

BRITISH DAIRYING

March 2026 Vol 32, No.5

FORAGE UPDATE

■ Top tips to get the most from your maize this summer

TECH TALK

■ How artificial intelligence and sensors work in dairying

SUCCESSION PLANNING

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Spring turnout is looming, so be careful to manage soil and cow nutrition to optimise health and yield

Time to celebrate?

Thank goodness spring has finally arrived (although I'm sure we're still in for some cold spells as the blackthorn comes out). Here in Devon we had over 50 consecutive days of rain and perpetual gloom from January onwards. When the sun finally broke through it felt like some incredible gift from the Gods!

But the grass is growing and it won't be long before turnout. After all that wet weather, though, look out for nutrient deficiencies as much will have been leached. We've also got some top tips on how to maintain cow productivity and health over the tricky flush period – attention to diets to optimise butterfat and protein will be critical.

One farm that seems to be getting its management right is NMR / RABDF Gold Cup winner Treveale Farm. Having scooped the prestigious trophy at Dairy-Tech last month, the Broad / Morrow family invited us down to take a look around. You can read the full feature on pages 64-67, and we look forward to reading their monthly columns in the year ahead. It's certainly an interesting and impressive set-up.

Celebrating success is so important – even more so during difficult times when farm staff might be feeling a bit low. It's human nature to pick up more on little mistakes than minor successes, but making a concerted effort to say 'thank you' or 'well done' really can make someone's day, reminding them that they are valued – even if it just 'part of the job'. So why not nominate your team – or someone you know – for the Cream Awards this year? Entries are now open, and there are 15 categories to choose from, ranging from dairy vets to young farmers, and youngstock health to innovation. There's a category for everyone, so take a look at www.creamawards.UK to see which you'd like to enter. You'll be judged by a panel of dairy farmers and industry experts, and what better way to celebrate with your team than at a highly entertaining night surrounded by your peers on September 3? Entries close on May 31.

Another aspect to sharing success is bringing the next generation of farmers forward, offering your advice and experience, and maybe even some land, cows or equipment. But succession planning is hard enough when you have family wanting to take over the reins – so what about those with no-one waiting in the wings? In an attempt to find an answer, British Dairying organised a special meeting in the House of Commons last month, bringing together a range of farmers and industry experts to explore a potential farm matching service. Hosted by Robbie Moore MP, and attended by Daniel Zeichner MP, this round table proved truly insightful and inspirational. Everyone offered their advice and experiences, and explored what has worked well – or failed – in the past, to find a practical solution for the future. You can read more on pages 68-69.

Thanks to Lely's sponsorship, we plan to take this initiative forward, working with existing organisations like Scotland's Land Matching Service, and profiling case studies where people have found success. If you'd like to get involved then please do get in touch at olivia@britishdairying.co.uk.

Olivia Cooper

Managing Editor

BRITISH DAIRYING

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Managing Editor – Olivia Cooper
 Email: olivia@britishdairying.co.uk / Tel: 01392 840009

Contributors this issue: Sarah Peacocke, Kevin Lane, Mike Abram, Jim Franklin, Howard Walsh, Danusia Osiowy

Publisher & Sponsorship – Alan Whibley
 Email: alan@whibleys.net / Tel: 07786 993789

Subscriptions/Accounts/Office – Nicki Grovestock
 Email: nicki@britishdairying.co.uk / Tel: 01438 833448

Marketing/Events/E-newsletter – Caroline Calder
 Email: caroline@calderwood.cc / Tel: 01892 231604

Advertising/Sales – Alan Whibley
 Email: alan@whibleys.net / Tel: 07786 993789

Production/Pre-press – Jamil Dhansey, Ruth Wills, Danusia Osiowy, Lydia Wombwell, Amanda Cornforth-Smith

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Publisher
Alan Whibley



Managing Editor
Olivia Cooper



E-News/Marketing
Caroline Calder



Agritrader/Feed
Jamie Day



Deputy Editor
Ruth Wills



Comment/Markets
Chris Walkland

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NFU welcomes Reynolds' commitment

By Howard Walsh

Both the Tenant Farmers Association and the NFU have welcomed Defra's commitment to farming investment, including via the sustainable farming incentive (SFI). At the NFU Conference, Secretary of State Emma Reynolds confirmed funding for the Farming Innovation Programme and the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund, alongside further detail on the reformed SFI.

"Many were fearing an extremely stripped back SFI with much lower payment rates and reduced flexibility," said TFA Chief Executive, George Dunn. "Those fears and concerns should, in large part, be addressed."

NFU President Tom Bradshaw added: "It's encouraging to hear the Secretary of State reaffirm her commitment to working with farmers. Her announcement on investment in productivity



The sustainable farming incentive plans are - mostly - encouraging

demonstrates that she recognises the vital contribution our nation's food producers make to the economy, national security... and the natural environment.

"The reformed SFI appears to strike the right balance between simplifying the process and maintaining flexibility, while still retaining preferable actions for farmers. It's good to see recognition of the uplands by maintaining actions that

support the landscapes in which they work, but we'll need to work through the wider detail of the scheme." The TFA had been concerned about the extent to which large landowners could remove land from active farmers to take advantage of a seemingly open-ended SFI offer, said Mr Dunn. "We therefore welcome the tightening to be introduced in the 2026 scheme to avoid this. "The Association also welcomes

the £100,000 annual limit on SFI and the 25% area limit on land earmarked for enhanced over-winter stubble. It is essential that SFI creates an environment within which food production and environmental outcomes can be produced side-by-side rather than having to choose one over the other," he added.

However, the CLA expressed some reservations. "Introducing a cap on payments has risks; limiting the ambitions of those that can do the most for nature," said President Gavin Lane.

"This is counterproductive when the government has legally binding environmental targets, and some may have no choice but to intensify production.

"Many farm businesses are facing some of the bleakest profitability conditions in a generation. The Basic Payment Scheme is virtually gone and SFI is an essential income stream to build business resilience and support food production."

Princess Royal Award winner



(L-R) Delyth Allen, The Princess Royal and John Allen - with the Award

John Allen, a highly respected figure in the UK dairy sector, has been awarded the RABDF's Princess Royal Award.

The honour, which recognises an individual who has made an outstanding lifetime contribution to the dairy industry, was presented by HRH The Princess Royal at Windsor Castle last month.

While Mr Allen is widely known as one of the founders of Kite Consulting 26 years ago, his career in the dairy sector spans more than five decades.

It began on a small family dairy farm with 40 cows in the Peak District before he graduated from Nottingham University in 1979 and joined ADAS as a Farm Adviser in South West England. He later became ADAS Head of Dairy and then Head of Agriculture, supporting farmers

through some of the most turbulent periods the sector has experienced.

Later, under his leadership, Kite Consulting grew to work across the entire dairy supply chain. The business expanded to more than 50 employees before being acquired by Associated British Foods in 2022. Mr Allen continued as Head of Corporate Dairy until his retirement in December 2025.

Hayley Campbell-Gibbons, Chief Executive at RABDF, said: "John is one of the most influential and respected figures the UK dairy industry has known. His career has been defined by integrity, leadership and an unwavering commitment to supporting dairy farmers and the wider supply chain. It is entirely fitting that RABDF recognises his outstanding lifetime achievement with this award."

SFI organic support reassurance

The Soil Association has welcomed news that the new sustainable farming incentive will support organic production. This includes farmers going through the two-year conversion period.

"The new details provide much-needed clarity and reassurance for farmers, many of whom have had plans on hold," said Policy Director Brendan Costelloe.

"The continued support for conversion to organic and the core ongoing organic land management options will give further confidence to the growing numbers looking to seize opportunities from the

booming organic market." What is needed next is an Organic Action Plan for England, as Scotland has already done, he added.



The organic market is booming

Specialist muck event launches in June

A new specialist technical event focused on slurry and manure handling, spreading, storage and nutrient management will take place at Bodrhyddan Hall, North Wales on June 3-4.



Live demonstrations are planned

The working machinery event, Muck Management UK, will combine live demonstrations, a substantial static exhibition and an independent Technical Forum in association with ADAS.

Event Director Graeme Lea said many exhibitors had already been secured, with the demonstration timetable being finalised. Availability for live demonstrations is limited, although space remains for static exhibitors.

Early-bird tickets are available at £20/day until March 31. www.muckmanagement.com

Milk wins with students

AHDB's 'Milk Every Moment' campaign has significantly boosted students' appreciation for milk and its nutritional benefits.

Some 95% see milk as part of a healthy, balanced diet - 5% up on April 2025. Also, 83% know that



Milk is centre stage at BUCS events

milk provides a range of vitamins and minerals (17% up on the year) and 71% recognise it as naturally rich in high-quality protein (up 14%).

The campaign continues to put milk centre stage at British Universities and Colleges Sport's (BUCS) flagship events, including the BUCS Super Rugby Milk Championship. It won two Cream Awards in 2025: The Cream Awards Cup and the Young Influencers Award.

Carrie McDermid, Head of Marketing at AHDB, said: "These results demonstrate how effectively our messaging is connecting with students, as their understanding and appreciation of British dairy continues to grow. This age group is beginning to make independent dietary choices and is often exposed to misinformation regarding nutrition. We aim to dispel those myths."

Red Tractor recognition grows

Three-quarters of UK adults now recognise the Red Tractor logo - a 3% increase, year-on-year, according to YouGov research.

Richard Cattell, Director of Marketing at Red Tractor, attributes growing awareness to the breadth of the scheme, logo visibility on packs and the 'With you for 25 years' consumer campaign.

"Our campaign not only celebrates British food but helps to remind consumers why the



More shoppers know Red Tractor

scheme is trusted by every major UK supermarket," he said.

Improving genetic knowledge for free

Herds in Northern Ireland will benefit from free genomic testing as part of a new Bovine Genetics Project.

Created by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and Sustainable Ruminant Genetics, the programme aims to ensure agricultural professionals have the required technical expertise

on genetic improvements when talking to farmers.

Darryl Boyd, Senior Technologist at CAFRE said: "By strengthening technical expertise, this programme aims to enhance knowledge transfer, increase farmer engagement, and ensure genetic information is accurately interpreted and correctly applied at farm level."

Digestate fibre required for domestic products



Fibre can create new eco-products

A sustainable materials studio developing domestic products made from digestate fibre is looking for farm suppliers.

Studio Mafa's 'Erth' product won the Surface Design Show New Talent Award in 2024. The studio is looking for farms with anaerobic digestors and separation systems in the Midlands, to supply 20-50kg batches.

"Our aim is to support sustainable waste management while adding value through high-quality, design-led products," said the Studio's Sane Mafa.

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Record dairy exports in 2025

Exports of dairy products from the UK reached a record £2.2bn in 2025, up 16.6% on the previous year, according to figures from AHDB. It highlighted the continued importance of the EU as a key market, accounting for 73.9% of the total value of UK dairy exports.

The Board's International Trade Development Team delivered a comprehensive programme of promotional activity in 2025, participating in major international

trade shows like ANUGA in Cologne, the world's largest food and beverage event.

In total, the dairy sector team delivered 28 events from San Diego to Singapore during the year. These included seven retail promotions and eight marketing events, making it their busiest year to date.

"The latest figures are a remarkable success story, underlining demand for our world-class dairy produce in a wide portfolio of markets," said Jonathan Eckley, AHDB International Trade Development Director.

Lucy Randolph, Head of International Trade Development for Dairy, added: "Exports are critical to the UK dairy industry by providing a long-term outlet for surplus production. They play a huge role in helping to strengthen demand, build price resilience and support long-term profitability. Every extra tonne of cheese, yoghurt or other dairy product sold overseas helps balance supply at home."

NFU Dairy Board Vice Chair Ian Harvey said: "These figures are fantastic news for British dairy and reflect the work of the wider industry, from farmers to processors,

and government attachés in key marketplaces around the world.

"In 2021, the NFU Dairy Board set out its ambition to double the value of dairy exports - then worth £1.6bn - over the next decade. At such a difficult time for British dairy farmers, who have seen 40% wiped off the value of dairy returns in the past few months alone, these figures provide confidence and evidence of the demand for our high quality, sustainable and tasty dairy products."



Jonathan Eckley at AHDB



Lucy Randolph at AHDB

New RUMA Chair



James Russell - the new RUMA Chair

The Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA) has appointed vet and consultant James Russell as its new Chair. He succeeds Cat McLaughlin, who steps down after six years in the role.

For more than 10 years, RUMA has driven major progress on antimicrobial resistance, with its Targets Task Force uniting vets, farmers and food businesses behind measurable goals across all livestock sectors.

Mr Russell has over 20 years' experience in clinical practice, veterinary policy, and animal health governance, and said he looked forward to building on the strong foundations already in place. "There is still much to do, both in maintaining our focus on antimicrobial resistance, and ensuring stewardship across other medicine classes," he said.

Farming's dangerous goods exemption

The NFU has worked with the Department for Transport and the Carriage of Dangerous Goods (CDG) Practitioners Forum to successfully maintain agriculture's exemptions from the CDG regulations.

These regulations outline the steps transporters must take when moving dangerous goods like fuel and certain fertilisers. They include the quantities that can be transported and procedures in case of a spillage or other incident.

The exemptions mean farmers can continue to carry these essential goods with fewer restrictions. However, to support best practice and compliance, agriculture-specific guidance has been issued, which includes driver and vehicle requirements, load security and advice on fuel, bowsters and intermediate bulk containers.

Findings challenge emissions assumptions

The carbon footprint of milk is shaped by many small, everyday management decisions rather than any single factor, according to new findings from the UK Dairy Carbon Network (DCN). The research highlights feed efficiency as the strongest driver of lower emissions and underlines the importance of establishing a clear baseline.

However, higher milk yields, larger herds or more time housed do not automatically impact the carbon footprint per litre of milk. Well-run, efficient systems can perform strongly on emissions regardless of scale or production level. Efficiency, rather than size, is what really matters.

All farms involved in the network have completed a baseline carbon footprint assessment to accurately estimate emissions. This pinpoints where emissions arise on different farms and establishes a benchmark against which future improvements can be measured.

One of the clearest findings is the wide variation in carbon footprints between farms operating broadly similar systems. According to the

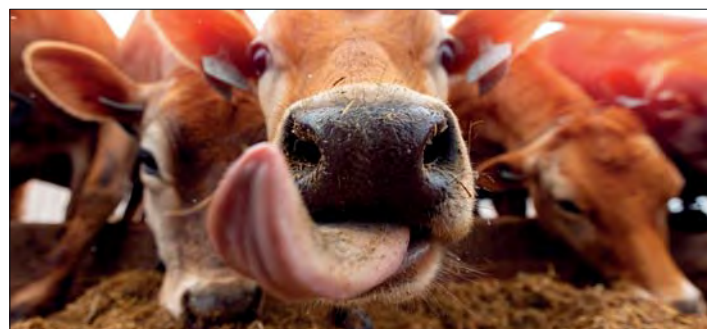
DCN, this reinforces a simple but important message that there is no single solution. Meaningful progress comes from stacking improvements over time rather than relying on one change to deliver everything, it said.

However, the main emissions sources are consistent across all systems. Intestinal methane from the cow is the largest contributor to the carbon footprint of milk, followed by feed production - particularly purchased concentrates.

Manure management also makes a significant contribution, while fertiliser manufacture and its use,

as well as energy and livestock purchases, account for smaller but important shares. Across grazing, mixed and housed dairy systems, the work has shown overall footprint values overlap considerably, suggesting management decisions have more influence than the production system itself.

Teaghan Tayler, Head of GB Farm Networks, said: "The DCN gives us a fantastic opportunity to gain real insight from experts who can translate complex data into practical, meaningful metrics for farmers and industry alike."



Milk's carbon footprint is shaped by small, everyday management choices

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Up to £100,000 funding for dairy farm ideas

Dairy farmers can benefit from grants of up to £100,000 to try out new innovative ideas to improve performance - but must apply by April 8.

The Accelerating Development of Practices and Technologies (ADOPT) grant, delivered through Defra's Farming Innovation Programme and funded by Innovate UK, supports collaborative projects lasting between six and 24 months. Full grants typically fund £50,000 to £100,000 worth of project costs, spread across the participating farms.

The grant has been designed around the reality that farmers are rarely short of ideas, just the time and funding required to measure their effectiveness. Instead of researchers or manufacturers leading projects and recruiting farms afterwards, the scheme supports farmers in England to investigate their own practical questions through structured farm trials.

Robert Morrison, Head of Farms at the UK Agri-Tech Centre, said the intention is to move innovation funding closer to everyday farm decision-making. "There's been



Innovation grants help dairy farmers test practical new ideas on farm

a shift away from funding centred purely on developing technology," he said. "With this, farmers themselves bring forward the challenges they want to solve within their own systems."

Importantly, farmers are not expected to arrive with a polished proposal. An initial £2,500 support

grant is available to pay for an external project facilitator who helps turn a practical idea into a workable trial. Farmers can still apply directly without using this grant, but many find it useful when approaching funding for the first time.

"A farmer can come with a rough concept and use the facilitator to

turn it into a proper application," explained Mr Morrison. "The full grant then funds the project itself, but it has to involve more than one farm working together."

The ADOPT Support Hub, run by ADAS in partnership with the UK Agri-Tech Centre and Soil Association, provides practical help from the idea stage through to delivery. It can advise on trial design, connect farmers with partners or technical expertise and ensure results are robust enough to stand up to scrutiny. "The hub is free, independent and fully funded, and we encourage farmers to come early so the idea can be shaped properly," said Mr Morrison.

Projects require regular review meetings during the trial period and a final report within three months of completion so results can be shared across the sector.

Round six of the grant is currently open with a £5m funding pot and applications close on April 8, 2026. Applications can be resubmitted in later rounds if unsuccessful.

For more information, visit: www.farminginnovation.ukri.org/adopt

Second national mobility survey launched



The new survey aims to tackle persistent dairy cow mobility issues

The Stride national dairy mobility initiative has launched its second survey to better understand the hoof health challenges faced by UK herds. The results will help to develop practical strategies to reduce the consequences of compromised mobility and poor hoof health.

The not-for-profit initiative aims to increase understanding of the issues surrounding dairy cow mobility, to contribute to industry knowledge, and help develop clear management strategies that

deliver sustained improvement in foot health.

"Mobility issues remain a major drain on dairy performance and profitability, and it is time for an increasingly practical and pragmatic approach," said dairy vet Matt Dobbs, Chair of the Stride Technical Board.

"Reduced mobility and compromised hoof health remain endemic problems affecting around 30% of cows and are a major cause of premature culling. These incidences have hardly changed during the past

30 years. Poor mobility costs the dairy sector an estimated £250m/year through impaired fertility, reduced production, premature culls, and treatment costs."

However, there have been significant advances in the understanding of the causes of lameness, management strategies to prevent problems and the range of effective treatments that, together, offer the potential to reduce the incidence and consequences of poor foot health.

"On all farms, the crucial question is: What can be done differently or better to help reduce mobility problems? In the 2026 survey we want to understand more about why mobility is remaining such a stubborn nut to crack," he explained. "What are the reasons it is not given a higher priority and what needs to be done to increase the focus on mobility and hoof health?"

The survey will run until April 30, 2026 - scan the QR code or go to: www.stridemobility.co.uk. All respondents will be entered in a draw to win one of five pairs of Apple AirPods.

Great British Farm Fest headliners



Lisa Hogan and Jeremy Clarkson

The inaugural Great British Farm Fest will take place at the NAEC, Stoneleigh, on May 22-24, sponsored by Morrisons. The event is designed to be "a celebration of farmers, their craft and their way of life" and will feature headline appearances from celebrity farming advocates including Jeremy Clarkson, Lisa Hogan, Kaleb Cooper, Charlie Ireland and Adam Henson. Some 60,000 visitors are expected over the three days.

Morrisons's headline sponsorship follows its £1.6bn commitment to British farming for 2026. "British farmers play a vital role in feeding the nation with high-quality, fresh British produce every single day," said Marketing Director Alex Rogerson.

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Test soils for deficiencies now

Farmers are being advised to monitor soil health closely before spring turnout, as recent wet weather has increased the risk of nutrient loss. In addition, poor drainage, compaction and nutrient lock-up could reduce the soil's ability to supply minerals to plants and grasses.

