Members of the Dairy Early Warning Club are making big improvements to their herds' health and fertility, and Becci Berry's story reveals why she is top of the league. **Ann Hardy** reports.

Cow data vital key to making herd progress

There has been no silver bullet behind the remarkable improvements made to health and fertility at Brimstone Farm, Coleshill, Wiltshire. But if dairy farmer Becci Berry had to highlight the single most important contributor, she would say it was recording and analysing data, and being prepared to act quickly on the messages it brings.

Becoming a member of the Dairy Early Warning (DEW) Club represented the turning point for the 170-head herd Becci runs with her family on their 365-hectare mixed dairy and arable holding, largely comprising tenanted land on the National Trust's Buscot and Coleshill Estate.

Performance

The Club – which was founded by Drove Farm Vets, Swindon, and uses data from NMR milk-recorded herds which is captured in Interherd Plus – provides its members with easy-to-understand visual images of their herds' performance, benchmarks performance and progress against all club members and the national herd, and highlights areas to target for immediate and long-term improvement.

"We receive the report within a few days of milk recording," says Becci, who discusses its details with the team at Brimstone Farm including herdsman Mark Boylan, as well as vet Alex McPherson and nutrition and breeding advisers.

"Involving the whole team is crucial," she says. "It's very important for everyone's involvement and their motivation."

Becci has experience of low morale and the problems it can bring, having taken over the running of the dairy after her husband, Richard, died from bowel cancer in 2011.

"Morale was very low after 18 months of Richard's illness and I had to decide whether to carry on," she says.

However, as the third generation of Berrys on the farm and with two young daughters, then aged five and eight, she knew – despite her lack of a dairying background – she wanted to keep things going for the sake of the family.

"My father-in-law Michael is involved and my mother-in-law Mary still does some of the admin," says Becci. "We have a great working relationship – they are full of support and encouragement for me."

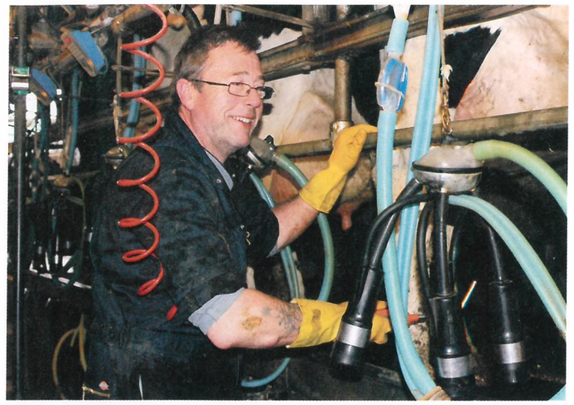
Describing how she began to pick up the pieces, she says: "I was so fortunate Richard had talked about his plans and had begun to put in place some changes."

This included plans to install Afi Lite milk meters, changing the position of in-parlour feeders and moving parlour rump rails.

"I was then able to take things further with the installation of pedometers and Crystal software to complement the Fullwood parlour.

"This then allowed us to measure conductivity, activity and rest rates as well as yields," she says, adding that changes to milk conductivity have been a precursor to a range of problems in the herd, from mastitis to ketosis, as well as being another useful tool to check when cows are on heat.

Becci Berry with one of the 70-litre Montbeliarde crosses in the herd.



Herdsman Mark Boylan – all the team at Brimstone is kept up to date.

Key indicators

Joining the club in 2012, its inaugural year, she says: "DEW then helped identify our key performance indicators and enabled targets to be set which would move the herd forward.

"That has been crucial," she says. "There was previously a herd health plan in place but I didn't have any idea about it."

Tackling the problems head-on, she says the team worked hard to record as much data as they could to provide the raw material with which to move forward.

"At our lowest point in 2012 we found we had 30% of cows with chronic mastitis and a calving interval of over 450 days," she says.

