

Sponsored survey

With larger herds and fewer staff, cow fertility still remains one of the biggest challenges on most farms, as the MSD Animal Health national fertility survey reveals.

National survey reveals major lack of workable fertility goals

Managing and optimising dairy cow fertility remains one of the most significant challenges for today's dairy farmer. Poor fertility is still the number one reason for culling and fertility performance, in general, showing little sign of improvement.

Widely acknowledged facts such as these have been confirmed in the findings from the third annual fertility survey, organised by MSD Animal Health, manufacturers of Metricure.

Over three years, more than 1,500 completed survey forms have been analysed and reviewed by vet Mark Burnell of Dorset-based Synergy Farm Health.

"The number of farms which have taken the time to complete the questionnaire means we can anticipate the findings are a good representation of what is going on throughout the country in terms of dairy cow fertility performance," he says.

Some of the statistics of note from the survey are that age at first calving is still a little on the high side. "For most units a target of calving most heifers by 24 months is optimal, but around a quarter of respondents still aim for

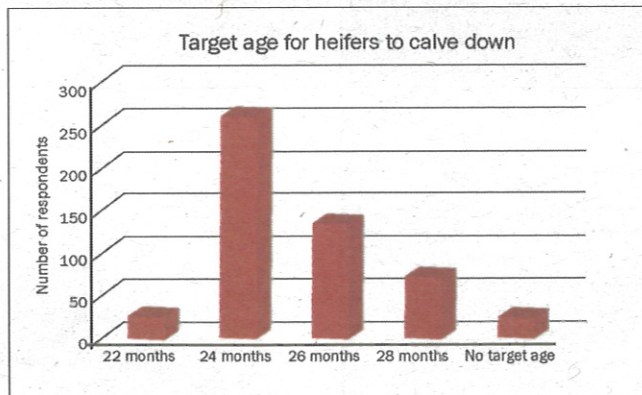
26 months. This has significant ramifications for herd production and profitability."

Although, in general terms, dairy cow fertility across the country is showing no clear sign of improvement, the survey reveals 25 per cent of respondents achieve a 365-390 day calving index (CI), up from 18 per cent last year.

"This is a positive step and, coupled with the fact 59 per cent of farmers said they wanted to improve fertility, shows a clear understanding of the need to improve and that changes are being made - and they seem to be working," says Mr Burnell.

Perhaps supporting this is the fact that management changes such as automated heat detection systems and aides have shown increased use on farm from 7-19 per cent of units, at the expense of more traditional 'stick on' systems. "It also seems outsourcing the job of heat detection is gaining in popularity," he says.

"Interestingly, when asked what single thing they could do to improve herd fertility performance, the most popular responses were to cull infertile cows and to work better with the vet. Perhaps this goes to show vet input to maximise submission



rates and improve holding to service rates, plus automated heat detection, could be a good option."

In contrast to these 'good news' conclusions, perhaps the most startling statistic from the survey is that a staggering 18 per cent of farms do not set fertility targets.

"This means almost one fifth of herds don't have a specific CI, age at first calving, conception rate, pregnancy rate or any other number of measurement set out as an objective," says Mr Burnell.

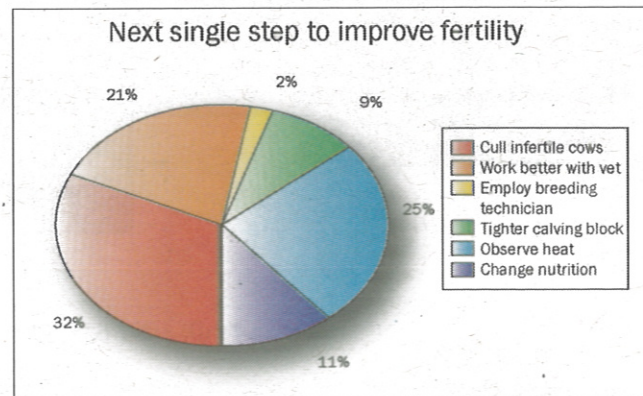
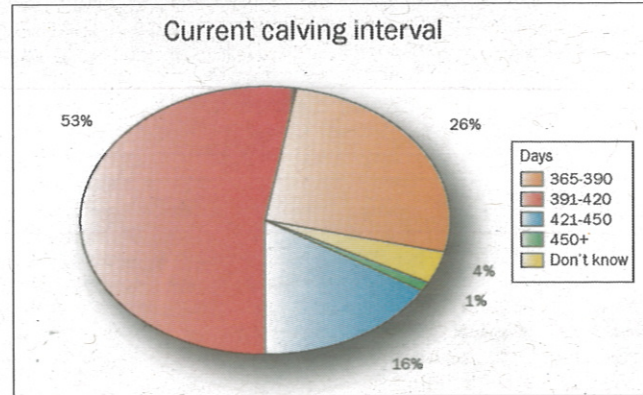
"Without targets, measuring performance is virtually impossible and in these times of pressures on all business from higher variable costs and uncertain milk prices, failing to

improve performance could have significant consequences."

An important aspect of dairy cow fertility is animal health - she has to be ready to begin cycling, demonstrate heat, hold to service and develop a viable calf.

The survey sought to understand when producers believe cows should be presented to the vet post-calving, and also the level of understanding of the difference between metritis and endometritis.

"Almost half of the respondents were either wrong or were not sure about when endometritis occurs and around 40 per cent were presenting cows too early to the vet (below 20 days). This is bad news



as treatment differs whether you are dealing with metritis or endometritis and, of course, antibiotics must be used

responsibly. The results from this area of the survey really did highlight how important it is to work with your vet," says Mr Burnell.