A farm-led study commissioned by Fevara in conjunction with Kingshay is examining the soil mineral profiles of seven UK monitor farms. The focus of the work is on key trace elements like copper, selenium, iodine, and cobalt.

"The mineral availability in soil sets the foundation for forage quality, and soils can often be deficient in trace elements," said Sarah Bolt, Technical Knowledge Exchange Manager at Kingshay. "At present, grass mineral analysis is unlikely to reflect turnout conditions due to winter dormancy. However, conducting a soil test now is ideal, as it will provide farmers with an early indication of soil microbial activity, fertility and nutrient availability."



Wet weather has increased nutrient loss so test soils ahead of turnout

A comprehensive broad-spectrum soil health analysis offers insights into key soil health parameters, while an animal health soil test provides additional measurement of trace elements which are essential for cattle health.

"These deficiencies may not always be visible, but they can have long-term effects on herd performance and profitability," warned Ms Bolt. Bolusing stock

with research-backed products can be an effective solution to address potential nutrition gaps highlighted by soil testing.

Met Office data showed the UK recorded 17% more rainfall in January than the long-term average, said Nia Williams, Commercial and Technical Manager at Nettex. "When soils sit wet for extended periods, oxygen levels are reduced and root function is compromised.

"This can limit mineral uptake by the plant. At the same time, we can see higher intakes of antagonists like molybdenum and iron, which interfere with the absorption of key minerals like copper, manganese and zinc in the animal."

Rapid grass growth later in the spring may compound the issue, she added. "Fast-growing grass can dilute trace element and magnesium concentrations. Combined with low dry matter and high potassium and nitrogen levels, this increases the risk of deficiencies and conditions like grass staggers."

Spring-calving cows are at particular risk of staggers post-turnout, as every litre of milk requires around 0.11g of magnesium to produce; double the dry period requirement. Producers should therefore consider their supplementation strategies now.



A soil test can identify mineral gaps

FETF grants to open soon

The 2026 Farming Equipment and Technology Fund (FETF) opens for applications on March 17 and closes at midday on April 28. The grants are available in three categories - productivity improvement, slurry management, and animal health and welfare.

Defra has calculated an expected average cost for each item based on costs from a cross-section of suppliers. The Rural Payments Agency will then pay a grant of 40-50% towards either:

- The average cost of the item - if the equipment costs the same as or more than the figure listed, or
- The actual cost paid, if the equipment costs less than the figure listed.

Successful applicants will receive between £1,000 and £25,000 towards productivity, slurry, or animal health and welfare items. It is possible to apply for an item with a higher specification, but not items that do not meet the minimum specification.

A farm that has received grant support for, say, a building through another scheme can still apply for FETF funding for equipment to be used within that building, but double funding is not available.

Visit www.bit.ly/4sq7Xz2



Grants are available for slurry items

NFU appointments

Tom Bradshaw has been re-elected as NFU President and along with the other officeholders will serve for the next two years. Mr Bradshaw, an arable farmer from Essex, has been part of the NFU officeholder team for six years, having served as President for the past two years and holding both the Vice President and Deputy President positions before that.

Vale of York dairy farmer Paul Tompkins was voted in as the new Deputy President and Robyn Munt, a beef, sheep and arable farmer from the Isle of Wight as Vice President.

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Get prepared for Environment Agency increased inspections



Alice Johnson at Strutt & Parker

Around half of farms inspected by the Environment Agency (EA) have some form of non-compliance, with common issues including gaps in nutrient planning, soil testing and yard drainage systems.

With the Agency increasing the number of inspections as part of efforts to improve water quality and reduce diffuse pollution, farmers are being advised to get prepared.

Alice Johnson at Strutt & Parker, said inspection notices have already arrived in some catchments. "This can be a stressful time for farmers," she said. "Being picked by the EA may not mean you are under suspicion of doing something wrong, but it could relate to concern about water quality in a local river if there are high or rising levels of pollutants like nitrates and phosphates."

Common problems include insufficient slurry storage capacity, no nutrient management plan or not being able to show soil test results.

"The letter from the EA will explain all the paperwork that the inspector will want to see, but, in our experience, it can be very reassuring to have addressed any potential weaknesses in advance, rather than under pressure.

"A pre-inspection audit can help to identify if there are any obvious gaps and be a springboard for exploring opportunities for grant funding if there are problem areas," she added.

"An issue we are also seeing come up a lot - particularly given the amount of rain we have had recently - is lack of a drainage plan for yards, particularly where people have taken advantage of the Capital Grants scheme to lay new concrete.

"Inspectors will want to see that clean and dirty water is being kept separately and that rainwater harvesting systems are adequately sized and located appropriately."

The Agency tends to take an 'advice-led approach' to breaches in the first instance - to give farmers time to rectify any problems - but will use enforcement powers where necessary.

New emissions and carbon standard

The new Land Sector and Removals Standard under the Greenhouse Gas Protocol will take effect on January 1, 2027. This sets out how businesses should account for greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, including soil carbon.

The new regulation places greater emphasis on robust, site-specific data and transparent reporting. First Milk welcomed the move as bringing greater clarity to how agriculture measures both emissions and sequestration.

"Dairy farming operates within a biological system," said First Milk's Chief Impact Officer Mark Brooking. "If we are serious about net zero, we must measure both emissions and removals properly. This new standard raises the bar on evidence and transparency, particularly around soil carbon. That's important for the dairy industry, because credibility matters."

The Standard also aligns with First Milk's regenerative farming programme, which is part of its commitment to reaching net zero by 2040. "It signals a more rigorous future for carbon reporting in agriculture, and British dairy farmers are well placed to respond."

Easier Red Tractor assessment



Mobile phone photos can be uploaded instantly

Red Tractor has introduced three major improvements to its member portal. These are designed to reduce assessment preparation time, stress and the paperwork burden for farmers.

The updates allow members to take live, geo-stamped photos directly within the portal as compliance evidence, using their mobile phone. Instead of manually recording tasks on paper, like changing milk liners, the portal automatically captures location, date and time data, creating an instant digital record and demonstrating due diligence.



TRACKING HERD SCC LEVELS IS EASY WITH NMR

Tracking somatic cell counts (SCC) for each cow every month is a 'basic' and essential part of productive herd management. But there's a lot more to be gleaned from this basic information to put a stopper in any potential losses.

NMR's Herd Companion is the library of all herd data and it's where all those recording with the company can see their cows' updated cell count results - and a lot more.

Cath Smith, NMR's dedicated software trainer, has run webinars on accessing and using three different cell count reports available to all NMR-recorded herds.

1. The SCC report is used to sort cows so high SCC cows can be pinpointed and any chronics identified that have been over-looked. Note this shouldn't spring any surprises if the reports are used routinely for cell count control. Also freshly calved cows with a high SCC. A look back - on the report - at her last SCC pre drying off will show up issues in dry cow management and if this is the source of the potential losses.

2. The Drying Off report also found in Herd Companion's Health Monitor section, is fundamental to identifying cows for selective dry cow therapy (SDCT).

3. The Herd Companion Key Performance Indicator (KPI) report - Progress in the field of SCCs can be a lower average herd count, but more specifically, fewer high cell count cows, minimal chronics and more cows eligible for SDCT. Farmers can monitor all these for their herds, but they can also use this report to see where their herd 'sits' compared with a representative but random group of 50 NMR herds. The key benefit of this is being able to look beyond the herd and gauge progress on an industry level, and make sure the herd is meeting targets.

Regardless of breed and system, maintaining low SCC scores across the herd will mitigate health issues and associated costs and protect the milk cheque.

Check out the NMR YouTube channel for our helpful videos.

Scan the QR code to register for Cath's next Herd Companion webinar.



HC Herd Companion
From NMR

Arla's results released in volatile market

Arla has released its 2025 results, showing the Group's total revenue reached a record €15.1bn (£13.1bn). The results were driven by a record milk intake of 14.3bn kg, high commodity prices in the first half of the year and exceptional growth in its ingredients business.

A net profit of €415m (£361m) was achieved alongside a performance price of 56.4c/kg (49p/kg) which, combined with a robust financial position, has allowed the Board of Directors to propose a supplementary payment of 2.2c/kg (1.9ppl) to farmer owners.

"Our performance demonstrates our strategy is working," said Chief Executive Peder Tuborgh. "We have strengthened our market position and delivered record value for farmer owners."

"However, the result was achieved against a backdrop of two



Arla is investing £261m in a new cheese dairy in Götene, Sweden

very different market realities. While the year began with a strong demand and a balanced supply, the landscape shifted dramatically in the second half."

Chair of Arla Foods Jan Toft Nørgaard said the year had demanded

'immense agility' from its owners. "We shifted from tight supply of milk to a sudden abundance, which naturally creates pressure on the market," he said. "As a farmer, it gives me confidence to see our co-op navigate this volatility and once

again prove its worth as a strong, competitive home for our milk."

Meanwhile, Arla's farmer owners are set to benefit from its commitment to invest approximately €300m (£261m) in developing a new cheese dairy at its site in Götene, Sweden.

"Producing more Swedish cheese is good for food security, agriculture and jobs," said Inger-Lise Sjöström, Vice Chair of Arla's Board of Directors. "Investments like this increase the value of the milk we produce, creating long-term demand and stronger returns for farmer owners across our co-operative."

Once the new facility becomes operational in 2030, household cheese production will be transferred from the Nr. Vium dairy in Denmark, allowing the site to focus on high-demand products for international and Europe Zone markets.

Tougher NI water regulation



There are proposals to strengthen enforcement around water pollution

Farmers in Northern Ireland are among all sectors facing proposals to strengthen the enforcement and regulation of water pollution.

DAERA Minister Andrew Muir said that NI's water environment is facing mounting and unacceptable pressures, with only 29% of its surface water bodies achieving good ecological status. More than 20m tonnes of untreated sewage and wastewater spill into waterways each year.

"This is not only an environmental issue. It affects public health, the economy and the confidence people have in the safety of the waters they

use," he noted. "To rebuild public confidence, we must ensure regulation is fair, impartial and proportionate and applied consistently across all sectors: Public bodies, agriculture, private businesses and industry."

Mr Muir confirmed a proposal for NI's Environment Agency to withdraw from the Statement of Regulatory Principles and Intent (SORPI) arrangement with NI Water, which constrains regulatory enforcement action. "It is my view that withdrawal from SORPI will deliver regulatory parity, with NI Water regulated on the same basis as all other industries."

NFU and Arla host MP dairy tour

A group of MPs have toured Arla's Aylesbury Dairy; the UK's largest fresh milk processing plant, and its Innovation Farm near Princes Risborough.

The visit formed part of the NFU's Food and Farming Fellowship Scheme and was designed to provide parliamentarians with insight into how the dairy sector is supporting food security and the rural economy.

"It's great to get MPs out on farm and around a major processing

facility so they have a better understanding of the importance of the dairy sector, the wider supply chain and its contribution to food production, the environment, jobs and rural communities," said NFU Deputy President Paul Tompkins.

"Providing valuable knowledge and information to our politicians on visits like this can go a long way in helping to create a more resilient, sustainable and profitable industry."

Collaboration on research and education

The Royal Agricultural University and the Royal Veterinary College plan to work together to expand their research and trans-national education opportunities.

The two universities have more than 400 years of teaching and research between them and plan to establish new initiatives with the support of national governments and industry partners.

"As a valuable British export, our joint expertise in veterinary and agricultural education will contribute



Prof McCaffery and Prof Reid, RVC

further economic growth to the UK in response to the Government's newly published International Education Strategy," said RAU Vice-Chancellor Prof Peter McCaffery.

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Iran war shakes markets



Jamie Day

Feed market specialist

The Middle East conflict caused an immediate lift in feed cereal and protein futures markets, but a slower response in physical values. Whether these changes are sustained will depend on how long the conflict lasts.

Feed cereal markets continued their slow drift downwards through most of February, with oilseeds strengthening slowly on Chinese demand. But the growing tensions between the US and Iran saw all commodity futures rise in the final week, ahead of the shock of the military engagement on the last day of the month.

As we enter March, constraints on Middle East energy production and shipping are causing oil and energy prices to rise. A monthly column is always behind the pace of world events, and it is hard to tell whether this is a short-term shock or the start of something longer term. Rising energy prices will inevitably feed through into all aspects of production, manufacture, transportation and delivery, affecting dairy farming and milk processing as much as the rest of the economy.

Commodities affected include diesel and fertiliser, with implications for forage and feed grain production. Since the last major energy price shock four years ago; largely caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the UK no longer has any domestic ammonia manufacture capability – the key ingredient to make nitrogenous fertiliser. Therefore, it is reliant on imported fertilisers, competing with other countries for product and subject to rising shipping costs for deliveries.

Delayed purchasing

Merchants are concerned that farmers have delayed their fertiliser purchases for cash flow reasons, given the recent low milk and grain values, and will be seeking to purchase product for spring applications as domestic fertiliser supplies tighten.

Global grain markets are well supplied, and prospects are good for harvest 2026 in the Northern Hemisphere, subject to the weather in the crucial crop growth and development period. But despite the comfortable global supply outlook, short-term volatility will be driven by the more uncertain geopolitical background and weather events – and the way speculative investors react to these factors.

The London wheat futures continued their drift downwards over the first three weeks of February, only to rise in the final week on the start of US-Iran tensions and then increase sharply as hostilities commenced. The post-harvest 2026 futures are increasing more rapidly than the nearby ones, with implications for next winter's purchased feed prices. The May 2026 London feed wheat contract opened February at £168.15/t, falling to £165.80/t by the 18th but closing the month at £169.00/t. The November '26 position started February at £172/t and closed it at £178/t.

UK grain merchants attribute the widening gap between old crop and new crop wheat futures to the large old crop stocks pressuring the spot market. But farmers are cautious sellers as fuel and fertiliser costs rise, so buyers may need to offer more to tempt crop out of farm stores. Spot feed wheat values traded at £160-£162/t ex-farm on average over February.

Feed barley values have strengthened recently. While still at a discount to feed wheat, the gap has fallen to less than £10/t. There has been some UK export activity, after a lacklustre first six months, with some cargoes sent to Ireland. However, rising values make feed barley less attractive to feed compounders, which is bearish for its longer-term value – as is the arrival of more settled dry weather and early signs of grass growth perhaps pointing to an early turnout. Certainly, there have been drills and fertiliser spreaders out already on lighter land. Traders see little longer-term prospect of feed barley prices increasing. February UK feed barley averaged £150-£151/t ex-farm.

Protein markets rise

Protein feed markets, largely based on oilseed meals, are linked more closely to crude oil values, since oilseed crops can be crushed for biodiesel use. Therefore, the constraints to oil shipped through the Strait of Hormuz affecting crude oil values are also moving vegetable oil markets, which is supportive to oilseed futures. The latter market was already rising from mid-February on expectations of renewed Chinese buying of US soyabean, with additional support after the bombing of Tehran.

But the soya market fundamentals are persistently bearish for values – the current soya harvest in Brazil is ahead of the five-year average, while Argentina is rumoured to be removing export taxes, which would encourage its soya shipments. In the UK, soyameal rose from £298 to £325/t ex-store over February, with soya hulls up from £185/t to £191/t ex-store.

Rapeseed markets largely follow the soya complex, so have been similarly supported. Canadian canola futures reached an eight-month high, helped by China's decision to remove anti-discrimination tariffs from Canadian rapemeal, which adds to export demand. Traders expect oilseed markets to reflect the geopolitical situation around crude oil, while weather conditions ahead of the spring planting season in Canada plus China's demand will also drive markets. Rapemeal moved from £235 to £223/t ex-store over the past month. Domestically, UK field beans are more expensive than competitor feed proteins, which limits demand.

The latest AHDB feed production figures for January 2026 show overall cattle and calf feed demand is still up on the previous year, despite weakening milk prices. Total demand was up 3.1% in January, against a 7% rise for the year-to-date, starting July 2025. Within the total, dairy compound volumes were up 2.1% in January (5.1% year-to-date) but dairy blends fell 4.4% in January against an increase of 1.9% since July last year.



Easy mixing calf milk replacer will pay back in labour savings

Ian Watson – Global Technical & Commercial Manager, Volac Milk Replacers Limited.

Taking the time to select a quality, easy mixing calf milk replacer will pay back in labour savings and more efficient calf rearing overall.

There's nothing more frustrating than a powder that takes too long to mix or mixes poorly. Not only does it add to the time it takes to feed calves, but it could also be compromising calf health and performance which will have a knock-on effect on labour further down the line.

Opting for a quality product that mixes well will mean less time preparing feed and more time focusing on calf management which will help elevate performance. It will also mean less blockages in feeders and less residues on feeding equipment which will make it easier to clean.

Feed For Growth's CMR range has been designed to deliver consistent nutrition that's easy to mix. For example, in our whey protein concentrate (WPC) powders, the unique to Feed For Growth WPC and vegetable oil base is combined as a liquid and homogenised resulting in evenly distributed particles that readily dissolve in water. The balanced liquid is then spray dried for optimum mixability. Joining different sized particles together on a fluid bed also facilitates easy mixing by increasing the surface area for water to act on, whilst optimal application of a type of phospholipid called lecithin improves solubility.

This translates into a CMR that mixes well, every time – regardless of the volume, ensuring each calf receives the same nutrition at every feed. This will help to maintain regular abomasal emptying rate and avoid digestive stress. Digestive upsets add to staff time having to treat and manage calves. Ultimately, having an even plane of nutrition will benefit overall immunity which will again lower labour input and vet fees.

Consistent intakes also mean calves are more likely to hit target pre-weaning daily live weight gains of 0.7kg or more per day, making the most of high feed conversion efficiency at this time. Heifers are then more likely to achieve an age at first calving of 24 months which is the optimum for lifetime performance and profitability.

For more information on these new calf healthcare products, contact your local Volac Milk Replacers Limited business manager.

Celebrating the best of the best

Four dairy herds took home prizes in the NMR / RABDF Gold Cup, on top of the main award – four others were commended as shortlisted entrants. British Dairying reports.

The NMR / RABDF Gold Cup is rightly heralded as the pinnacle of dairy awards. And you can read more about the winner – Truro-based T N Morrow and Partners – on pages 64-67. But there were other incredible achievements to be celebrated at the awards presentation at Dairy-Tech, with three Scottish herds and one English herd scooping prestigious awards.

Chris May Memorial Award

John Harvey from Messrs Harvey, Drum Farm, Dumfries was presented with the Chris May Memorial Award for the herd with the highest average lifetime daily yield (LDY) – averaging 23kg/cow.

John and his brother Stuart keep 278 cows and 140 followers at Drum Farm, alongside their mother Margaret until her retirement last year. The Killywhan Holstein herd's average production is 14,800kg/cow, with a 305-day yield of 13,700kg, on three-times-a-day milking.

A total of 18 cows in the herd have produced over 100t of milk in their lifetime so far. The average butterfat is 4.13%, and protein is 3.5%.

Longevity is an important factor in this herd. Some 30% of the herd – 80 cows – are in their fifth or greater lactation and 11 animals are eighth or ninth lactation cows. The average lactation is 3.41.

John says the breeding policy is important, but not the most important factor in achieving all round efficiency. Indeed, those eighth and ninth lactation cows were conceived about 13 years ago.

More important, he says, is getting nutrition right so that cows can reach their potential. A key part of the milking cow diet is a mineral pack which includes methionine



Mark Frankcom from NMR (L) presents the Chris May award to John Harvey

and lysine, to support milk solids production.

The transition period is also a priority, particularly given the older and high production cows, which can be more susceptible to transition issues like milk fever and ketosis. The family have fed a dietary cation-anion balance diet for at least 10 years, and are very proactive with cow care and nutrition immediately post-calving, giving yeast and calcium boluses to help cows through first week in particular. They've only had one left displaced abomasum in the past 24 months.



Rory Torrance (L) wins the Salver

The average age at first calving is 24.5 months, and the calving interval is 403 days, based on a target of 400 to 420 days. John and Stuart avoid chasing a low calving interval, instead aiming to maximise days of production without cows getting stale. They have a voluntary waiting period of 70 days, but if a cow is still producing more than 60kg of milk a day, they will continue to inseminate her after 300 days.

