diluted at 12.5-15% using 45-55C water to ensure components are diluted thoroughly.

"Ensure calves have access to fresh, clean water. At two weeks a heifer calf can drink a litre of water on top of the milk replacer. This increases with age," said Dr Bach.

Offering a quality 18% protein (minimum 2.9 Mcal ME/kg) weaning pellet early would stimulate rumen development and appetite. "Make sure it is made of palatable ingredients – wheat, barley, sorghum,

maize, but avoid oats for energy."

Chopped forage (2.5cm long) offered alongside pelleted feed before weaning increased intakes by up to 20%, with oat straw improving intakes more than alfalfa. This increased the likelihood of heifer calves achieving daily liveweight gains of at least 1kg at weaning – something which was critical, as strong early growth has been shown to have a direct effect on improved milk yield in first lactation by up to 1,000 litres/heifer.

■ **Date for the diary:** next year's Large Herd Seminar will take place on 25 and 26 June 2013 at Tortworth Court Four Pillars Hotel, Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire.

ANTHEA KITCHING

FARMER PANEL GIVES TIPS ON PRODUCING MORE THAN 10,000 LITRES A COW A YEAR

Golden answers for dairy operators

■ A panel of NMR Gold Cup finalists and winners, who rank among the leading dairy operators in the country, regularly producing more than 10,000 litres/cow, gave their tips for top production in an open, quick-fire round of questions from delegates:

THE PANEL:

- Neil Baker (NB) of Kingston Farms, Somerset – runs 1,100 cows and produces 300t of vintage cheddar, sold into the retail sector
- Tom King (TK), current NMR Gold Cup holder – runs Vortex Holsteins in Dorset, where the aim is 60t/cow lifetime yield
- Bill Higgins' (BH) Shropshire dairy unit supplies an aligned liquid milk contract and operates a robust replacement programme

■ Henry Lewis (HL) of Tack Farms, Hereford, operates a flying herd and is not on an aligned milk contract

HOW DO YOU RETAIN STAFF?

- NB: We don't pay on performance – keep it simple
- TK: Pay well and you attract the right staff
- BH: We have good cows and that attracts staff
- HL: Team approach and we share our successes

WHAT'S IMPORTANT, CALVING INDEX OR CONCEPTION RATE?

- NB: Pregnancy rate is number one – we aim for 100 a month
- TK: Calving interval is historic; conception rate is current
- BH: It's milk sold that matters – keep your bulk tank full

■ HL: Cow welfare is important; calving index comes along with that

WHAT WOULD CHANGE IF CONTRACTS MOVED FROM RETAIL TO NON-ALIGNED?

- NB: Nothing. We've cut costs back hard already
- TK: Loss of retail bonus would slow expansion
- BH: I don't think I can honestly answer that
- HL: We're not on an aligned contract, but wish we had price

WHAT IS YOUR AIM FOR DRY COW MANAGEMENT?

- NB: 56 days dry, sand stalls to calve and daily temp checks after calving
- TK: Use two diets, clean bedding

and straight into milking herd

- BH: Maximise barrier and trough space to reduce stress
- HL: Use a high-straw diet and dedicated fresh yard once milk hits the tank

MOBILITY SCORING – WHAT'S IMPORTANT?

- NB: If you record a poor score, pick up the foot the next day. No calf is born lame, is it?
- TK: Cow comfort is important. Don't let staff chase cows. Act when a cow is lame
- BH: Our trimmer visits fortnightly. Remember – the public only remembers the six lame cows at the back of the herd
- HL: Trim before drying off. Foot-bath regularly. No dogs or sticks