

Vet proves vital for herd expansion

Alastair Hayton

Synergy Farm Health

Specialist vet Alastair Hayton played a vital role in helping one top dairy farmer recover from the debilitating floods across the Somerset Levels.

The farm lost nearly one-third of its grassland under deep water, so a good vet was essential in a revival plan that aimed to nearly double the number of milking cows.

Alastair helped raise fertility levels and pushed down mastitis cell counts as the herd size rose sharply to 800 milkers on 320ha of grassland.

The farm is now well on a recovery path with average cow yields up to 12,000 litre/year, and Alastair's help is seen as vital in the five-year plan to push towards 15,000 litres.

Alastair has been behind a rash of innovations such as the move to more hygienic sand in cubicles, pushing up the average days of cows in milk and trimming the calving index.

"My aim is to be highly proactive and try to get where the farmer wants to go," he says.

Alastair is at the cutting edge of dairy health, looking to introduce a new TB test, working as a consultant with supermarket chains and with a string of papers and even a book to his name.

Two of his 13 clients have been named *Farmers Weekly* Dairy Farmer of the Year and he advised the most recent winner, Anthony Gothard, on expansion.

When the floods came in the winter of 2012-13, Anthony had the dilemma of getting out of milk, downsizing or expansion.

On the premise that milking cows generates cash, and with a 50-point rotary parlour that was only 10 years old, he decided the time was not right to abandon milk.

The decision to expand was made – but only with the help of Alastair, who Anthony describes as one of the top vets in the country, on his side.

"We needed to expand quickly, and we needed Alastair as it was



Alastair Hayton is part of a specialist vet team advising close to 250 dairy client across Dorset, Devon and Somerset.

key to have a good person on the health side of the team," says Anthony.

During nine years of working with Alastair, the calving index moved into the desired range of 380-385 days for maximum yields, and three of his cows are producing more than 20,000 litres/year.

The five-year plan aims for 800 cows, 600 youngstock and an average cow yield of 15,000 litres/year.

"We had the security of knowing we had an expert on board when we were expanding, and the wealth of his knowledge is unbelievable," he says.

Alastair makes a weekly visit to the farm and the pair usually speak twice a week about all aspects of herd health.

He was instrumental in merging two vet practices to create a 27-strong farm vet team, which is now the second biggest in the country after the Westpoint Veterinary Group.

The practice boasts 220 dairy clients from Exeter to Swanage and as far north as Bridgewater, and Alastair personally looks after 13 dairy clients, including four organic milk producers.

His focus is on all aspects of dairy cow health including nutrition, lameness, fertility, mastitis and youngstock rearing.

Alastair is also a leading light in the development of a new bovine tuberculosis test for the UK, which is used for camelids such as goats and deer and which has

been given tacit approval for validation work on bovines.

The Enferplex serological test will give a fuller picture of the disease and help farmers get out of TB restrictions quicker in endemic areas, he says.

"TB is the biggest single obstacle to our dairy client, so we see the test as potentially providing significant benefits to the control of bovine TB in the UK," he adds.

In other work, he is now a consultant for two major supermarket chains with a role in advising them on hygiene and milk quality.

The last word comes from Anthony, who produces 27,000 litres of milk daily for Sainsbury's through Dairy Crest with a team of 20 milking three-times-a-day at Slough Court Dairy Farm, Stoke St Gregory, some 10 miles east of Taunton.

He says that advisers don't stay on his farm very long unless they perform, and Alastair has been here the longest. Enough said.

THE JUDGES LIKED

- * Good ambassador for the dairy veterinary industry
- * Innovative solutions for issues in the dairy industry
- * Putting academic work into practice on the farm
- * Good team performance in a modern vet practice
- * Breadth of knowledge of the dairy industry