Herd health is a priority, as being integral in achieving high productivity. The herd's average somatic cell count at 117,000 cells/ml reflects this.

Karen Bond, NMR Veterinary Adviser and one of the Gold Cup judges, says: "Animals that produce good yields, get back in calf and incur few setbacks like health issues across more lactations will have high LDYs. Herds with good LDY averages are most likely to be more environmentally efficient: As the LDY improves, the kg of CO₂/litre of milk can be expected to fall."

Lilyhill Cup

The top Jersey award went to the Hunter family from Shotts, Lanarkshire. Robert and Lorraine Hunter run the Clydevalley Jersey herd of 200 cows and 200 followers with their son Mark. They received the Lilyhill Cup, presented to the Jersey herd with the highest combined fat and protein production (CFP) among Gold Cup qualifying herds.

The Hunters' herd achieved a CFP for the year ending September 2024 of 846kg. The current average production is 8,023kg/cow at 6.27% butterfat and 4.09% protein on twice-a-day milking. Milk is sold to Graham's.

Key to achieving high butterfat in this herd is feeding high dry matter silage, which is cut and baled in-house, giving the family full control of its production.

Chairman's Cup

Cowhill Trust Muirside, Dumfries, run by Stuart Neish, won the Chairman's Cup, awarded to the herd of a breed other than Holstein or Jersey, with the highest CFP. This herd of 210 cows is a blend of Ayrshire and red-and-white Holstein. They achieved a CFP of 763kg in the

year ending September 2024. The average milk yield is 11,000kg/cow at 4.2% fat and 3.6% protein. Milk is sold to cheese manufacturer Lactalis, so high protein content is targeted.

Stuart places a strong reliance on homegrown forages, with about 90% of the diet homegrown. Cows are housed for about six months of the year and graze through the summer with a buffer ration fed to supplement the diet.

NMR Silver Salver

The NMR Silver Salver, for the herd with the highest CFP, was won by R Torrance and Son from Stapleford Abbots, near Romford, Essex. A former Gold Cup winner, the Torrances' pedigree Curtismill Holstein herd of 730 cows with 560 followers achieved a top CFP of 1,076kg/cow for the year ending September 2024.

Milk sold averages 14,892kg/cow at 4% butterfat and 3.33% protein. They achieve these high levels of performance and constituent milk values through good breeding plans and attention to detail in herd management.



Amanda Wilkes for Stuart Neish

Gold Cup Finalists

The other Gold Cup finalists were:

- Ruth and Stephen Ashley, PJ & PE Ashley & Son, Conover, Shropshire
- Ben Foote, J H Foote Farming, Church Lane Farm, Brown Candover, Alresford, Hampshire
- Michael Madders and Rosie Chandler, M Madders Farming, Church Farm, Coppenhall, Staffordshire
- William Mayor, Yeo Valley Farms, Yeo Valley, Blagdon, Bristol.



L-R: Robert Craig and Robert Hunter

Flushing the milk away?



Chris Walkland

COMMENT

Spring looks as if it is springing at last... and with it will come the inevitable flush. With milk volumes currently failing to slow down - at least not by enough to make a difference - there's little doubt that capacity will be exceeded and milk will once again be dumped. But why would milk volumes drop? After all, January's Defra milk price was just short of 38ppl so no one will be dropping production at that. February's price will be between 35 and 36ppl, I reckon, so I can't see that making much of a dent either.

Keeping it flowing

Arla's two-cent (1.7ppl) 13th payment on the back of its excellent 2025 annual results will also keep the milk flowing, I'd have thought. And it won't want to drop the price any further with everything it has going on around the globe - aka the investments here; the DMK merger in Germany; and the 'largest ever investment in Sweden to build a new cheese dairy' (and which will result in even more whey... on which it makes a tidy sum!).

Whether Muller's 1ppl scheme for milk over and above 2% for last year will make a difference remains to be seen. I've heard a couple of its farmers have been touting around 100,000 litres/month of spot milk to cheesemakers for March and April, but I don't know how successful they've been. Most of the cheesemakers I know are full of their own milk, so can't take in any more anyway.

"Organic will struggle to get processing space, not only in the spring flush."

Thus we can probably look forward to significant amounts of milk entering anaerobic digestion plants or being emptied into slurry pits, at a huge loss that will undoubtedly be passed back to farmers.

The most alarming example of this loss relates to organic companies, of course - the pain is much worse. Organic Herd, for example, has recently given a stark warning to its farmers about possible pain to come in its newsletter. CEO Martyn Anthony stated that "we have seen conventional milk volumes entirely saturate the processing capacity in the UK and... this means that organic products have not been prioritised."

This is going to continue for some time, he added, and "organic will struggle to get processing space, not only in the spring flush - we have to assume that this could also be the case throughout the next one to two years as the factories settle down and conventional slows a little."

It is hard to disagree with his assessment. But his starkest line is this: "If we have to downgrade 1m litres of milk to conventional we would be exposed to a £500,000 loss." Organic Herd is paying a decent milk price, of around 57p on a standard litre, which will be well over 60p I reckon for most farmers with good quality.

Muller, Arla and Yeo Valley are unlikely to want any more organic milk than they are getting; there will be very little cheese making capacity available, so the conventional spot market looks like a very likely destination... at what could be between 10 and 20p at best. That's if they can sell it in there.

"Seasonality incentives and penalties are a pretty blunt instrument."

Such a loss would be colossal amount for a small company - to put it in context the OMSCO Group posted a monster (one off?) pre-tax profit of £850,000 in the year to March 2025, thanks to a 6% surge in milk volumes bumping turnover to over £52m. Profits were just £6,000 in 2024, £28,000 in 2023 and £22,000 in 2022. None of the £850,000 was paid out in a 13th payment, though, but 'retained within the business to help support future initiatives in line with its long-term strategy to maximise returns to members.' (I can't remember the last time OMSCO / Organic Herd paid a 13th payment, in fact).

Price cut warnings

A £500,000 loss would also be around 15% of its £3m reserves from what I can see. I'm sure Organic Herd will be run as a pretty tight ship, so savings from within the business won't cover anything like this hit. Thus the only places the money can come from is reserves, or via milk price cuts. Organic Herd is already warning of this.

While this dumping of organic milk into conventional isn't new, what has changed is the lack of capacity open to it. Also not new is the demand profile for organic, which is entirely flat. Of Organic Herd's £52m turnover, for example, £41m or nearly 80% is for the liquid market, and nearly 90% of its turnover is related to the UK market.

Incompatible markets

All of this means that Organic Herd's business is absolutely not compatible with spring calving and a seasonal profile, if it can't get access to processing to deal with the spring surplus.

More evidence of this can be seen from its recent doubling of its seasonal litre penalty from 10p to 20p for March to June (while increasing the premium for the rest of the year). But will it work? There are many who doubt it will - history shows seasonality incentives and penalties are a pretty blunt instrument. I doubt farmers will change,

but we'll see. If they don't, though, and 2025/26 become normal years for huge volumes, not fluke years, then its members may have to take their future into their own hands by funding some sort of processing themselves.

If not, they face a multi-thousand-pound downgrade each spring, and with a corresponding hit to their milk prices which then further erodes profitability and the viability of members. A tricky one, for sure.

Oatly win

Finally, congratulations to Dairy UK for taking on, and winning, a major court case in the Supreme Court against corporate bully boys Oatly (Google Glebe Farm and Oatly if you want evidence for that comment).

The court case related to the use of the word "milk" in relation to plant-based products and specifically a bizarre trade mark that Oatly was using in its marketing called "Post Milk Generation" (whatever that means).

But then the company does do odd things - it has, for example, its own "F*ck Oatly" website (yes really) which is a "time machine of all things bad about an oat drink company".

Dairy UK challenged Oatly's use of the word milk under EU law that protects some dairy terms, and in a unanimous decision the Supreme Court dismissed Oatly's appeal and confirmed that its trademark was invalid.

"There aren't many companies who can brag about that record!"

Challenging Oatly was (aptly) a supremely gutsy move by Dairy UK, and there is little doubt losing the case would have been significant. At the very least it would have opened the door for plant-based brands to steal our terms, and would have empowered Oatly to throw even more anti-dairy rhetoric in our direction... while also riding on the back of milk's premium nutritional reputation.

Winning the case "reinforces the long-established legal protections for dairy terms and ensures that they cannot be used inappropriately in ways that undermine fair competition," said a diplomatic Dairy UK. The less diplomatic scribe of this column sums it up by referring to the language of its website with other suitably accompanying words. The court case aside, though, Oatly is an almost unparalleled business success, so let's give it credit for that. The company floated in 2021 at an impressive value of \$10bn (£7.5bn), with its share price peaking at \$575 (£430). Since then the stock price has, er, tanked by a meagre 96%, and currently stands at just under \$12 (£9). Pre-tax losses for the past five years are \$1.4bn (£1.1bn). There aren't many companies who can brag about that record!

AHDB MILK PRICE LEAGUE TABLE

Milk price league - January 2026

	January price	Annual average
Müller M&I M&S	46.81	46.62
Müller M&I Sainsbury	45.88	45.69
Müller M&I Co-op	43.86	43.67
Müller M&I Tesco	43.19	43.00
Müller M&I Direct	39.25	39.06
Crediton Dairy	38.66	38.63
Saputo Dairy UK - Profile	38.49	38.43
Saputo Dairy UK - Variable	40.49	38.38
Barber's Cheesemakers	36.14	36.14
Dale Farm GB	35.66	35.67
Belton Farm	35.58	35.58
Wensleydale	34.79	34.79
Arla Manufacturing	34.73	34.67
Pattemores	33.93	33.93
Dale Farm NI	33.83	33.88
South Caernarfon	33.05	32.15
Wyke Farms	32.16	32.08
First Milk Manufacture	31.84	31.81
Leprino Foods	31.03	30.35
Freshways	30.82	30.19

NOTES TO LEAGUE TABLE

Milk prices shown are the monthly price and the annual average price that would be paid on a contract for 12 months if the present price schedule remained unchanged, according to AHDB calculations.

Prices listed are ranked according to estimated annual average price. Prices exclude capital retentions, administration charges, farmer group subscriptions, and VAT but include the AHDB Dairy levy and seasonality adjustments.

Please note the standard litre for 2025/26 has been updated to reflect UK trends. Butterfat has increased from 4.20 to 4.25% and protein from 3.38 to 3.40%. Milk volumes have been slightly reduced in spring and raised for the winter. These changes should be taken into account when comparing April's league table against March.

While the AHDB seeks to ensure that this information is accurate, no warranty is given and the AHDB accepts no liability for any errors.

BONUSES NOT INCLUDED

1. Arla Manufacturing currently has a guaranteed minimum of 1.32ppl.
2. First Milk manuf. member premium +0.50ppl and F/M manuf. Tesco cheese group +1.58ppl. Members may qualify for both premia.
3. Müller M&I Sainsbury's pays a sustainability supplement of +0.63p and Müller M&I Tesco pays a sustainability supplement of +1.46p
4. South Caernarfon will pay a 13th payment of 0.25ppl.
5. Pattemores pays an extra 0.25ppl for thermoduric count below 250/ml.
6. Dale Farm NI pays a winter supplement of +2.00p.

None of these supplements are included in the milk prices league table; they are additional to them. Retailer price supplements are included where applicable.

* These prices reflect the milk supplied to the retailer.



Farmgate milk price changes

	2025							2026		
	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
UK Arla Farmers Manufacturing	-	-0.15	-	-0.86	-1.66	-2.63	-3.50	-3.48	-1.75	-
Barber's Cheesemakers	-	-	-	-	-	-2.50	-3.75	-2.50	-2.00	-1.90
Belton Farm	-1.00	-	-	1.00	-	-1.50	-3.50	-2.00	-2.50	-3.00
Crediton Dairy Ltd	-	-	-	-	-	-2.00	-2.00	-2.00	-3.00	-2.00
Dale Farm GB	-0.12	-	-	0.13	-0.25	-3.54	-3.32	-2.22	-1.91	-0.25
Dale Farm NI	-1.00	-0.50	-1.50	-2.50	-2.00	-3.00	-2.00	2.00	NPA	NPA
First Milk Manufacture	-0.50	-	-	-	-1.00	-2.00	-6.00	-3.60	-2.00	-
Lactalis/Caledonian Cheese	-	-	-	-	-	-5.19	-3.11	-3.04	-1.76	-
Leprino Foods	-	-	-	-	-1.00	-4.00	-5.00	-3.00	-2.00	0.40
Müller M & I - Co operative	-	-	0.01	-	-	0.84	-	-	-1.75	-
Müller M & I - M&S	-	-	-	-	0.88	-	-	1.02	-	-
Müller M & I - Direct	-	-	-	0.50	-	-1.25	-1.50	-1.50	-3.00	-1.00
Müller M & I - Sainsbury	0.06	0.09	-0.13	0.03	2.85	0.16	0.04	0.18	0.04	-0.05
Müller M & I Tesco	-	-	-	0.50	-	-0.11	-	-	0.41	-
Pattemores Dairy Ingredients	-	-	-	-	-	-3.79	-3.00	-3.00	-4.00	-
Payne's Dairies	-	-	-	-	2.00	-4.00	-2.00	-3.00	-	-1.00
Saputo Dairy UK	-	-	-	-	-	-	-1.00	-4.00	-2.50	-1.50
South Caernarfon Creameries	-	-	-	-	-1.00	-3.50	-3.50	-3.00	-2.00	-
Wensleydale	-	1.77	-	0.20	-0.20	-2.55	-3.00	-2.93	-2.23	-1.29
Wyke Farms	-	0.40	-	-	-	-5.20	-3.11	-3.11	-2.08	-

NOTES: Price changes are listed as reported by the processors but may not be fully reflected in the AHDB Dairy standard litre price. Prices listed above include the AHDB dairy levy and seasonality schedules. NPA - No Public Announcement.

- (1) For Barber's Cheesemakers, B price for milk in excess of the base milk volume plus threshold: Actual Milk Price Equivalent (AMPE) set by the AHDB for the month in which litres are supplied, less 2ppl, subject to contractual adjustments.
- (2) As of March 2025, Arla Tesco farmers receive the UKAF price plus a cost compensation.
- (3) First Milk Manufacture Member Premium calculated on a pro-rata basis linked to a member's level of capital payments.

Milk price U-turn?

Milk prices have been dropping sharply and continuously since October in response to falling commodity values. Milk supplies have been running well ahead of the five-year average since October 2024, and the market has been over-supplied both here and globally, prompting expectations for markets to remain under severe pressure until the second half of this year. However, confounding all expectations, commodity markets have turned around and began an upwards trajectory in February.

We first saw this in New Zealand's Global Dairy Trade (GDT) auction, which has now had five continuous positive price movements since the beginning of the year. This was followed by an uplift in UK skimmed milk powder (SMP) and cheddar prices in January and across the board in February.

Initially, this was believed to be driven by market sentiment. Buyers believed that the market was as low as it was going to get, so they started buying again, particularly to cover short forward positions. This sparked a flurry of demand. However, more fundamental issues have emerged.

Export trade

Some demand has come from European prices becoming competitive against the Southern Hemisphere, sparking export trade. The other driver is the emerging conflict in Iran. Iran was estimated to be the fourth largest exporter of SMP in 2025, according to Expana. Major buyers include Pakistan, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and Afghanistan. Estimates indicate Iran exported about 182,000t of milk powder in 2025, up by 27% year-on-year and roughly 134,000t more than in 2021.

Some buyers in the region and South East Asia may be looking elsewhere. Others may anticipate rising prices due to rising energy costs (SMP is an energy-intensive production process) and want to secure supply earlier.

The SMP market in the US is genuinely under-supplied in that it has focused its dairy production towards cheese, yoghurt and whey (and expensive whey derivatives like WPC-80 and WPI) and less towards SMP and butter. This has pushed prices up. Dryers in the UK and EU are reportedly full as well.

Some product substitution has also emerged as whey prices have increased, boosting demand for casein found in SMP instead. Global consumer demand for products with a protein claim is rising, pushing up demand for dairy proteins. Other commodities may have followed suit.

As a result of improved commodity values, market indicators like the actual milk price equivalent (AMPE) and milk for cheese value equivalent (MCVE) have risen, too. AMPE rose to 32.8ppl, gaining 2.7ppl and MCVE rose to 32.7ppl, gaining 1.9ppl. This means that the value of milk is now around 4% higher than last month.

As milk prices are correlated with market indicators, they should stop falling and start to rise, however little, in two to three months' time. We have already seen the first positive GB milk price rise announced for April. However, this could be a short-term reprieve. With milk supplies as they are, once buying sentiment settles, we may see commodity values settle, too.

Milk price changes

Aligned liquid contracts remained steady for March, with the exception of Sainsbury's which cut its price by 0.05ppl, counteracting the positive movement of 0.04ppl made for February.

All non-aligned liquid contracts on the AHDB league table cut prices again, apart from Freshways, which held steady after four months of decline, probably as a result of weakness in the cream market.

Muller Direct and Payne's Dairies made a price reduction of 1ppl each. Crediton Dairy and Pembrokeshire Creamery dropped by 2ppl and 1.34ppl, respectively.

A few cheese contracts saw further reductions, likely as a result of high milk volumes ahead of the flush. Barbers, Saputo and Wensleydale Creamery reduced by 1.90ppl, 1.50ppl and 1.29ppl, respectively. Belton Cheese announced the largest price decrease of 3ppl, to mark the fifth month of consecutive price decline. In contrast, Leprino increased its price by 0.40ppl, providing producers use soya-free feed. First Milk, Lactalis, South Caernarfon Creameries and Wyke Farms all held for March.

Manufacturing contracts were mostly stable, with the exception of Dale Farm GB which reduced its March price by a further 0.25ppl.



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War threatens positive markets

By Chris Walkland

Everything was looking up, with dairy markets rising faster than had been expected. And then came the war. Another war. At the time of writing the omens do not look good for the long term, with the crisis escalating rather than diminishing.

In the short term, though, the crisis might give the market a boost, as buyers forget about price and concentrate on securing supplies by bringing forward future orders. In times like these it's not 'can I get hold of the product I need at a price point I want', it's 'can I get hold of it at all'. But global demand won't increase in the medium term, and sooner or later those order pipelines will be full, and panic buying will wane.

Then there are the logistics of getting product from A to B, without it going via C, D, E or F. Already ships are in the wrong place, going to different ports, or not available at all. The Strait of Hormuz is effectively closed, and this is vital for ships to access and leave Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates - and there is talk of New Zealand having to send containers back home.

Shipping costs

It is believed this issue is more problematic for the Southern Hemisphere than it is for the EU / UK, because we can use Jeddah, and then transit overland through Saudi. But it is far more expensive, and risky. Shipping costs are skyrocketing. We should not underestimate what this might mean to the UK and Europe, as exports to the affected region are significant (see table).

In addition, we've got the impact of much higher oil and gas prices to deal with. On the upside there is (usually) a link between commodity prices and oil prices, although the wheels fell off this relationship somewhat during Covid and lockdown. Thus we can expect commodity prices to rise. But they are likely to become

UK cheese exports to the Middle East

Country	YTD 23 (DEC)	YTD 24 (DEC)	YTD 25 (NOV)
Bahrain	1201	1285	707
Iraq	209	461	505
Israel	472	715	801
Jordan	265	400	324
Kuwait	538	388	358
Lebanon	2731	2887	3841
Oman	307	352	415
Qatar	393	534	440
Saudi Arabia	2716	2080	2257
United Arab Emirates	1968	2777	2389
TOTAL Exports	10800	11879	12037

The Middle East is becoming an important cheese export market

more volatile, too. On the downside, costs increase - skimmed milk powder (SMP) processing costs are estimated to have risen by between £60 and £80/t on gas and electricity prices, depending on where you put the price.

Thus we've got to ride the waves and see what happens. But aside from the direct and obvious impacts there will be numerous knock-on effects. It's very early days and currently there are too many unpredictable scenarios to make a hugely detailed analysis.