Today, as she peruses the latest DEW report, she not only sees a picture of a high health, reproductively efficient,

Pedometers are now used to help with heat detection.

Straw and hydrated lime are added to cubicles three times a week.

8500-litre, mixed-breed herd, but she is also completely conversant with each parameter in the report.

Becci highlights the feed monitor graph as a key indicator for change. "This graph shows the yields of all cows on that recording day and the point of the 3.2% protein intercept," she says. "In other words, it shows the maximum yield that cows achieved on that day without dropping below 3.2% protein.

"This gives me an immediate idea of the energy status of the herd and, specifically, the point below which they are likely to be in negative energy balance.

"I'd act on a drop in this line on the graph immediately. If it drops, you know the herd is under stress and you can always see that reflected in poorer fertility six weeks down the line."

Forage

Often reacting by analysing forage immediately and adding more blend to the ration, she says the converse is true if the protein intercept is high.

"If it is high, it has less impact on the herd, but it means I am wasting money." She says she will work with her nutritionist to achieve a more cost-effective ration.

Milk from forage of up to 4000 litres – although currently running a little lower – is one measure of their success.

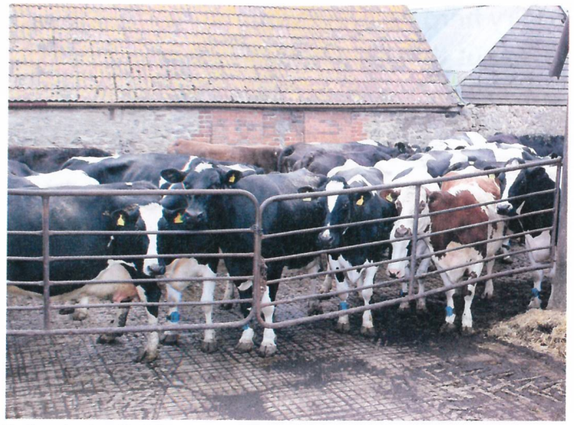
"Then there's the somatic cell count summary graph which has also really helped," she says. "Once we knew we had so many chronic cows, we worked with Drove by taking samples, analysing bacteria and treating accordingly, and then tightened up protocols in our management."

This ranged from adding chopped, barn-stored straw and hydrated lime to cubicle beds three times a week to raking cubicles by hand twice a day.

Meanwhile in the parlour, cluster flushing was installed and the milking routine tightened and includes the single use of disinfected flannels which are washed twice-a-day.

Today, the herd's SCC runs between 100,000 and 150,000 cells/ml, the Bactoscan is 10 and the chronic cows have declined to around 5%.

Herd fertility has also seen a dramatic improvement – again from a low base. "In 2011, our conception rate fell to as low as 25%," she says. "And percentage served of all eligible [submission rate] was down at 40%."



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Today, the report shows 86% of cows are served within 80 days of calving, which is the highest of all 30 DEW Club members, submission rate has reached as much as 82% and routinely ticks along at around 66%, and conception rate is heading towards 40%.

These figures reflect much-improved heat detection and benefits of continued insemination training, and importantly, they are also enhanced by the better nutritional status of the herd.

Calving interval

"The big thing is calving interval, which has now dropped to 382 days," says Becci, too modest to mention this is the best of all the DEW Club herds. "For the morale, and to the credit of everyone in the team, that's been our biggest success."

Today, she says using DEW has been as much a motivational as a management tool and she is delighted with the speed results have been achieved.

"There has been no one action that has made a significant difference, but just lots of little cogs to help with the bigger picture.

"To progress in any herd you have to set clear targets and that is what DEW has done."

She says the reports have also turned excuses into challenges, setting step-by-step goals which can realistically be achieved.

"Dairying is very difficult as there is always an excuse to explain why performance is not as you would like," she says. "This has taken the excuses away."

■ *DEW Club membership is available through Drove Farm Vets, Swindon, contact 01793 501 499.*