

Monitor farm couple double cow numbers

by Jennifer MacKenzie

FOUR years on from embarking on a plan to double dairy cow numbers, Matt and Sue Bland have achieved most of their objectives while maintaining milk yields.

The couple have expanded from 150 to 300 cows by buying in mostly fresh heifers from France, Germany and Denmark.

Their farm 277 acres at Heskett Farm, Dacre, near Penrith, Cumbria, where the mixed-soil land rises from 600ft to 920ft above sea level.

In 2009, it became one of six RDPE Livestock Northwest Programme monitor farms in Cumbria, Lancashire and Cheshire, and has received input from experts and farmers on improving profitability.

The four-year programme, which ends in July, saw them set business and performance targets with Promar's Paul Henderson, Paragon vet Victor Oudhuis, and SAC senior dairy and nutrition consultant Jimmy Goldie, who is based at Crichton Royal, Dumfries.

Key areas targeted included making better use of home-grown grazed grass, conserved grass and wholecrop which has reduced concentrate use without compromising yield or fertility.

Managing herd health – paying particular attention to transition cows and cow mobility – has also been a key focus.

The exercise has given Matt and Sue added confidence to manage and expand the business and to employ Marcus Fox as a full-time cowman.

Before joining the programme, the couple installed a new parlour with computerised feeding system and shedding gates, and a new dry cow building was erected. More recently, the cubicle housing was

extended with a new building. The couple sold their young stock to help fund the expansion and maximise acreage.

Mr Goldie said they had managed their expansion well. "It will always take longer than you anticipate," he said. "Matt and Sue, with the help of Promar, devised a business plan and stuck to it, with some modifications, as it progressed."

"It's a difficult decision when expanding as to what comes first – a new parlour or cows – but avoid overstocking a building."

"I believe a building has a 'capacity for milk' and this has been proven recently when producers have been culling cows because of shortages of feed but their milk production has not been reduced."

Matt and Sue have maintained yields at about 8,200 litres per cow despite buying in cows for the flying herd. Milk from forage has increased dramatically – rising from 1,868 litres a cow in February 2011 to 2,677 litres in February this year.

One of the first meetings held at the farm in 2010 looked at getting more from grass. New paddocks have since been created with smaller grazing areas, allowing cows to be moved more regularly. Grass is also monitored by a plate meter.

Cows are now split into four groups by yield, and fed accordingly. Dry cows receive a dedicated ration from the Keenan feeder. Early lactation cows and dry cows are not grazed – only low yielders are turned out.

Spending time and money on transition cows and cow mobility under the guidance of Victor Oudhuis has helped improve the cows' ability to graze and utilise feed better.

Victor scores the cows every three months as part of DairyCo's healthy feet programme. Managing herd health through the expansion has been a key achievement.



EXPANSION: the programme has given Matt and Sue Bland added confidence

As a result, more than half the herd now has the highest mobility score of 0-1 with only a few still at score 3.

Management of transition cows has also been a target.

The new dry cow building now needs further expansion to house the herd's 60 dry cows to allow nine to 12 square metres of space per cow and a feed space of 70cm per cow.

Victor said the target calving index was 390 days – it is now 407, significantly less than the 436 days in 2011. He said that a simple assessment of which transition cows were not doing well was by monitoring which were not eating.

Significant mastitis improvements have been made by adopting a proper drying off protocol. Improved parlour hygiene has also reduced environmental mastitis, with cell counts running below 200,000. The herd is vaccinated for Leptospirosis, BVD and IBR and, despite importing cattle to increase herd numbers, disease has not been an issue.

The Blands' ultimate aim is to consolidate the herd to achieve optimum production, increase the slurry storage and then invest in cow tracks.

The long-term aim is to expand to 400 cows, with an additional 100 cubicles and loose boxes and expand the transition housing.

Looking back, Matt said: "If we were starting again, we would increase cow numbers in one go rather

than staging it over an 18-month period.

"This would aid cash flow by increasing income and reducing some of the financial pressures sooner.

Managing cash flow has been one of the biggest hurdles to overcome."

The monitor farm programme in Cumbria has been delivered by Cumbria

Farmer Network, with Myerscough and Reaseheath colleges managing the farms in Lancashire and Cheshire respectively.

Kendal milk producer David Martin found the DairyCo Milkbench+ meetings on the farm particularly valuable.

He has used the benchmarking system for three years and has expanded his pedigree Holstein herd at Lords Plain, Levens, to 225 cows.

He said: "Since I have attended the meetings, it has been much easier to see my business's strengths and weaknesses in discussion with other producers.

"As a result, I have looked closely at variable costs and improved herd profitability."

It is hoped that the Milkbench+ producer meetings can continue after the programme ends.



HIGH LEVELS OF BIO-SECURITY
94% OF COLLECTIONS MADE WITHIN 24 HOURS
LOW COST
NO HIDDEN CHARGES
FULLY COMPLIANT WITH ANIMAL HEALTH REGULATIONS

We are the North of England's leading fallen stock and farm waste collection and recycling business.

The services we offer are:

- Fallen stock collections utilising modern vehicles equipped with blood tanks and sealed bodies to give the highest levels of bio-security**
- Farm waste collection and recycling**
- Liquid waste and septic tank collection and disposal**

Also our **FREE** online service creates comprehensive compliance reports for DEFRA, Trading Standards and Inspectors.

**A RICH FARMING HERITAGE,
 A COMPETITIVE SERVICE**

Visit jwarrenabp.com or call 01388 488215.



JohnWarrenABP

Farm & Animal By-Product Recycling

“ It's a difficult decision when expanding as to what comes first – a new parlour or cows – but avoid overstocking a building

Jimmy Goldie