Until we can, we'll enjoy what is currently a pretty positive ride, especially given global milk volumes. The logical law of supply and demand seems to have gone walkabout for the time being.

Certainly prices are much more positive than people thought they would be a month ago - and astonishingly so when it comes to mozzarella!

Normally, plentiful volumes would have a major negative effect on milk prices. But in New Zealand the Global Dairy Trade (GDT) auction is not so much remarkable, it's extraordinary. The first March auction increased by another 5.7%, which took the run of positives to five auctions in a row - its best run since early 2021. In February the auction posted its biggest increase since March 2021, the third biggest since 2020 and the 11th biggest since 2015. As a result of the good run, Fonterra has increased its milk price prediction to \$9.50/kg solids (£7.11)

having dropped it to \$9.00/kg (£6.74) in December. And this was before the latest auction!

The gains have taken the prices back to thresholds we haven't seen since the middle of last year for most commodities, and for SMP we've to go as far back as October 2022 to see similar prices. The last time the auction dropped was on December 16, and since then there has been a near \$1,000/t (£749) and 30% increase in the value of the average basket of commodities; an \$800 (£599) and 33% rise in SMP values and a \$1,716/t (£1,285) and 34% rise in butter prices.

EU markets

According to my calculations, the commodities convert into a milk price of 34-35ppl, having dropped below 30p in December. The EU farmgate price is less, as commodities are trading at a significant discount to southern hemisphere ones. EU butter is at €4,900-€5,000/t (£4,242-£4,329) now, for example, compared to being below €4,000/ (£3,463) on January 20.

But Fonterra butter is €1,000 (£866) more at €5,900/t (£5,108). Arla's SMP is at €2,600/t (£2,251), compared to being below €2,000/t (£1,732) in the last December auction. Fonterra's SMP is at €2,800/t (£2,424). Thus the EU price only converts to a price between 30p and 32ppl.

And it currently looks as if there will be further improvement too, given market developments. At the time of writing on March 9, cream had soared to £1.55-£1.60/kg for export. If this gains another 10p or so I think some liquid processors will be pondering milk price increases, as the cream income to a processor will be around 9p, as opposed to 6-7p in January. Butter has also increased to as high as €4,800/t (£4,156) for now and €4,900 (£4,242) for the next quarter, with UK traders

putting the current price around the £4,000/t threshold.

SMP is also riding higher on the back of the GDT, with Arla's price settling at €2,600/t (£2,251) and Solarec's €100 (£87) higher. But traders put the current market at €2,550-€2,600, with UK prices at £2,200 to £2,250/t.

EU exports are continuing to do well, and will be further helped by the Euro-Dollar exchange rate. The rising prospects point to Skelmersdale farmers receiving a price above 30p for the first time since last November, by my calculations.

The prospects are currently looking up for cheddar makers, too. Firstly, whey is at €1,400/t (£1,212), and it hasn't been at this level since April 2022. And cheddar prices have also increased on the back of a complete lack of availability, lower stocks than last year, and buyers all stepping in to the market to try and secure what limited supplies might be out there. But manufacturers say they are sold up, and seem very relaxed indeed. Mild is at least €3,100/t if not €3,200, but buyers aren't ready to pay these prices yet, some say. Mature and coloured are both said to be extremely tight, with prices increasing here too.

Star of the show

But it's mozzarella that is the current star of the cheese show, as availability of that is very scarce on the back of very good demand. It also had a near 8% boost on the GDT, with Arla's jumping to €3,575/t or £3,100. Traders say the UK price has increased £250 since the last report to £3,200-£3,250/t - its highest level since last September. On the back of this I think I can confidently say that there will be price increases announced for May by the mozzarella makers.

They won't want to do it, as it will send all the wrong signals to farmers, in that they will think the worst is over and they can continue to produce oceans of milk. But if current prices stick it would be unfair if they didn't pass some of that back.

Whether these prices do stick cannot be taken for granted, though. Anything can happen with a war, and one major thing hasn't changed and that's supply. The fundamentals on supply haven't changed at all. It begs the question as to how long the market can buck itself by ignoring the fundamentals - war or no war. And no one, so far, has the answer to that.

Price and % changes since the last time the auction fell on 16 Dec (\$)

	Index	Average	WMP	SMP	Mozzarella	Cheddar	Butter
16 Dec	-4.4	3341	3161	2431	3395	4646	5012
03 Mar	5.7	4301	3863	3243	4189	4920	6728
Diff		960	702	812	794	274	1716
% Diff		28.7	22.2	33.4	23.4	5.9	34.2
Last time at this level:		Jul 25	Aug 25	Oct 22	Sep 25	Jun 25	Sep 25

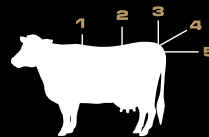
GDT dairy auction prices have risen sharply since December



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2+

Are on their
second or greater
lactation



Have high
body condition
scores



Produced a high
milk yield in the
previous lactation



Have a history
of milk fever



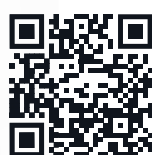
Go off feed
post calving



Have
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Driving milk quality improvements

For one dairy, a revised approach to cow environment, forage quality and precision feeding has strengthened output and milk value. British Dairying finds out more.

Gary Swires farms with his brother Steven, Gary's sons Jack and Jordan, and Steven's son Daniel at High Moor Farm in Harrogate. The Yorkshire-based 324-ha farm is home to 1,200 head of cattle, with a focus on 425 Holstein Friesians. Of these, 370 are milking cows producing over 34 litres/cow per day at 4.85% butterfat and 3.78% protein.

Over the past few years, the team have placed an emphasis on driving milk quality to maximise their milk contract by focusing on key areas, and continual improvements which have had a big impact. At the same time, they have also increased overall milk volume, a testament to the joined-up approach taken across the business.



Gary Swires has focused on improving milk quality and herd performance

	DECEMBER 2023	JANUARY 2024	% IMPROVEMENT
Milk yield	28kg	34kg	21.4%
Butterfat	4.58%	4.85%	5.9%
Protein	3.55%	3.78%	6.5%

Amino acids have boosted yields

The herd has been bred specifically to produce more milk butterfat and protein, with genomic testing making them more agile to market demands. "Breeding, nutrition and the temperature in the shed have all had a positive impact on milk quality," explains Gary.

The family work closely with Richard Bainbridge at Advanced Ruminant Nutrition, who plays a key role in balancing diets around homegrown forage. Richard routinely monitors milk quality and dung consistency, along with key indicators like milk urea. His primary focus is on optimising production, feed efficiency, and overall margin.

Historically, the farm relied heavily on soya alongside maize to drive energy in the ration. Several years ago, however, they made the decision to remove soya entirely. Richard rebalanced the diets and introduced Novatan - a blend of natural ingredients designed to optimise protein release and rumen function - to replace the bypass protein lost from soya.

In addition to this, the family has focused on improving the quality of

their homegrown forage and now have full control over the process. This has played an important role in increasing intakes over recent years and, alongside the maize silage, has added valuable energy to the diet and improved ration consistency.

"We took soya out of the diet several years ago, and to keep the milk quality level up, we understood how important quality forage was," says Gary. "We therefore took the decision to produce our own forage in-house. It means we have full control and take full advantage of the weather window. Expenditure on the machinery costs was a consideration; however, if your silage quality is poor, you'll really pay for that in the long term."

Amino acids

Richard also introduced amino acid supplementation and balancing, which aligned with the removal of soya. Amino acids like methionine - which is key to butterfat production - have since been incorporated into the ration, with butterfat increasing by 5.9% over a two-year period.

Amino acid balancing offers the potential to both boost performance and reduce environmental impact. However, producers need to work closely with their nutritionists to accurately balance, as it can be a complex process, he says.

"We work alongside the latest nutrition rationing programmes to ensure the correct level of supplementation," explains Richard. "We consider specific farm targets; in this case milk constituents, and the

feed ingredients we're working with. The programmes also provide us with a predicted response, allowing us to make informed decisions. Methionine has been a key part of pushing yield while keeping cow health right where it needs to be."

All elements are incorporated into a single, easy-to-use blend, which the team describe as both practical and highly consistent. "I like the fact it's ground down to a dust; there's far less sorting," Gary says. "Using a premix means we can add the silage afterwards, and it makes the whole process simpler with less to handle."

Underpinning these dietary changes is a reliance on their dry cow management system, which keeps this pivotal period consistent to ensure the cows are healthy going through transition. The team have fed X-Zelit - a dry cow treatment - for over 10 years, using it as a foundation to support transition health and early lactation performance. "It's a really simple system and provides us with the continuity we need to keep the cows healthy," notes Gary.

Managing ventilation

Last year, the Swires had new fans installed in the shed to improve ventilation. "Cow temperatures can sometimes be overlooked, but are a key factor in cow health and improving milk yield and production," he explains.

The fans activate when the house temperature exceeds 8.5°C, helping to reduce the risk of heat stress, which has been shown to reduce dry matter intake (DMI) by 8–12%. This can cut milk production by 10–30%, while cows may require 20–30% more energy simply to maintain body temperature.

Over the past six or seven years, the team have also focused on market trends, forward planning and cost control rather than reacting to short-term price fluctuations. "Richard helps us to plan and understand the market; we know what works well and have the confidence to implement that over a 12-month period," says Gary. "Knowing our costs and controlling the ration in terms of improving milk quality and maintaining animal health gives us that security."

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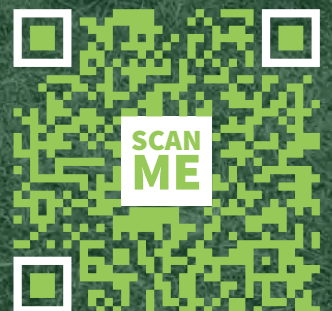


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Supplementation: Improving feed efficiency

Feed efficiency is a driver of economic and environmental sustainability. How can a focus on feeding the rumen first help producers keep it on track? British Dairying reports.

Dairy producers in the UK pay close attention to nutrition and feeding, balancing key nutritional, practical, and financial factors. However, there are still challenges, with costs and efficiencies under growing scrutiny.

Often when reviewing diet costs, efficiency, or sustainability, protein is a focus - and there is good reason. Purchased feed makes up 30-40% of total milk production costs, with imported dietary protein representing one of the major costs of feeding dairy cows.

“We need to pay more attention to the rumen microbes.”

Despite this, most UK dairy rations have high crude protein levels and are oversupplying protein to meet amino acid requirements. This is due to variable amino acid profiles of feed materials and limited precision feeding capabilities of UK rationing programmes.

Other reasons for oversupply of protein include compensating for shortfalls and variability in forages; especially grass silage, and reducing risk to early lactation cows. Dietary protein also accounts for a considerable proportion of nitrogen inefficiency - around 75% of nitrogen fed is wasted and excreted as urea-N in urine and other organic



Huw McConochie says most UK dairy rations have high crude protein levels

nitrogen components in manure. And there are environmental implications to consider, with soil nitrate leaching and greenhouse gas emissions, particularly methane and nitrous oxide.

Rumen protein utilisation and feed efficiency are determined not just by crude protein supply, but by how effectively rumen microbes convert nitrogen and energy into microbial protein, according to Emma Millar, UK and Ireland Ruminant Manager at Zinpro.

Microbial protein

“Protein and feed inefficiencies represent significant economic losses to individual farms and the industry,” says Emma. “Yes, dietary protein should be part of the focus, but the most efficient, amino acid-rich and sustainable protein comes from the rumen’s microbial population as microbial protein. The

more microbial protein, the more efficient the cow and the diet, and ultimately, the better the cow is fed and performs.”

Increasingly, focusing on isoacid supply to fibre-digesting bacteria in the rumen is helping producers achieve this - improving production and health. This also helps cows make more of forage, reduces dietary protein requirement and enables significant cost savings.

Isoacids are branched-chain volatile fatty acids (BCVFAs) - isobutyric, isovaleric and 2-methylbutyric - produced in the rumen when rumen degradable protein (RDP) is broken down into branched-chain amino acids (BCAAs) and then BCVFAs.

“We need to pay more attention to the rumen microbes,” says Dr

Huw McConochie, Nutritionist and Ruminant Technical Specialist at Zinpro. “As living micro-organisms, they have their own specific nutrient requirements. If these are not met, the consequence is poor rumen function, which shows up in reduced cow health, fertility, and production.”

Two bacterial groups drive fibre digestion and microbial protein synthesis in the rumen. Amylolytic bacteria digest starch, sugars and RDP, releasing energy and supplying peptides, amino acids and ammonia, which fuel microbial growth. Fibrolytic bacteria digest fibre and release energy. Importantly, they use isoacids, ammonia, and carbon to drive microbial protein synthesis - improving forage and protein utilisation.

Natural competition

Isoacids function as essential growth factors for the fibrolytic bacteria. However, there is natural competition which can interfere with their supply. “Fibrolytic bacteria rely on amylolytic bacteria to complete proteolysis; the degradation of RDP, like soya. This results in BCAAs, which are then further degraded into BCVFA - the isoacids,” explains Huw.

“Amylolytic bacteria are fast growing and use both BCAA and isoacids for bacterial growth, while fibrolytic bacteria can only use isoacids for growth and microbial protein synthesis. Under certain

Limiting parameters

Diet parameters which would benefit from isoacid supplementation:

- Reducing soya inclusion: Soya is rich in tRDP, and therefore amino acids, so lowering inclusion can leave diets limiting in isoacid precursors, resulting in inadequate supply to rumen bacteria populations.
- Replacement of soya with rapeseed meal: Moving away from expensive and environmentally taxing soya is a positive move for sustainability. Rapeseed meal is cheaper and less environmentally damaging; however, it has a much lower tRDP and therefore will be limited in isoacid precursors.
- High levels of digestible fibre: More fibre requires more fibrolytic bacteria for digestion, increasing isoacid requirement.
- Diets high in NPN: Diets that include high levels of NPN sources, like urea, are typically limiting in isoacid supply, which means released ammonia will not be efficiently captured, resulting in greater nitrogen losses in the urine.
- Highly fermentable carbohydrate diets: Diets high in maize silage, grass silage, or with high starch or sugar content increase the activity of amylolytic bacteria, which then outcompete fibrolytic bacteria for isoacids. Diets result in poor fibre digestion, which increases rumen acidity and can result in acidosis.
- Fast passage rates: Diets with fast passage rates do not allow for optimal breakdown of proteins and production of isoacids.

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dietary conditions, this competition leads to a lack of isoacids for the fibrolytic bacteria.”

When looking at what protein is in the diet, Huw says to be most concerned with what protein sources are going to be highest in true rumen degradable protein (tRDP) content - not just RDP. “RDP in itself can be split into tRDP and non-protein nitrogen (NPN),” he says. “It is tRDP which contains the amino acids, which means there is more chance of a higher level of BCAAs, contributing to the production of isoacids in the rumen. It is the tRDP that provides the precursors to isoacids in the rumen.”

Targeted isoacid supplementation offers an efficient and sustainable way of feeding the fibrolytic bacteria directly and avoids isoacids becoming limiting to fibre digestion and protein utilisation.

Studies show impact

Extensive research has been undertaken in the US and across the EU on isoacid supplementation. On-farm studies, involving 70,000 cows, showed the impact of Zinpro IsoFerm - a proprietary blend of isoacids that directly feed fibre-digesting bacteria. It was fed for 60 days or more, on average, resulting in a whole herd reduction of dry matter intake (DMI) of 2%, with 4.3% greater energy-corrected milk, resulting in a 5.5% improvement in feed efficiency.

Supplementation is particularly pertinent for the transition cow and the dry period, says Emma. “Isoacids are not only important nutrients for fibrolytic bacteria but are known to be directly absorbed from the gut and utilised by the liver for glucose production,” she explains.

“Improving rumen efficiency during the dry period allows the cow to digest and extract more protein and energy from feed and forage, which supports muscle mass and body condition, and reduces the extent and impact of a negative energy balance post-calving.”



Regular silage sampling is pertinent

Isoacids can also help mitigate health and production-hitting stressors like heat stress. “During heat stress, cows require more metabolisable protein and glucose,” says Emma. “Supplementation helps to ensure energy and isoacids to the rumen and liver are not limiting, improving the synthesis of microbial protein, which makes up 60-70% of a cow’s metabolisable protein supply.”

To assess a herd’s need for isoacid supplementation, Emma recommends:

- Having silage regularly sampled and analysed. Ideally, use a lab offering Cornell net carbohydrate and protein system (CNCPS) analysis, especially when reviewing lactating cows
- When reviewing the lactating ration, having a full dietary analysis completed to review the requirement and amino acid balance of the diet
- Considering the current diet composition (see list of limiting parameters).

For best results, IsoFerm should be fed at least three weeks before calving, continuing through lactation. “Differences in ration composition, raw materials, protein quality, and amino acid supply mean supplementation needs are farm-specific rather than one-size-fits-all for lactating cows,” she says. “However, in transition cows, a 40g/cow per day feed rate often delivers a consistent response.”



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Rumen-protected amino acids can reduce crude protein requirements

UK dairy farmers looking to cut soya from rations to meet environmental targets and reduce costs could risk leaving cows short of essential amino acids – hitting milk yields, fertility and cow health. But supplementation could help, as British Dairying finds out.

Rumen-protected amino acids (RPAAs) are widely used across Europe and the US for their production and health benefits to cows, but are only just starting to gain traction in the UK. That could be about to change as pressure mounts to reduce crude protein (CP) levels and lower emissions, predicts Independent Nutritionist Andrew Jones from ChewintheCud.

Amino acids are the building blocks of protein, with 10 out of 20 classed as essential because they cannot be produced naturally by the cow. Instead, they must either be included in feed or supplements.

Body functions

Traditionally, UK dairy cow rations have aimed for 16-18% CP using ingredients like soya. However, much of this protein is broken down in the rumen and converted to microbial protein, which may not fully meet the cow's amino acid needs - resulting in some of the body functions not working as optimally as they should.

RPAAs are designed to bypass the rumen and be absorbed directly in the small intestine, allowing nutritionists to target key amino acids more precisely.

Methionine, which has long been known as the first limiting amino acid in most UK dairy diets, has been joined in the spotlight by lysine (critical for milk protein synthesis, immune function and reproductive performance) as



Rumen-protected amino acids could reduce reliance on crude protein

farmers look to reduce or replace soya. "By supplying rumen-protected methionine and lysine, over time we can reduce overall CP in the ration and still maintain or improve milk yield, quality, and cow health," explains Andrew.

One of the barriers in the UK has been the price of many RPAAs products. However, Andrew believes farmers need to look beyond that. "While on the face of it they may appear costly, farmers need to remember RPAAs are precision nutrition," he says. "In reality, only about 10-30g/head per day may be required, and long term they allow you to reduce overall CP in the diet, which can save money - alongside the health and fertility benefits."

In UK trials, using RPAAs has knocked three days off the days to conception. "The essential amino acids are involved in egg health, immune function and general cow health," he explains. "We've also seen less metritis and overall healthier cows when RPAAs are included."

RPAAs don't need to be fed throughout a cow's life. Instead, Andrew recommends targeting their use in the transition period - from 21 days pre-calving to 120 days post-calving. During this time of greatest nutritional demand and metabolic stress, responses are seen in milk yield, fat and protein, fertility and health.

Studies on the effects of rumen-protected methionine showed that while supplementation pre-calving had no effect on dry matter intake; after calving it increased intake, milk yield, milk fat and protein. Milk fat percentage rose by 0.15% and protein by 0.66%.

The response to methionine fell as lactation progressed, confirming that feeding it during transition and early lactation offers the greatest return. "In cows it isn't just about the milk in the tank," stresses Andrew. "With RPAAs it's the health and fertility benefits that can really make the difference."

Calf improvements

Benefits have also been seen when RPAAs are fed to calves, with improvements in growth, earlier age at first service and fewer cases of disease and mortality.

RPAAs come in many forms and can be fed as a complete diet, in a premix, or added in a total mixed ration. However, when selecting a product, it is vital to choose one that is truly rumen-protected and backed by research.

"There are some products without the same level of protection, so be aware of what you are using and work with your nutritionist to get the balance right; latest research indicates that the ratio of methionine to lysine needs to be

balanced at 2.65:1." Andrew suggests reducing the diet's CP gradually. "You could start at around 16.5% CP, balance the amino acids accordingly, then drop CP by 0.5% at a time. There are herds maintaining production and health at 15% CP - and in the US, some are down to 13.5% CP."

It's also important to test forages regularly to understand their amino acid profile so that diets can be balanced accordingly.

"Producers can reduce CP without compromising performance."

German animal nutrition specialists Bewital Agri has recently launched a new Bewi-Patrix range distributed in the UK and Ireland by Azelis.

The range uses special cryotechnology to protect essential amino acids like lysine and methionine from rumen degradation, ensuring targeted delivery to the small intestine, where they are most efficiently absorbed and utilised by the animal.

"It's important that RPAAs really do bypass the rumen," says Leia Trotman, Ruminant Technical Sales Manager at Azelis UK.

"It's in the small intestine where they are then transported via the blood to the liver and processed for various metabolic functions, including the synthesis of body proteins, conversion to glucose, or storage as fat."

In farm trials, the product has boosted milk performance by 2.3kg/day and increased milk fat synthesis by 80g/day. "By targeting the essential amino acids that cows actually require, producers can reduce CP in the diet without compromising performance - which also contributes to lower nitrogen excretion and environmental impact."



Nutritionist Andrew Jones



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The Goldilocks approach: Just right

It's very easy to overfeed dry cows without changing their body condition score, leading to a plethora of metabolic diseases and reduced productivity. Finding the right balance is key to maximising efficiencies at a time of very tight margins. British Dairying reports.

Dairy producers can significantly reduce metabolic diseases - and boost milk yields - in freshly calved cows by managing their dry cows better. That's according to James Drackley, Professor of Animal Sciences at the University of Illinois, US, who was speaking on a recent visit to the UK.

Prof Drackley, pioneer of the 'goldilocks' approach to dry cow nutrition, was speaking at a nutritional masterclass organised by Mole Valley Feed Solutions. The goal is to calve cows at a body condition score (BCS) of three, and not to overfeed at any point in the run up to calving. "You want to provide 90-110% of cows' energy requirements consistently, and with adequate other nutrients," he said.

"Intakes are an indicator of success, not the cause of it."

In trials, cows fed 80%, 100% and 150% of their energy requirements during the far-off dry period calved down at a BCS of 2.9, 3.0 and 3.2, respectively. The overfed cows showed signs of insulin resistance, and after calving they had lower dry matter intakes (DMI) and energy status than either the 80% or 100% fed cows. Milk yields in the first 10 days averaged 29.7kg/day for the 100% cows and just 26kg for the overfed cows, with the 80% cows at 26.4 litres.



After calving, cows mobilise skeletal muscle to meet amino acid needs, to produce milk to feed their calf

In addition, the overfed cows mobilised more fat after calving and had very high levels of beta-hydroxybutyrate (BHBA), raising the risk of subclinical ketosis, explained James. In another study, far-off cows were fed a low energy diet, with some switched to a high energy diet for three weeks before calving - again, the low energy animals performed better.

Positive effects

The key effects of controlling energy intakes in the dry period include cutting the risk of a displaced abomasum fivefold, a 2.1x reduced risk of ketosis and a 10-day shortening of days to pregnancy,

with no impact on milk yield or composition. "It's a win-win."

So what's going on inside the animal to cause these impacts? Feeding a high straw, low energy diet ensures rumen fill, reducing the risk of displaced abomasum. And even without a change in BCS, feeding a high energy diet leads to significantly more fat around the stomach, intestines, kidneys and reproductive tract, said James. "Modest overfeeding could lead to a >75% increase in visceral adipose tissues that drain directly to the liver."

Cytokines - inflammatory compounds - are much more prevalent in visceral fat - so overfed cows are far more likely to suffer from chronic inflammation, reduced liver activity and compromised immunity. "There is a normal level of inflammation after calving but it resolves quickly. If it doesn't resolve, you get negative energy balance, metabolic diseases and infertility."

It's important to remember that cows won't stop eating once they've met their energy needs, so if the diet is too high in energy and too low in bulky fibre, that will result in overfed cows. So it's vital to balance the diet accordingly, with enough neutral detergent fibre for rumen fill and an

appropriate amount of nutrition to meet - but not exceed - her needs.

"Pushing our cows to have high pre-partum DMIs is misguided," warned James. Although studies have found a link between lower DMIs and both ketosis and metritis, the reduced DMI is a symptom of the problem, not the cause of it. "Restricting DMIs doesn't cause more disease - intakes are an indicator of success, not the cause of it."

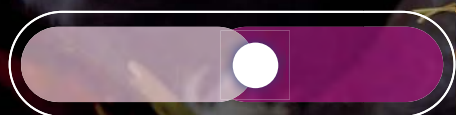
Feeding protein

Recent research has led to updated guidance over the feeding of protein to transition cows, with many diets not feeding enough or the right kind of protein. National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) guidelines now account for protein needed for mammary function on top of maintenance, pregnancy and growth. It has increased the recommendation from around 850g/day of metabolisable protein (MP) to about 1,025g/day in close-up dry cows. But the Cornell Net Carbohydrate and Protein System (CNCPS) suggests this should be closer to 1,200-1,400g/day.



James Drackley advises not overfeeding cows at all in the run up to calving

Continued on page 28.



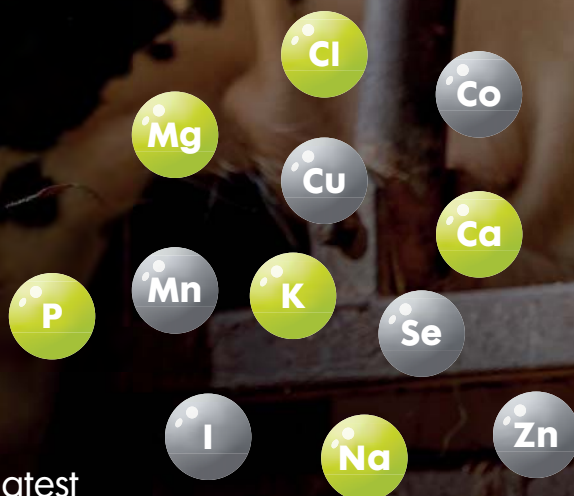
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Continued from page 26.

If feeding an 11% crude protein diet (6.5% MP) at 12.3kg DMI, this should be enough for far-off cows - although James recommended increasing this to 12% protein (7.2% MP) to be sure.

"Close-up cows will need a 13% (7.8% MP) crude protein diet - but might need more. I'm pretty sure the recommendations are too low as they don't account for a lot of other bodily functions like the immune system. And the cow will deplete her own body reserves to feed the calf."

Proteins and amino acids are used for immunity and to fuel the inflammatory response, so intakes need to cover that. "First lactation cows also need MP for growth." Trials have shown that every 1g/day increase in dietary MP before calving, up to about 1,100g/day, equates to 0.6g more milk protein postpartum.



NASEM recommends ensuring the diet contains 1,025g/day of metabolisable protein in close-up dry cows

Improved returns

Research commissioned by Mole Valley Farmers and undertaken by Prof Chris Reynolds at Reading University found that feeding maize gluten meal with rumen protected amino acids for four days after calving had a sustained beneficial impact on butterfat, protein and body condition.

In the 12 weeks after calving, treated cows averaged 3.97% butterfat and 3.26% protein, against the controls of 3.47% and 3.07%, respectively. Bodyweight increased by 35.3kg against a loss of 5.1kg in the control group.

"As a result of this research and work with James, we have developed a bespoke new feed range for feeding both pre and post calving," said Dr Chris Bartram, Head of Nutrition at Mole Valley Farmers.

"TPi 90 Nuts are 28% protein and very high in DUP, with prairie meal and NovaPro protected rapeseed. They are available both with and without the protected amino acids lysine and methionine, and are not mineralised so are easy to fit in existing feeding systems."

Boosting milk fat and protein is a good way to claw back some of the reduction in milk price, noted Chris. A 0.2 percentage point improvement in both milk fat and milk protein will typically add 2ppl (based on a value of 5p per 1% fat and protein). Over 12 weeks this will deliver an extra £60/cow (based on 35 litres/cow per day). Investing an extra £30/cow in specialist feeds around calving will therefore give a return of 2:1.

In British diets, two amino acids are limiting; methionine and lysine. Soyabean meal is high in lysine but lower in methionine, while maize gluten meal and rape meal are good for methionine supply. Ideally lysine and methionine should be fed in a 3:1 ratio, so 90g/day to 31g/day, respectively, depending on cow size.

The role of amino acids

Supplementing diets with these amino acids - in rumen-protected form - has consistently shown to increase both milk yields and constituents, with 2kg/day more milk and around 0.1 percentage points more fat and protein. Methionine is required for milk protein and can be converted into choline - both of which help to transport fat out of the liver.

"Thin cows mobilise more muscle than adequate ones."

"In high-risk herds it could be beneficial to feed both, but methionine is particularly important during the transition period and post-calving," said James.

Methionine is also very important for gene expression and the production of cell antioxidants, which is useful ahead of and after calving. Feeding lysine has also been shown to increase DMI after calving, leading to more energy-corrected milk for the 28 days post-calving. After calving, cows mobilise skeletal muscle to

meet their amino acid requirement, as they cannot generate enough MP from their diet; effectively suffering a negative protein balance similar to the negative energy balance. Cows that mobilise protein reserves before calving are at higher risk of ketosis, and have less available to them post-calving, reducing milk protein content. "Thin cows mobilise more muscle than adequate ones - so do we need to feed thin cows more protein before calving?"

There is a natural curve in skeletal muscle in adequate cows - they lose muscle after calving, remain stable throughout their lactation and build muscle in late lactation into the dry period. So they may require more MP in the diet during the dry period, suggested James.

Feeding more MP at times of muscle depletion doesn't impact on the amount mobilised - but it does impact on milk protein contents. This is because the cow's metabolic priority is to direct amino acids fed postpartum to milk synthesis. Feeding supplementary lysine and methionine postpartum therefore has a direct impact on milk protein contents. "There's a very strong relationship there."

In addition, supplying lysine and methionine in the correct ratio improves feed efficiency, provided nothing else in the diet is limiting. "Histidine is the third limiting amino acid after lysine and methionine, especially in grass-fed cows," said James. "To predict the cows' nutritional needs look at her bodyweight and milk production - it's very important to supply the right balance."

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The right inoculant can drive yield gains

The use of a crop and condition-specific inoculant on grass silage could help farmers get more milk in the tank – according to new trial results. British Dairying finds out more.

Dairy farmers who use the right inoculant on their silage could increase milk yields by as much as two litres/cow per day, new trial data suggests. Lientjie Colahan, Forage Technical Support at Lallemand Animal Nutrition, says trials at the company's Centre of Excellence in the US have highlighted the benefits of feeding silage treated with an appropriate inoculant. "The trials set out to assess how incorporating a multi-strain inoculant-treated lucerne grass mix silage into the diet influences production efficiency in lactating Holstein cows," she explains.



Lientjie Colahan says trials have shown some inoculants boost milk yields

"The longer it goes on, the more nutrients are lost during ensiling."

"The results are relevant to farmers in the UK, whether they're producing a monoculture grass silage or a multi-species sward with a legume like clover, because they show how using a crop- and condition-specific inoculant can reduce spoilage in the silage, boost dry matter (DM) intakes, and deliver higher milk yields. Against the backdrop of falling farmgate milk prices and the variable forage season last year, it's important to make as much as you can from homegrown forage."

The trial took place in 2025 at the Miner Agricultural Research Institute in New York State. "It involved 50 Holstein cows at the institute's research farm, which were all fed a ration comprising 62% forage on a DM basis, including 41% lucerne grass mix silage," she says. "The cows were split into two

groups of 25, with one group given a ration including a lucerne grass mix silage which was treated with an inoculant, and the other group given an untreated silage."

The treated silage was ensiled with an inoculant containing three strains of bacteria - *L. hilgardii* CNCM I-4785, *L. buchneri* NCIMB 40788, and *P. pentosaceus* NCIMB 12455 - which is known commercially as Magniva Platinum Grass Dry. Both silages were ensiled for 124 days before use, with samples taken from ensiling through to six weeks after opening for feed-out.

"The silages were assessed for lactic acid bacteria, yeast and mould counts, as well as aerobic stability," says Lientjie. "Once fed, individual cow DM intake, milk yield and milk composition were measured daily."

Benefits were recorded from the clamp to the parlour throughout the trial. "Firstly, an improvement in aerobic stability was measured, which means less nutrients are being lost from the silage because of spoilage organisms. This is measured as the time it takes for a

silage to heat to 2°C above ambient temperature, which is the scientific threshold for instability in silage.

"The silage was sampled two weeks after ensiling, and the stability tests showed the untreated silage was above this threshold for 80.42 hours, while the treated silage only spent 7.51 hours there. This continued up to the six-week measurement with the untreated silage showing instability for 61.43 hours, compared to 16.26 hours for the treated silage."

The only point at which the treated silage recorded a longer time above the aerobic stability threshold than the untreated silage was on the day of ensiling, which is called day zero in the trial. "The reason for this is that the grass hadn't ensiled yet and the microbes were extremely active and producing heat, which is a sign the inoculant was doing its job."

Temperature and time

"The process of ensiling always results in a temperature increase at the beginning, and we want this process to be as short as possible, because the longer it goes on, the more nutrients are lost during ensiling."

Higher aerobic stability in the treated silage was also reflected in yeast counts. "Yeast levels in the treated crop were 0.93 log colony forming units (cfu)/g at week six, compared to 2.28 log cfu/g in the untreated crop; in everyday numbers, this represents a 95.5% reduction in yeast," she adds.

"This matters because yeasts are one of the main initiating microbes in the spoilage cycle; by inhibiting them, you massively slow down the spoilage

process, resulting in less waste and better-quality silage being available to feed your cows."

Lientjie says having a more stable silage with less yeast contamination resulted in better feed intakes and, in turn, increased milk production from the cows fed the treated silage during the trial.

"Average DM intake for the cows fed the treated silage was 28.1kg/day - up by 0.9kg when compared to the cows fed the untreated silage," she explains. "This led to an improvement in milk yields, with the cows that were fed the treated silage yielding an average of 49.5kg/day - 2kg more than the untreated group."

Improvements in milk quality were also recorded in the trial. The cows fed treated silage produced 2kg of butterfat and 1.45kg of protein/day, compared to 1.91kg and 1.4kg, respectively, for the untreated group.

Methane and milk

Methane intensity per litre of milk was also lower in the treated group, with cows emitting 0.38g less methane per kg of energy-corrected milk. "These improvements are all due to the treated silage being of better quality and more palatable - highlighting the importance of properly treating your silage with a crop- and condition-specific inoculant," she adds.

"As the results from this trial show, using an inoculant will help your business become more resilient," says Lientjie. "Although the product works on the microbiology of the silage, the knock-on effects it delivers really come down to things that matter in terms of farm profitability, like improved forage quality, higher forage stocks, better forage intake and more milk."



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Season-long protection against worms and flies at spring turnout

Employing a season-long worm and fly control strategy may not only provide protection, but also result in less labour and reduced animal stress. British Dairying reports.

Gut and lung worms can hamper productivity on dairy farms, affecting youngstock weight gain, carcass quality and milk production. The annual cost of worms through lost production and treatment has been estimated at £149m for the UK dairy industry. Fly worry can also be costly, with growth rate losses in youngstock of up to 0.3kg/day and milk losses of up to 0.5 litres/day.

Andrew Venables at Hills Green Farm, near Macclesfield, Cheshire, follows a season-long worm and fly control strategy, helping him avoid the stress of repeated handling of first and second grazing season heifers.



Hills Green Farm is home to 240 Holstein Friesians plus 190 followers

“We had a lot of ups and downs with the previous worm control.”

He runs 240 Holstein Friesians with 190 followers and operates a split block-calving pattern, with cows calving from January until March and again from July until October. To simplify calf management, replacement heifer calves are born in the autumn block, with the spring calvers served to beef.

Cows typically graze for seven to eight months of the year, but heifers can be outside from April until January in a good year. Lungworm and roundworms have previously been a challenge due to the extended grazing season,

and sometimes treatments were administered too late, impacting growth rates, age at first calving and future milk production.

After weaning, calves are initially moved to a youngstock unit a few miles from the home farm, where they graze land, but are without handling facilities.

Avoiding stress

“Previously, when we used drenches and pour-ons, we would have to treat every three to four weeks,” recalls Andrew. “To avoid stress from gathering and handling, youngstock are now injected with a long-acting wormer around turnout.”

Calves need to develop immunity to gut and lung worms over one to two grazing seasons to minimise losses from infection. Starting the first grazing period in good health is key to allowing protective

immunity to develop effectively at grass. Cydectin 10% LA Solution is a single-shot injection containing moxidectin, used to treat and control gastrointestinal roundworms and lungworms in cattle. It allows animals to develop a natural immune reaction when exposed to larvae, as larvae pass through the gut wall before being killed by the wormer, initiating immunity.

“We have used the injection in our heifers, and it has been very successful,” says Andrew.

Monitoring and testing

“It’s simple to administer, and I know the calves are covered for a few months rather than having to treat them every few weeks during the summer. Faecal egg counts are also taken to monitor roundworm levels and future field burdens. Although faecal sample testing is less useful to confirm lungworm in acute disease, it is still important to know it is present on the farm,” he adds.

“Since using the injection, we have had more consistent growth rates during the grazing season, whereas we had a lot of ups and downs with the previous worm control. The youngstock have been ready to serve earlier, reaching our target of 350kg liveweight easily by 15 months. Having a robust, joined-up approach to parasites, supported by our vet, is aiding youngstock performance and

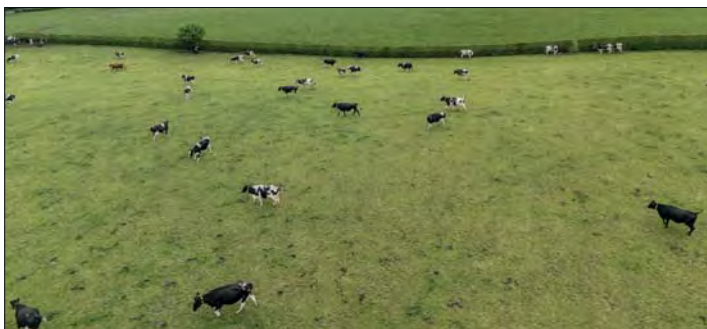
ensures they are on track to calve at the 24-month target.”

However, during the grazing season, flies can pose another issue and can cause major economic losses through reduced feed intake and disease transmission. Conditions like pink eye and summer mastitis can potentially spread among animals, having serious consequences for health, welfare and future productivity of dairy heifers. “Historically, we always had one or two cases of pink eye, mastitis and blind quarters each year due to flies. We used Electron ear tags in a block of first season grazing heifers and second grazing season bulling heifers for the first time during 2025,” says Andrew.

“Tag retention was excellent, so once they were in, they were in.”

“We noticed very little fly activity and fly-related behaviour in the two groups that were tagged throughout the season. There were a lot more flies in the other batches of cattle, as there may have been some delays with our spot-on treatment because of other activities on the farm. There were no cases of pink eye or summer mastitis in those tagged and no blind quarters in heifers after calving, which was an excellent season outcome,” he says.

“One tag per heifer, set early, carried us right through to the end of the grazing season, and tag retention was excellent, so once they were in, they were in. While the cost of the tags may be similar to multiple spot-on treatments throughout the grazing season, we saved on handling and animal stress of mid-season interventions. This was a good option for our heifers, which grazed away from home, especially when gathering and handling is difficult.”



Youngstock graze away from the home farm, with no handling facilities

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1. Independent trial performed at Reading University 2022 (unpublished). 2. Lactation Performance and Methane Intensity of Holstein Cows Fed Diets Containing Alfalfa Grass Silage Inoculated with a Multi Strain Inoculant, ADSA Abstract #: 1582, G.O. Omoruyi, C.S. Ballard, J.R. Green1, H.M. Dann, A. Barkley, R.A. Scuderi, and S.Y. Morrison, 2025.

Forage focus in a strong organic market

Strong organic milk prices are creating scope to increase production, but the opportunity to boost output relies on careful assessment of market conditions, maximising use of homegrown forage and targeted concentrate feeding. British Dairying reports.

From turnout and grazing management to silage quality and utilisation, getting the fundamentals right will determine how effectively organic farmers can capitalise on current market conditions.

With demand for organic milk forecast to grow by one to two percent year-on-year, the market outlook is very positive in the sector. To meet this growing demand buyers will look to source milk from the existing organic dairy pool, providing scope for some farmers to increase output.

“Forage will always be the cornerstone of organic milk production.”

However, the market is finely balanced, and while some processors are well positioned, capacity constraints among others mean overall volumes need to be managed carefully, particularly ahead of the spring flush.

Against this backdrop, the focus for organic dairy farmers should be on strengthening efficiency within existing setups, lifting output where possible and as market signals support, says Ben Trott, Organics Product Manager at ForFarmers.



Ben Trott says efficiency is key



Good forage is pivotal to organic milk production and getting the fundamentals right will pay dividends

In organic systems, that efficiency starts with forage. With at least 60% of dry matter intake (DMI) required to come from forage sources, maximising milk from grazed grass and silage - coupled with targeted concentrate use - will lay the foundation for making the most of market conditions.

“Forage will always be the cornerstone of organic milk production,” says Ben. “Reassessing concentrate use will be really important to help fuel performance and make the most of market conditions as they evolve over the coming months. But it’s vital that producers are also pushing to get the most milk they can from homegrown forage.”

Reassess approaches

“Now is a great time to reassess approaches to turnout, grazing management and silage making to ensure that the season ahead is geared towards making the best quality forages and maximising output from grass.”

For organic herds, grazed grass remains the cheapest feed available, with great productivity potential; but only if it’s managed well. Getting cows out early can maximise milk from forage, but turnout decisions need to be driven by ground conditions, grass cover

and cow requirements, rather than the calendar.

“Every year is different,” says Ben. “Wet weather, soil condition and sward recovery all need to be assessed before turnout. Turning cows out too early onto unsuitable ground can undo a lot of good work.”

Grass should ideally be grazed at the three-leaf stage, with cows entering paddocks at around 3,000kg/ha dry matter (DM) and exiting at 1,500-1,800kg DM/ha. Grazing too tightly reduces regrowth potential, while letting grass get too long leads to higher fibre and lower energy levels.

Grass quality

“To realistically assess how much milk can be produced from grazing, farmers need to understand both grass quality and how effectively their system can utilise it,” Ben explains. “Measuring grass regularly helps identify surplus and deficit areas and supports better decision-making through the season.”

Multi-species swards, including clover and herbs, can further improve DMI and resilience, particularly in difficult weather. However, spring grass brings its own challenges, with high degradable protein, low fibre and lower dry matter, making regular ration balance critical.

And while grazed grass often takes centre stage in spring and summer, silage remains the backbone of organic milk production for much of the year. “With good market conditions, but fluctuating input costs and variable weather conditions, producing consistent, high-quality silage has never been more important,” says Mel Digger, ForFarmers Forage Product Manager. “Grass silage is one of the most cost-effective feeds available on organic farms, but only if quality is protected at every stage of production.”



Protect forage quality, says Mel

Recent seasons have challenged silage production, with some farms struggling to achieve both yield and quality. Delayed cutting in pursuit of bulk can often undermine feed value.

"Quality mustn't be sacrificed," Mel stresses. "Digestibility can fall by around 0.5 units/day after grass has headed, and the energy loss from cutting later can be significant. Across a large clamp, that lost energy equates to a substantial volume of milk."

"It's about using supplementary feeding in the right way."

Attention to detail is key, from cutting height and chop length to wilting speed and clamp management. "When cutting, too low there's an increased risk of soil contamination in the clamp, resulting in poor fermentation and lower feed value," continues Mel. "In terms of clamp management itself, poor consolidation and sealing will allow air into



Turnout decisions should be driven by ground conditions and grass cover

preserved forage and compromise feed value. Inoculants are a worthwhile investment for organic producers and while they won't turn poor grass into good silage, they will help preserve feed value, improve fermentation and support more consistent intakes.

"Used correctly, they can deliver a strong return on investment (ROI), helping to increase milk production by up to 1.5 litres/cow per day."

Despite good grazing periods last autumn, many farms are still feeling pressure on forage stocks following difficult growing

seasons. In these situations, the goal should be to use forage efficiently, rather than asking it to achieve too much.

"When forage is under pressure, it's about using supplementary feeding in the right way," says Ben. "That's where targeted use of concentrates and raw materials can help, relieving pressure on forage supplies while still supporting milk yield."

"Some organic herds working with ForFarmers are achieving annual yields in excess of 9,000 litres/cow by ensuring rations are balanced around forage quality and availability.

"In organic systems, up to 40% of DMI can come from concentrates, and that portion needs to perform well," Ben explains. "With stronger milk prices, now is a sensible time to review what concentrates are being used to complement forage, and fuel increased performance."

However, organic producers do not have access to the same nutritional tools as conventional systems, making protein efficiency, raw material choice and ration formulation even more important. "Routine forage analysis is essential," says Ben. "Once you know what's in the clamp or coming from the paddock, rations can be tailored accurately, avoiding both deficiencies and waste."

"By tailoring rations to forage analysis, herd performance and system goals, we can help farmers get more from what they grow, while using concentrates strategically to support yield and margins."

As organic milk prices strengthen, additional litres must still be earned. Producers that produce high-quality forage and make best use of it within the ration will be best placed to increase output while protecting herd performance and margins.

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Grazing with robots – getting it right

Successful robotic grazing doesn't happen by accident and involves detailed planning around access, track width, strip grazing and well-timed selection gates – all aspects that need consideration before robots are put to work. British Dairying finds out more.

Grazing cows with milking robots is entirely achievable, but only if the system is planned properly before installation. “Infrastructure, cow flow and grazing layout must be defined before robots are commissioned, not after,” says Gareth Jones at Robotic Milking Systems.

The starting point is access, and grazing land must be easily reachable from the robot barn without forcing cows across busy yards or frequently used tracks. “The amount of land you require will obviously depend on your herd size and how many hours a day you want to graze,” says Gareth.

“It is essential to decide what system to adopt before start-up.”

Cow flow is central to maintaining robot visits, so track design is equally important. Tracks do not have to be excessively wide, but the layout must still allow smooth, uninterrupted movement between barn and paddock. “These tracks only need to be the width of two animals, because the herd will not be moving around en masse as they would with conventional milking.”

Strip grazing is essential. “Allocating a measured amount of grass or dry matter (DM) for a set period encourages cows to return to the barn to get milked, as they



Gareth Jones says good field access is vital if grazing cows with robots

go in search of their next break of grass. It's the same principle as a housed, guided, no feed system, which relies on the total mixed ration (TMR) to attract cows through the robots, except in this situation, it is the fresh grass that the herd is seeking,” says Gareth.

“However, in most situations concentrates will be fed in the robots, because if you are grazing 24 hours a day, this will be your only opportunity to get additional feed into the cows. But this will not be their sole motivation for returning to the barn.”

A well-positioned selection gate is therefore fundamental and should be positioned just outside the robot barn, allowing cows access to grass once

they have been milked. A secondary gate on a timer can then direct cows to different paddocks throughout 24 hours. “The cows quickly get to know when the gate change will take place, which promotes increased activity at these times,” he adds.

Grazing with a selection gate that changes twice a day is commonly referred to as an AB system, with cows rotating between two paddocks. “Typically, you can expect 2.4 milkings/day here, with cows grazing up to 500 metres away. Anything more than this distance, the milkings per day will be lower. It will also be necessary to move the electric fence twice a day, to allocate enough grass for the next grazing period.”

Boosting visits

Where higher robot visit rates are required, an ABC system may be preferable. “An ABC system allows for a gate change every eight hours, in order to keep cows moving, and will result in more visits to the robot. This requires more labour, as the fences require moving three times in 24 hours. But if you are looking for additional visits with cows out at grass day and night, then this is the best solution. Typically, you can expect up to three milkings/day with this type of system.”

For higher-yielding herds, a hybrid approach may be easier to manage. “There is a third option,

which is to buffer feed in the barn for eight hours, combined with two eight-hour grazing blocks. I refer to it as an AB/C system, and in my experience, it is simpler to manage than grazing for 24 hours a day, and is typically suited to higher-yielding herds,” says Gareth.

But choosing the right grazing approach is not something that can be left until after installation.

“If you are planning to go robotic and considering grazing, then it is essential to decide what system you are going to adopt before start-up.”

The gate is the key

Although relatively inexpensive compared with the cost of the robotic units, the grazing gate is the critical component as it plays a central role in making the system function effectively. “The grazing gate is the key component, and compared to the cost of the robots, it will be a cheap addition. However, its positioning, design and functionality need careful consideration in order to facilitate the system of your choice,” he says.

Ideally, cows should remain housed for at least three months after start-up before being turned out. “It will take the first few months before they find their rhythm, but in my experience, cows get better at travelling in year two and three, as they adapt to their new way of life.”



Cows will take a few months to get used to the system, but do adapt well



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Pairing grass and maize for higher returns

Maize can help to boost forage dry matter production per hectare, alongside a grass and maize silage strategy – which could be pertinent when planning for a year in which many producers will be making the most from their forage. British Dairying reports.

Last year's forage shortages remain in sharp focus for producers in drought-affected areas, as they seek out winter stocks. Where an autumn grass catch crop has been sown, there is an opportunity to fill the clamps with two high-quality silages by drilling ultra-early and early maize hybrids, says Andrew Cook at KWS.

As long as winter grass cover looks healthy, and the sward is not significantly frost-depleted, a silage cut could be taken in April or early May and followed by maize.

Good grass condition

"Last autumn's conditions mainly permitted an early harvest, allowing many producers ample time to sow grass after maize," says Andrew. "It has generally established very well. In South West England, for example, the autumn grass is in very good condition as it heads into the coming spring. The fields should produce a leafy sward that will analyse favourably."

"First cut grass typically delivers 50-60% of total yield, so it makes sense to maximise forage production by planting maize afterwards, as it gives a higher dry matter (DM) yield per hectare than grass."

"Given that autumn-sown grass will have already performed to its best on quantity and quality, the policy should give plenty of bang for the buck in terms of keeping the clamps



Maize is dietary 'rocket fuel' so is a good addition to grass, says Andrew

filled. By contrast, leaving the grass in situ will limit silage stocks."

The strategy would be best served by sowing ultra-early or early maize varieties, he advises. "Achieving a combination of high maize yield and quality is paramount. Reaching this goal requires carefully planned agronomy and optimising the timing of drilling," says Andrew.

"Spring 2026 conditions are anyone's guess at this stage, so future-proofing should take into account the possibility that first cuts might be delayed due to bad weather. That means selecting a variety that will still fulfil volume and dietary targets in a season that has been compressed by late sowing. This will also help to bring cutting dates forward on units where the maize harvest can drift into late autumn."

Modern ultra-early and early maize hybrids have superior genetic potential and offer greater flexibility, compared with older varieties, he says. "The key to their success is their short-season trait, which has been developed to produce varieties capable of reaching maturity in as little as 130 days from sowing to cutting. The only provisos are

matching variety to the individual farm situation and making sure that agronomy needs are fully addressed."

While there can be a temptation to cut costs by leaving winter grass cover, he argues that the policy may be a false economy. "It is a tremendous challenge to reduce the cost of production per litre within the constraints of any system," he admits. "However, most experts would agree that maximising milk from forage is usually a priority."

Short growing season

Ultra-early and early varieties are suitable after first-cut grass silages, or where harvest security is a priority. "The ultra-earlies, Jardinero (FAO 160) and Temprano (FAO 150) are roughly equal on performance. They also offer the short growing season that many producers are looking for in response to erratic weather patterns. Both varieties have good early vigour and are ideal for relatively low maize inclusion rates."

"Jardinero has consistently given 17.7t/ha DM at 36.1% starch. Meanwhile, it is beaten by a few points on starch figures by Temprano, which contains an

average 36.5%, plus a 16.6t/ha DM yield average. Suitable for early or late drilling, the varieties have demonstrated resilience in less favourable areas."

In cases where the harvest date is marginally lower down the list of priorities, the early variety Reo (FAO 170) might be a good fit, he adds. It has a slight edge on yield compared with many rivals, with average DM production at 19.3t/ha, along with 36.7% starch. Nevertheless, it may require an extra 10 days to reach maturity when pitched against Temprano and Jardinero.

In the early/maincrop category, Zimo (FAO 190) could be an option. "The variety joined the Recommended List this year, having been ranked in second place on DM yield at 19.6t/ha, a trait that will help to reduce the overall cost of production."

"It would be worthwhile to compile figures for comparison."

"It also comes with a balanced starch content of 35.3%, so it fits into dairy cow rations with a 50-70% maize silage inclusion rate. To perform to its best, it needs a favourable site, where it will show strong early vigour. It will also benefit from an extra seven to 10 days to reach full maturity."

Andrew believes following first-cut grass with maize could improve profitability in the right circumstances. He also notes that selecting two or more maize varieties with a range of FAO maturity numbers can make it easier to manage the workload.

"It would be worthwhile to compile some figures for comparison, focusing not only on DM tonnes of forage per hectare, but also on the production benefits of maize silage, which has a well-deserved reputation as dietary 'rocket fuel'. A mix of maize and grass will contribute to maintaining milk yield and quality, and minimising input costs."



Temprano is an ultra-early variety



Farm

Spotlight

Matt and Charlotte Norton - Hole Farm

Smarter Farming, Stronger Results: Hole Farm's Journey with Datamars

Hole Farm located in the picturesque countryside in North Cornwall just outside of Launceston in Egloskerry on the Penheale Estate. Hole Farm is an organic 1,200-acre, autumn calving dairy farm and has been part of the Carswell Group for over 14 years.

The farm is managed by Matt and Charlotte Norton and is home to 540 low-input grazing Kiwicross cows. To support the herd and improve efficiency, Hole Farm has invested in **Tru-Test smart farming collars and a drafting gate**. This technology has transformed herd management, delivering accurate heat detection, streamlining cow flow, and ensuring timely interventions that directly contribute to better breeding and calving performance.

Decision to Upgrade

Speaking from Hole Farm, Matt reflected on the insight and decision behind investing in the Datamars Tru-Test Active Tag Collars and Drafter.

"The team on the farm, including myself and Charlotte, were completely new to this herd in 2024, which needed some TLC to make things run more efficiently. After having a long discussion with the business owner, it was a group decision to upgrade the farm with the Datamars Tru-Test Active Tag heat and health monitoring system and drafting gate."

Time Saved

Matt explained that the system has already freed up valuable time which can now be spent on other areas of herd management.

"Having the drafting gate and collar system, this meant not having to focus on tail paint and scratch cards and spending time looking for bulling cows. Allowing us much more time to focus on management and other areas in the

herd to improve, as lameness was a key area. This saved me around 6 hours per day! The data we see within the app has been dependable, so much so that now we trust the system fully and allow the gate and the collars to pick the cows out for us to AI and check for health issues. We spent a lot of time at the beginning, making sure that we did night checks, writing down what we saw, and the system always found the same results"

Support that Delivers

Acknowledging the importance of support when adopting new technology, Matt also praised the service received.

"Backup and after sales service has been excellent. There is always someone at the end of the phone who is able to help if something doesn't seem right. The small tweaks to get the drafting gate to 99% read rate took a minimal amount of time and we are very pleased with the way it has run this past season."

With the success of the installation and the initial first calving Matt is looking to a bright and productive calving for 2025, he explained:

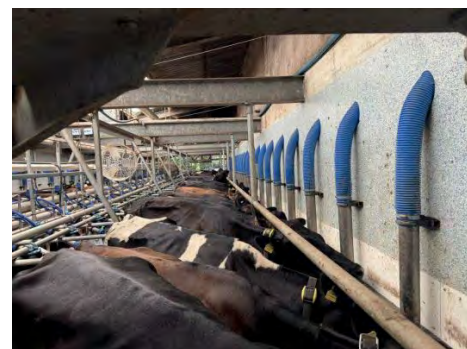
"In 2025, after having the Datamars system in for 12 months, we are now expecting 530 to calve in 12 weeks."

In the first 6 weeks gone from 205 to 343 to calve. That's a 67% increase in previous breeding season figures! By bringing this amount of cows forward into the first 6 weeks, we are putting another 58,000l in the tank, this is a significant increase to the farm, over £30,000 at today's prices."

Health Alerts and Wellbeing

Alongside the production gains, Matt highlighted the reassurance the system provides through accurate health and heat alerts.

"If a cow has flagged in the health alerts, or we notice her not looking her best, we can refer to the Datamars App to confirm our thoughts and these almost always align and help us with our decision on how to treat that animal. These health alerts have been key in helping us to get on top of lameness, which had previously been a concern."



Looking Ahead

The investment in Datamars technology has not only saved the team significant time but also delivered measurable improvements in breeding, calving performance, and herd health. For Matt and Charlotte, this has meant more hours to focus on managing the wider herd and addressing key priorities such as lameness. For the farm, it has translated into earlier calvings, higher milk output, and a clear financial gain.

By combining accurate data with practical day-to-day management, Hole Farm is already seeing the benefits. With stronger calving results in 2024, a healthier, more efficiently managed herd, and a system they trust, the outlook for 2025 and beyond is bright for this 1,200-acre organic dairy farm.

Are we feeding maize enough?

More attention needs to be given to maize nutrition planning, as some crops are potentially being underfed, thereby compromising yield. British Dairying reports.

Modern, high-yielding maize varieties can be very 'hungry' for nutrients and trace elements throughout the season, yet crop demands are not always being met. That's according to Jim Clark, Agronomist at Hutchinsons.

"I believe that many growers are still under-feeding maize, and in dry years like 2025, it can be particularly challenging to ensure crops take up enough nutrition from the soil alone," he says.

Leaf testing at the Carlisle maize trials site in late August 2025 highlighted deficiencies with nitrogen, potash, and manganese, likely due to plants being unable to extract sufficient nutrients from dry soils.

While the risks of nutrient deficiencies are often exacerbated in dry seasons, issues can - and do - arise even when moisture is adequate,



Dry conditions in the summer can limit uptake of granular nitrogen

so nutritional programmes must be planned carefully to meet crop demands in all situations.

"Traditionally, where maize is grown on mixed or predominantly livestock farms, nutritional demands

are largely met with slurry or manure," adds Jim. "However, depending on individual situations, you might need to supplement these requirements, particularly if you're growing maize in an arable situation."

The importance of potash is often understated, partly because of the assumption that applied manures will meet crop requirements. However, a high-yielding crop of maize can require 8kg/ha per day during peak growth, with total demand exceeding 400kg/ha to maintain yield potential. "It is therefore really important to ensure there is sufficient potash present and available to meet this demand," he says.

Herbicides and trace elements

Other macro and micronutrients are also important, and the three-to six-leaf stage is a key time for nutrition to keep plants green and growing. "People are often putting herbicides and trace elements on at this time," says Jim. "Leaf testing at this stage last year showed some crops were short of manganese, so this was included in applications.

"Some herbicides can be quite strong, though, so growers need to check product compatibility and crop safety before adding other things to the tank," he advises. "Last season, some growers went back with a separate application after applying herbicides, purely to apply trace elements to push maize on."

Strong rooting is essential to maximise a crop's ability to 'mine' soil nutrients throughout the season, especially once maize is too tall for conventional machinery to travel through. Phosphate (P) is particularly important in this respect, and trials over multiple years have shown clear benefits from applying a placement P fertiliser, like Primary-P, with seed at drilling to boost early root development and improve the crop's 'scavenging ability' for water and nutrients.

"Plants can recognise when there is sufficient nutrient supply."

In the same maize trials last year, across three varieties sown in the open and under film, freshweight yields were 5-6t/ha higher where the placement fertiliser was used. Dry matter yield increased by around 2t/ha, worth the equivalent of £300/ha in extra value, says Jim.

"Given the favourable growing conditions in this area last season, the benefit perhaps wasn't as big as we've seen in previous years, but it still more than paid for itself and is a far more efficient way of using nutrients than conventional diammonium

Applying late nitrogen by drone

One of the biggest challenges with late-season nutrition is crop height preventing access with standard machinery. At the 2026 Carlisle maize trials, Jim plans to investigate whether a drone can be used to accurately apply late foliar nitrogen fertiliser instead of a traditional wheeled spreader or sprayer. This follows successful drone-based undersowing of grass seed into standing maize during the 2025 trials.

"It's probably not something you'd do over large areas of maize, but it could be a useful back-up plan should you miss the opportunity to apply nutrients due to the weather, wet ground conditions, and/or rapid crop growth."

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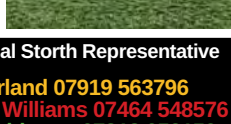


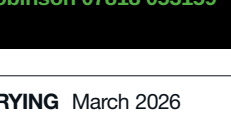









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phosphate (DAP) 'down the spout' applications," he adds.

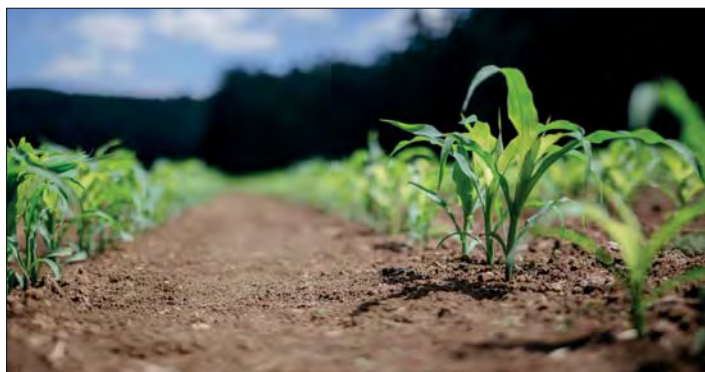
A key issue with DAP is that although soluble phosphate is initially readily available, if not taken up quickly by the roots, it can react with other nutrients in the soil like zinc, iron, calcium and magnesium, potentially causing localised deficiencies. "Protected phosphate products are not as reactive, so they remain available for longer," explains Tim Kerr, Crop Nutrition Manager at Hutchinsons.

Placing fertiliser

He also dismisses suggestions that placing fertiliser close to the seed could make plants 'lazy rooters'. "Plants can recognise when there is sufficient nutrient supply, and providing there is, they will keep growing."

Early nitrogen demand in maize is relatively low, as over half is needed between the eight-leaf stage and tasseling, with a further third required during cob fill. Meeting this later demand is challenging, though, as crops quickly become too tall for conventional farm machinery.

In summer, there is also a greater chance of dry conditions limiting



Strong rooting is critical for a crop's ability to 'mine' soil nutrients

plant uptake of granular nitrogen in dry soils, and an increased risk of losses through volatilisation. In warm, biologically active soils, nitrogen cycling can also occur more quickly, potentially further limiting the availability of nitrogen for plant uptake.

This is where protected, slow-release methylene urea (MU) products can be more effective, says Tim. "We've had many years of success with foliar-applied MU products in maize. They allow you to travel as late as you can through the crop but give a prolonged release of nitrogen over a six-to-eight-week period."

Trials suggest that a single 20-litre/ha application delivering 8kg/ha of nitrogen (N) can provide the equivalent response of 40kg N/ha of granular fertiliser, due to improved uptake efficiency.

Anecdotal evidence from leaf testing at the maize trials also showed notable differences between crops that received prilled granular nitrogen versus those treated with a slow-release foliar-protected urea product.

"Tests showed more nitrogen in the leaf where liquid nitrogen was used, compared with the prilled nitrogen," notes Jim. "That's largely down to the dry weather reducing

the crop's ability to pick nitrogen up from the soil, but it's something we're going to look at more in 2026 trials."

Another area of interest is the use of foliar-applied biostimulants which use naturally occurring bacteria like methylobacterium symbioticum, to convert atmospheric N into ammonium for the plant. Some products claim to deliver 20-30kg/ha of supplemental nitrogen. Bacteria enter the plant through stomata of young leaves, before colonising surrounding leaves, stems and roots, where they fix nitrogen throughout the plant's lifecycle.

Effective nitrogen use depends on the availability of other nutrients like zinc and manganese, warns Tim. "One way to get more from your nitrogen is to make sure all other nutrients and trace elements are there in sufficient quantity too."

Pre-season soil testing provides a useful overview of nutritional status, while in-season leaf testing can highlight emerging deficiencies. "Remember too that soil conditions, like pH, and seedbed quality, can also influence nutrient availability," says Tim. "High pH and poor seedbeds increase the likelihood of manganese and potash deficiencies, for example."



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Getting the best from maize this season

High winter rainfall could delay maize drilling in several parts of the country, so growers will need a flexible approach to early season management. British Dairying reports.

Variety selection will be even more critical this year unless soils dry considerably in the coming weeks, says Andrew Cook at seed breeder KWS. Ultra-early and early maize varieties have seen renewed interest as weather patterns become more extreme and unpredictable, with seed order books reflecting that trend.

“Many conventional hybrids need around 160 days to reach harvest maturity, and ultra-early and early varieties can be ready in as little as 130 days under favourable conditions,” says Andrew. “Also known as short-season varieties, they require fewer heat units to complete their growth cycle.

Competitive options

“That earlier maturity can be particularly useful in wet seasons, where drilling is delayed beyond the standard timing for the site. They also have a role in more marginal locations or where an early harvest is needed to create a window for winter cereals or cover crops. Historically, they were associated with yield penalties. But advances in breeding mean there are now highly competitive options, and in many situations, the trade-off will be worthwhile.”

Patience at drilling is always advisable, but it will be even more important after such a wet winter. “Wet soils are slow to warm up,” he stresses. “As a general guide, lighter soils should reach at least 8°C for three to four consecutive days before drilling begins. Heavier land requires more warmth, with temperatures closer to 12°C before travel and sowing are advisable.

“The KWS online soil temperature tool can support decision-making. It uses postcode information and local weather station data to provide



The seed rate should be tailored to the field conditions and end use

daily updates on soil temperature at a depth of 10cm.” When a seed is placed into cold ground, nutrient uptake is restricted, and early root growth is limited. That can affect plant vigour throughout the season, with negative consequences for harvest performance. “Every year, we see crops sown into soils that were not ready,” says Andrew. “The result is often slow and uneven emergence, and sometimes plant losses that are never fully recovered.

“There is also a strong drive to protect soils to reduce nutrient run-off and potential pollution issues, not to mention the risk of structural damage that can affect crop performance for years.”

Field tests

Before sowing, he suggests a simple field test. “If you are picking up soil on your boots, or a handful leaves shiny smears, then it is too wet for travel. Machinery should only be taken onto land when the top five to seven centimetres is friable. On some units, a subsoiler may be required as a first pass to relieve compaction and loosen below-ground structure.”

Understandably, growers aim to drill all their maize within the same window, as it helps to manage the workload. However, flexibility will be important this spring. Lighter, freer-draining fields could be sown first as one block, with heavier parts of the farm left until later in the season when conditions are more suitable.

Maize performs best in a seedbed that allows air movement while retaining warmth. Creating an overly fine tilth can be counterproductive. “Maize benefits from a slightly coarser finish,” explains Andrew. “If soils are worked too fine, they are more prone to capping after heavy

rainfall. A fine surface can also reflect sunlight rather than absorb it, meaning valuable soil heat is lost at a critical stage.”

Seed rate should also be tailored to field conditions and end use rather than following a standard figure. “Growers need to consider whether a field is exposed or sheltered, the fresh weight yield and starch characteristics of the chosen variety, and the drilling date,” he advises. “Water availability is also important. As a general rule, a modest reduction in plant population can help accelerate ripening and increase overall starch percentage. However, that must be balanced against the yield target.”

“There is increased focus on avoiding bare soils over winter.”

Correct drilling depth plays a significant role in crop resilience. From April through to early May, seed should typically be placed at three to five centimetres. As soil temperatures rise and surface conditions dry, the depth should increase to five to seven centimetres to maintain access to moisture. Later plantings may require placement at around seven centimetres and, in dry conditions, up to nine centimetres for even germination.

“Drilling too shallow can create problems,” Andrew warns. “On lighter soils especially, seedlings may struggle for moisture at a vulnerable stage, although a lot will depend on the weather. Shallow rooting can also increase the risk of lodging later in

the season, particularly on fertile sites. If buttress roots are clearly visible above ground, it is often a sign that the crop was not drilled deeply enough. Ideally, most of those roots should remain covered.”

Accuracy and consistency during drilling are equally important. Regular checks of drill settings help ensure seed placement remains uniform across the field. “Even spacing supports stronger root systems and better stem strength, and it allows plants to intercept light more effectively,” he says. “Double planting is particularly damaging. When two seeds are dropped into the same slot, the plants will compete, often resulting in weaker roots, smaller cobs and uneven maturity.”

Further approaches

Beyond establishment, more dairy producers are assessing systems like undersowing maize with grass or integrating double-cropping into the rotation. These approaches can deliver environmental and practical benefits.

Undersowing helps protect soil structure, reduce erosion risk and make use of excess moisture in wetter seasons. Double-cropping, like following maize with spring rye, can provide early grazing or an additional silage cut the following year. However, nutrient removal and water use must be considered.

“There is increased focus on avoiding bare soils over winter,” Andrew says. “Maintaining cover can help limit runoff and support soil structure. In some countries, undersowing is already compulsory. For businesses that have not yet tried these systems, starting on a small area may be a sensible way to evaluate how they fit within the rotation.”



Andrew Cook at seed breeder KWS



Double planting can impact the cobs

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Teamwork makes the maize work

For dairy farmer Peter Baillie and beef farmer Alastair Hargreaves, pooling labour, machinery and experience enables them to grow a larger area of maize. With guidance from their agronomist Tom Smith, it is a true team effort. British Dairying reports.

Peter Baillie is the eldest of four brothers farming at Sills Farm near Burscough, Lancashire, where 480 Holstein Friesians produce 10,000 litres/lactation at 4.3% butterfat and 3.14% protein.

The housed herd calves all-year-round and cows are fed on a total mixed ration (TMR) of grass and maize silage, supplemented with soya meal, rape meal and caustic wheat.

The Baillies grow 121ha of maize, two-thirds of which feeds their own herd, with the remaining third sold locally. "We've been growing maize for 20 years, so we've got a good idea of what does and doesn't work for us," Peter explains.



L-R: Alastair Hargreaves, Peter Baillie and Tom Smith work closely together to optimise maize production

"There aren't many bad maize varieties out there any more."

"But every year has the potential to throw a new challenge at us, so we work with Alastair Hargreaves to share resources and ideas about what we can do better."

Alastair, who runs a beef finishing unit at Walton-le-Dale near Preston, grows 93ha of maize, which is all sold to farmers in North Lancashire. "My customers either haven't got enough land to grow their own maize or are

in areas where it can't be grown due to the topography or climate," Alastair explains.

"Growing maize is such a labour-intensive process that I couldn't do it on my own, so I work with Peter and his brothers to share manpower and machinery. Working together makes growing maize less demanding and gives us the capacity to drill and harvest an additional 405ha for customers throughout Lancashire."

Both farmers stress that timing is key. "Irrespective of whether we're growing maize for ourselves or our customers, we always wait until conditions are as close to perfect as possible before putting the drill in the ground," says Peter. "It varies

each year, but we usually start drilling in April, using a Kverneland high-speed drill to get seed into the ground as quickly as possible while conditions are good."

And once the pair have found a variety that suits them, they are loyal to it. "When we find a variety we like, we stick with it until we know we've found a reliable and better yielding replacement," Alastair adds. "There aren't many bad maize varieties out there any more, but that doesn't mean we don't spend time looking at new options to improve yields and forage quality."

Recently, Alastair has relied on Prospect and P7326, both of which have shown good early season vigour and an early harvesting date.

"Prospect is usually a little lighter in terms of overall dry matter yield, but it makes up for it by delivering a high starch content," he explains. "In contrast, P7326 provides a bit more bulk, and because it dries down a bit more slowly, it complements Prospect by giving us a slightly wider harvesting window."

Multiple varieties

The Baillies also grow Prospect and P7326, but have also used MarcoPolo, Trooper and Highlight to suit their farm's wide range of soil types. "We've got everything from pure sand to peat mosses, so we use different varieties to suit each field," Peter explains. "Using multiple varieties also gives us some protection against

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unpredictable weather and uncertain harvesting conditions.”

In 2025, both farms trialled Sunset after ProCam Agronomist Tom Smith recommended the variety as a potential candidate for the future. “Sunset isn’t on the official maize descriptive list,” Tom explains. “But with an FAO of 170, excellent early vigour and good standing power, dry matter and starch yields, it’s an ideal companion to Alastair and Peter’s current choices. I persuaded them to try a few bags of Sunset in 2025, and we’ve been very pleased with the results.”

Alastair agrees, despite a slow start. “My crop looked a bit scruffy at first due to the drought, but it filled out well and produced plenty of starch thanks to its very full cobs,” he says. “It also withstood three strong storms and ripened quickly while remaining green until harvest. We’re always keen to try new varieties, and we trusted Tom’s judgement when he suggested Sunset. He’s an integral part of our team approach to growing maize successfully.”

Proven reliability

Sunset performed well on both farms in 2025, benefitting from plenty of sunlight and coping well with the dry conditions, although Tom stressed the need for reliability in diverse conditions. “With the weather so difficult to predict, it’s important to choose a variety with proven reliability in a range of conditions,” says Tom. “That means picking a variety with strong hybrid vigour so that it establishes quickly, and an early maturity rating so that it can be harvested in favourable conditions.”

Tom also emphasises the importance of seedbed preparation. “A good seedbed is vital,” he explains. “It’s therefore important to be patient before setting the drill in motion. A poorly established crop will struggle to recover, whereas a slightly later drilled crop; even one which goes in as late as May, will stand a much

better chance of catching up as the summer progresses.”

The growers also apply a pre-and/or post-emergence herbicide treatment to minimise weed competition. “We work closely with Tom on that front,” Peter explains.

“He knows what we’re trying to achieve and understands how our farms work, so we listen to his advice when it comes to deciding which variety to put where, and when and how to tackle weeds.”

Both farmers are long-standing advocates of cover cropping, which they see as essential for soil protection and environmental benefits. “We’ve both been growing cover crops for at least 15 years,” Alastair explains.

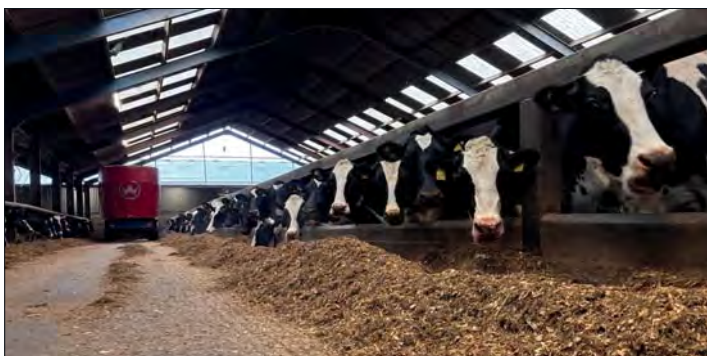
“It makes sense to use a cover crop to keep soil where it should be.”

“And certainly, since before any financial incentives became available. Some of Peter’s land is sloping, so it makes sense to use a cover crop to keep soil where it should be.

“Most of my land is flat, so the risk of soil erosion is lower, but it still makes sense to keep a living root in the ground to mop up any nutrients left over from the previous maize crop and to improve soil structure ahead of the next crop.

“We’ve historically grown Westerwolds, but more recently we’ve also used forage rye,” adds Alastair. “Receiving an environmental payment is a bonus, but protecting our soils and converting nutrients into a harvestable crop is much more beneficial, especially as the organic matter that the cover crops put back into the soil gives the following maize a better start.

“As a rough estimate, we get an additional 4.9t/ha, which is a huge advantage by any standard.”



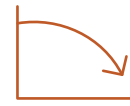
The Baillie brothers’ Sills Farm is home to 480 Holstein Friesians

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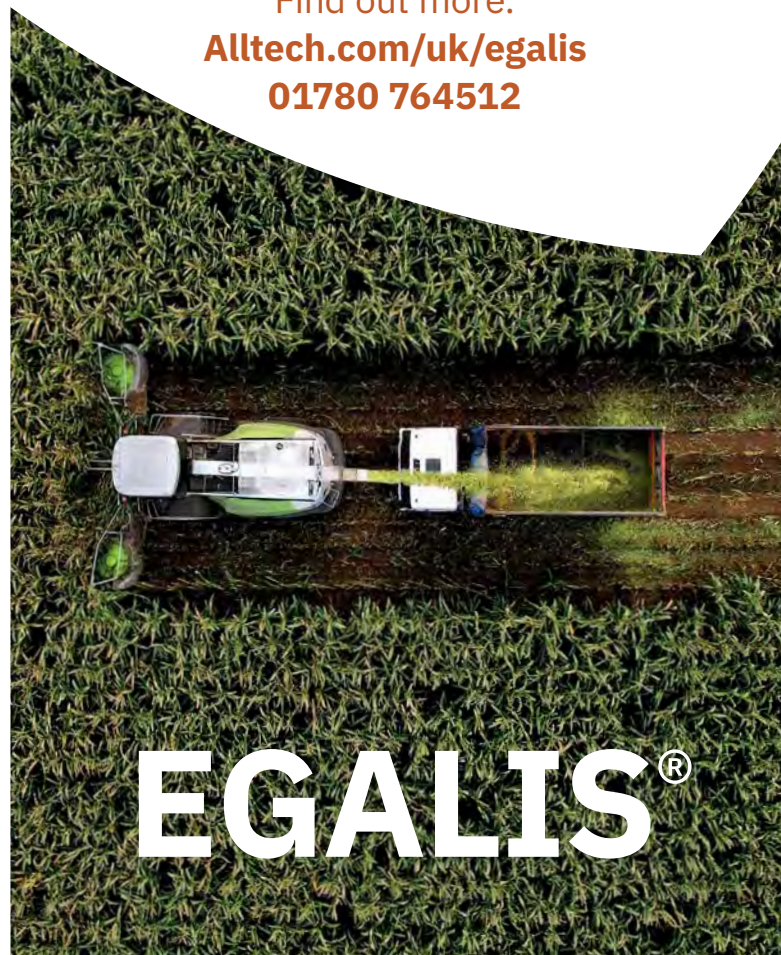
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Undersowing maize: A win for soil health

Undersowing maize can boost soil health and reduce environmental damage. But it's important to choose the right crop to avoid yield penalties, as British Dairying finds out.

Wetter than average, but not record-breaking' announced the Met Office, publishing its provisional winter statistics as February drew to a close. Yet that national declaration masks the true picture, as many English farmers will attest: At 35% greater than average, England has endured its wettest winter in more than a decade.

For growers looking out at waterlogged fields, fields that hosted 2025's maize crop might prompt the most concern, with worries about nutrient leaching, soil loss and watercourse pollution. While too late to combat current conditions, those planting a 2026 maize crop can be proactive about mitigating any repeat, according to Barenbrug's Agriculture Commercial Manager David Linton.

"Let's face it, maize is a high-risk crop for soil health."

"Undersowing maize is a terrifically simple undertaking, yet it remains something of a niche interest," he says. "It's got so much going for it: Retention of nutrients like phosphorus and nitrates, and the reduction in surface runoff helps to both prevent flooding elsewhere and the loss of valuable topsoil onto roads and into watercourses."

The practice fundamentally improves overall soil health and structure. "Let's face it, maize is a high-risk crop for soil health," notes David. "The cover crop that



David Linton at Barenbrug



Undersowing maize can offer benefits when it comes to soil health, grazing opportunities and the environment

undersowing provides is the single best move you can make to alleviate this effect, alongside other best practices like field selection and harvest timing."

As if good soil health were not enough of a reward, additional benefits include valuable winter grazing opportunities and an easier route towards meeting environmental obligations. "Then there's the economic argument: A grass catch-crop can generate a positive return on investment, in the form of a reduction in next year's bagged nitrogen requirement," he points out.

It's not too late to make plans to include undersowing in this year's maize crops, and there are several ways to achieve it, even without specialised equipment. "But more important than the method of drilling is your choice of the undersown variety. The wrong selection can have such a detrimental effect on the maize crop that you'll completely wipe out any benefit you've gained from retaining soil nitrogen," David warns.

"We see maize as a rather robust crop, but it's surprisingly vulnerable in early growth stages. Undersowing with anything that's overly competitive can have a deleterious effect on final yield. All that you've gained from nitrate retention and winter grazing might be wiped out by the depressed yield."

Italian ryegrasses (IRG) are often suggested as ideal for under-sowing. "But consider this: Why do we like IRG so much? It's one of the fastest growing grasses farmers can buy, and it germinates and establishes rapidly.

"At seedling stage, maize struggles to compete with other plants," he explains. "Competition for nutrients and moisture is most damaging during the first six weeks post-emergence. And as arable farmers will confirm, IRG is becoming a significant weed burden in cereal crops."

"So, you might not want to undersow your maize crop with IRG, especially if it's suggested to undersow in conjunction with the maize itself. Far better to let the maize establish, then go back into the crop with an inter-row drill."

Fescue to the rescue

To help growers avoid the 'IRG mistake', Barenbrug has developed a 'maize-friendly' green cover option, based on the company's tall fescue genetics. Fescue's deep-branched rooting system helps maintain soil structure and health post-harvest, as well as soaking up nutrients from a far greater volume of soil - and much deeper soil layers - than alternatives can offer.

In trials, the branched root system has shown an ability to enhance the

soil's 'bearing capacity'. In practice, this helps growers avoid or reduce the soil damage that heavy harvest machinery can cause. Studies show that the roots also sequester more carbon deeper into the soil profile; soil organic carbon, the major component of soil organic matter, is most stable at depths below 20cm.

"For those who might have been considering IRG, and growers concerned that any undersown crop could rob their maize of sunlight, moisture and minerals, this offers a dependable alternative," David says.

"It's been selected for traits that favour rapid germination - to get the seedling out of the soil - but far slower growth post-germination. These characteristics give it time to develop its deep, robust root system without presenting competition for the maize."

"What's more, the undersown grass gives growers improved confidence to harvest when they want, when the crop is right, without the worry about structural damage to the soil or the cover crop itself, while providing all the benefits of soil and nutrient retention."

Undersowing maize: A summary

- Soil health-boosting practice
- Consider 'maize-friendly' alternative to Italian ryegrass
- Proterra Maize, a crop specific cover crop, is based on Barenbrug's tall fescue technology

- Use in forage and anaerobic digestion situations
- Sowing rate of 12kg/ha
- Drill when maize is at six to eight leaves
- Use an inter-row drill
- Benefits include better soil structure, improved carbon sequestration and reduced soil erosion and nutrient loss.

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Living a day in the life of... a farm assurance assessor

As part of our Day in the Life series, Farm Assurance Assessor Jim Franklin tells us how he carries out Red Tractor assessments and supports farmers in the process.

Having spent 30 years milking a herd of 150 Holstein Friesian cows, calving all year round, there's no place I'd rather be than out on the farm, working with farmers. After leaving dairy farming, I was unsure what to do next, but my role as a Red Tractor assessor has allowed me to stay connected and support farmers in the sector. It's opened my eyes to the different systems and innovative practices being used across the agricultural industry.

I typically visit one site a day to give farmers a good amount of time, and to ensure I don't rush the process. This also means that every day offers something different, which I thoroughly enjoy. I travel the Scottish Borders, across Wales, down to Oxford and to Somerset, meeting farmers from dairy, beef, lamb, and arable sectors. They're all working hard to produce high-quality British food in their own way - because of who they are, where they are and what they're trying to achieve on their farm.

“It's important to establish a positive relationship with the farmers.”

My preparation starts well before I set foot on a farm. About three weeks before each assessment, I will ring the farm to confirm the booking and details. During this call, I also check if they're using the Red Tractor portal, which offers a great way to help prepare for an assessment. It's not a requirement, but if they are using the portal, I check they're aware of its features and ask farmers to make sure their documents are uploaded 48 hours in advance of my visit to their farm.

This ensures I have time to review everything before I arrive. On the day of the assessment, I make sure I have the farm details ready, and all the essentials packed - a fully charged



As a former dairy farmer himself, Jim understands the challenges and tries to form good relationships on visits

laptop, checklist, the Red Tractor standards, pen and paper, and a clean pair of wellies and waterproofs.

When I arrive on the farm, the first step is to introduce myself to the farmer and explain exactly what I'm there to carry out, and the order for the next two to three hours. It's important to establish a positive relationship with the farmers I assess.

I know that they take pride in what they do, so I listen and reassure them that my role isn't to catch anyone out. My job is to record the high standards they're working to through consistent protocols, and a fair and open dialogue.

Understanding requirements

I am there to learn about how they farm, to share knowledge, and to aid their understanding of what the requirements of the standards are, which, when delivered with politeness, honesty, and a willingness to listen, is received positively. By the time I'm suited up, I have a good idea of how the farm is run and its layout, and the farmer knows what I'm there to look for.

I then start the walk around the farm, generally going from clean to dirty, beginning in the parlour, then moving to the cows, medicine cabinets, calf rearing, and so on. Next, we undertake a couple of audit trails - usually over a cup of tea - which involve reviewing the necessary

paperwork and documentation used to capture objective evidence within the requirements of the standard.

During this closing meeting, I provide a summary of what we've seen and any non-conformances that need addressing. This is the time to answer any final questions and try to support the farmer as much as possible.

Even with my background in dairy farming, as a self-employed farm assurance assessor, I know that I need to keep learning to stay current. I'm regularly assessed to ensure that my knowledge is up-to-date.

Every five years, I undergo animal welfare training with AssureWel and partake in annual mobility scoring exams with the Register of Mobility Scorers (RoMS). In addition, I have a witnessed assessment every

two years, where a senior assessor accompanies me on farm to observe my work.

I also use the Red Tractor Online Academy and participate in webinars to make sure I'm aware of any changes in standards and protocols across the dairy, beef, lamb and crop sectors. My experience as a dairy farmer has proved to be one of the biggest assets in my role, particularly as one of the main misconceptions about assessors is that they don't have the agricultural knowledge and experience.

Empathy with farmers

On top of my knowledge, 30 years in farming has allowed me to empathise with the farmers I meet. I know what it's like to feel nervous about an assessment, and to be on the other side of the table, having been through the same process myself. But I believe this experience makes me better at what I do.

On most occasions, I know the mindset I'm walking into, and the challenges farmers are facing, meaning I can approach each assessment with an understanding that every farm is unique. I'm proud to still be part of the industry I've always cared about, and if I can help farmers feel supported, confident and recognised for the standards they work hard to achieve, then I know I'm doing my job well.



Jim Franklin, Red Tractor assessor



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Historic farm invests in the latest technology for its future growth

After upgrading to new milking robots, Clifton Hall Farm has improved its fertility management and lifted yields. British Dairying discovers how using data to drive decisions – provided by new herd management software – is shaping its future growth.

Following the installation of new milking robots in 2024, Will Holliday has increased yields and improved cow health by using the data provided via new herd management software.

A relative pioneer of robotic technology, Will's father, John, installed DeLaval Classic robots at Clifton Hall Farm near Penrith in 2016 following a shortfall in labour. Almost a decade later, Will is taking the reins and has chosen to upgrade the robots to V300 models, using data from DeLaval's DelPro system to run the herd.

“We can focus our time on the ones that need it the most.”

“Mathers Dairy installed our first Classic robots and, working with them, I chose to upgrade because it was more financially viable for the farm than servicing the old system. The V300s are two minutes faster and draw more milk. Plus, with the new DeLaval Plus system, I am using data to run the herd, which is saving time and resources,” says Will.



Will Holliday farms with his father, John, and is seeking to expand the herd onto a second dairy site

The robot groups no longer require routine vet visits, with Will relying instead on the robots' progesterone testing system for fertility management and data generated at each milking to flag any cow health concerns.

“The robots can detect heat and disease risk and identify drops in productivity that alert us to any potential health concerns. Our cell counts have almost halved and are currently at 70,000 cells/ml. The new teat cleaning system, a better camera

to locate the teat and new cluster technology have left us with almost no early lactation mastitis. We have also seen robot visits increase from an average of 2.6 to three per day,” he says.

The family has been farming at Clifton Hall for 90 years, and currently milk 420 pedigree Holsteins, with 230 higher-yielding cows on the robot system. The remainder are milked through the farm's old DeLaval 14/14 herringbone parlour.

“We have a historic mix of buildings dating back to the 15th century, so building a new shed to house all the parlour cows on a robot system was never really an option,” says Will. “Instead, we have upgraded our parlour to use DeLaval Evanza clusters replacing the previous 20-year-old Harmony clusters. This has decreased time spent in the milking parlour and we have also found a large reduction in late lactation mastitis.”

John installed the original robots to support the farm's desire to expand. Without the space to install a rotary or similar large parlour, robots were the obvious route after the herd had grown from 150 to 400 in-milk between 1990 and 2016.

“Upgrading to the new V300s enabled us to add a further 20 to the herd, which now stands at 420,” notes Will. “We have separated the high yielders from the lows and continue using the parlour. We were early adopters of robot technology and have worked closely with Mathers to improve the system.”

While there is little opportunity to expand on the current tenanted farm, Will intends to install a further three robots on a second site to milk a further 180 cows.

A new dairy

“We are farming 352ha of largely grassland with a bit of wholecrop, and we are lucky that we can make good forage from that to support a growing herd. We are rearing beef cattle at the second farm but will sell the beef herd to make way for a new dairy.”

Will's ambitious nature is not speculative, but built on hard facts. Using data from the robots, he has driven the herd average up to 11,500 litres/cow per year and believes the same system can be replicated at another site.



The farm first installed robotic milkers in 2016, and recently upgraded

Continued on page 52.



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Continued from page 50.

"Dairying is a scalable business as long as the foundations are strong. My father and I have worked hard to establish a system at Clifton Hall that is as efficient as it has ever been. I can see that leveraging the technology we have can bring us greater efficiencies and productivity both here and at the new site," he says.

Keen to improve both operational efficiency and productivity, he intends to invest in DeLaval's behaviour analysis (BA) software. Using ear tags, this can flag issues for individual cows, including fertility and rumination. The analysis provides accurate bulling behaviour alerts and identifies insemination windows, shown in 12-hour timelines that pinpoint the optimum time to serve each cow.

"With data from the robots, I can act quickly and plan more accurately."

"It is all about being able to act faster to reduce any downturn in milk production or more significant cow health issues like mastitis or ketosis. I also see technology as a labour saver because, rather than having to attend to each cow, we can focus our time on the ones that need it the most," he says.

All fieldwork is handled on-farm apart from drilling and combining. Will and his father have worked proactively with neighbouring farms to pool machinery, which has reduced the farm's capital expenditure and reliance on contractors.

"I operate as head herdsman and joint farm manager with my father," says Will. "We have an apprentice every year, two milkers, one general farm worker, two tractor operators, and several self-employed staff. Many staff members have dual rolls to maintain flexibility. We aim for a 42-hour week



Data from the robots and ear tags can flag different issues for individual cows, enabling early intervention

so that everyone gets a day off in the week and every other weekend. This is important, especially for younger members of staff," he says.

Despite some of the land being in a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone (NVZ), the farm has optimised slurry use to reduce bought-in fertiliser. An investment into a 1.2m-gallon slurry store was needed to collect slurry, especially between October and February when applications are restricted by NVZ rules or prevented by ground conditions.

"The new storage has helped us save on fertiliser and we have our own umbilical kit to reduce soil compaction. This year has been a bumper year for forage, which is strange when much of the country has had drought," says Will.

In the North West, conditions have been ideal for grass and his multi-cut silage system yielded a first cut with 16.5% protein and 11.9MJ/kg metabolisable energy (ME). However, he concedes quality is down on later cuts, with neutral

detergent fibre (NDF) over 50% and ME below 11MJ/kg. "It might be a record amount of forage grown, but it is not the best quality. This year I am hoping to move to a 30-day system, but, with unpredictable weather, it will be a challenge. I will be happy if we can achieve five cuts," he adds.

With more time to concentrate on improving the overall system, he has also been working hard on the herd's genetics. The farm's cull rate has been higher than normal at 37%, and he expects this to fall to around 20% in the year ahead.

"We have had a lot of new heifers, fresh genetics and genomic testing over the past two years, to improve the herd for the future. Big improvements have been made with youngstock, and we have gone from a profitable lifetime index (PLI) of 100 to nearly 500 at the same time as pulling out older, harder to manage cows. We also use a custom breeding index based on our Arla milk contract and data from the robots," he says.

Even small adjustments based on robot data have delivered measurable gains in cow productivity and health. "We noticed foot health suffered in the hot weather, so we installed VES Artex fans. We have since seen lameness reduce from nearly 20% to just two percent. It has also improved butterfats, somatic cell counts and cow flow," he says.

Similarly, the farm introduced AutoHoofClean mats at the exit of each robot. "They are easier to maintain than footbaths and have contributed to reducing our digital dermatitis from 40% to two percent," notes Will.

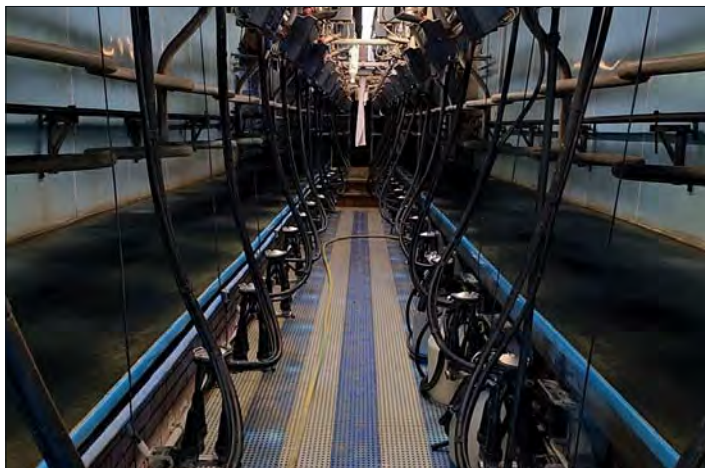
Five years of data

"Using historic foot trimming data from five years of recording - to establish improvements that can be made to reduce cases of digital dermatitis and other cases of lameness - the data is extremely extensive and has taken a lot of time to analyse, but it has given us an advantage," he adds.

With the new robots well bedded-in after more than a year of milking, Will believes the data offers further scope for incremental improvements - and supports his plans for growth.

"With data from the robots, I can act quickly and plan more accurately. Instead of using more man hours we are relying on the robots to provide us with the data to be less hands-on. This is essential if we are going to take on more cows and another site, because I will rely on the data to manage the farm without necessarily being on-site.

"Like any business investment it comes with risks, but I feel we are ready and it is an exciting prospect."



The farm also operates a parlour as the older buildings don't suit robots

Clifton Hall: In figures

- **352ha** (324ha rented, 28ha owned)
- **420** pedigree Holsteins in-milk
- Housed and calved all year
- **4.7%** fat
- **3.6%** protein
- **11,500** litres/cow per annum
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The AI revolution: Why farmer-owned data co-operatives are crucial to dairy

Dairy farmers have just three years to form partnerships to take control of the artificial intelligence revolution, according to one US Nuffield Scholar. Mike Abram reports.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is already enhancing dairy farms through technology like automated milking systems, cow wearables, health monitoring cameras and feeding automation.

But for it to be truly transformative, individual data streams need to stop being siloed. And instead they must be used in a single, unified system which provides whole-system intelligence, according to a report by US Nuffield Scholar and Michigan dairy farmer Paul Windemuller.

A turning point

Compiled after visiting 15 countries, including the UK, Paul suggests the livestock industry is at a significant turning point, with AI enabling a revolution in decision-making. "It will enable farms to move from intuition-led management to insight-led ecosystems," he says.

While dairy farming generates an enormous amount of data from sensors on cows, robotic milking systems, feed and forage analytics, genomic profiles and health records,



Paul (right) visited Andy Macfarlane's farm during his Nuffield study tour

it lacks a system that turns that data complexity into clarity. "In theory, this data could allow us to close the gap between average performance and optimal biological or economic potential in the dairy sector."

The answer, Paul believes, is in advanced AI modelling of dairy systems. "But it will require co-ordinated innovation - farmer-controlled data platforms, transparent AI models, skilled advisers who can interpret outputs, and business models that share value fairly between farmers, software providers and downstream partners."

Problem solving

Currently, on many farms, AI is being used to solve one problem well - whether it is detecting heat events with wearable sensors, monitoring milk flow with robotic systems or tracking activity with cameras.

These tools deliver value, but in isolation - they don't connect to other systems and require manual interpretation. Increasingly, though, leading companies are starting to build platforms that unify data streams across key areas,

like health, reproduction, nutrition and environment.

One example is Gea's acquisition of CattleEye. "By plugging CattleEye's AI-powered lameness monitoring into a broader platform, Gea can combine vision data with milk production, cow condition and behaviour trends."

The result is platforms that will unlock the real value of

AI by generating compound insights that emerge when multiple data streams converge, Paul says. "This tipping point is what I call the holistic insight threshold - it's the moment when AI shifts from adding value to transforming strategy."

"A platform that knows your feed inventory, cow genetics, forage and milk quality, and parlour performance can simulate future scenarios, align decisions with business goals and prioritise trade-offs across the entire system. Farms that cross this threshold will pull away from the pack."

"Today, much of the data generated on farms flows outwards."

But developing these integrated platforms comes with potential risks for farmers. Already awash with disconnected tech, no farmer wants yet another dashboard or app, Paul says. "They want one system that works, but they don't want to surrender choice in the process. The danger is that whichever company succeeds first in unifying dashboards and data

Five ways AI can create value in dairy farming

- Efficiency - AI can continuously fine-tune operations based on real-time data, for example, by improving feed efficiency or adjusting milking routines
- Longevity - detects subtle health changes before clinical symptoms appear, allowing for earlier interventions, extending productive lifespans, reducing culling rates and lowering replacement costs
- Labour - empowers a leaner team to do more with less, helping less experienced workers to succeed with the guidance of timely insights
- Insight - it's not just automation. It will also help managers to see interactions and trade-offs invisible to the naked eye by integrating data streams across the business
- Profitability - AI solutions that deliver clear, measurable returns will drive widespread adoption.

Is your farm ready? Use LARI to check

Paul has developed an index that evaluates farms' readiness to adopt AI. The Livestock AI Readiness Index (LARI) helps identify where the gaps are in the business to help identify where investment is required.

It uses four pillars:

- Data maturity - are relevant data streams already being collected, and is the data labelled accurately and stored in accessible formats?
- Integration readiness - are current systems connected, and can existing hardware and software support AI integration?
- Team capacity and culture - does the team have digital literacy and openness to data-driven decision-making, and is there a willingness to adapt workflows and trust AI recommendations?
- Infrastructure and connectivity - are broadband speeds sufficient for cloud-based systems, and are sensor and hardware upgrades needed?

Each pillar is scored on a 1-5 scale, from unprepared (for example, no digital records or connectivity) through emerging (basic sensors), developing (fragmented systems), ready (integrated systems, trained team) to optimised (fully AI-integrated farm).

streams could leverage that position to dominate the market, forcing producers into closed ecosystems," he warns.

It's the kind of lock-in that erodes the flexibility farmers depend on to choose genetics, feed systems and management tools that fit their

operation. "True progress will come not from monopolisation, but from open standards and permissioned data flows that allow multiple providers to plug into the same backbone. Farmers don't want a single company controlling the future of digital agriculture."

Avoiding such an outcome requires a structural shift where farmers move from being passive data providers to active owners of data assets, Paul believes. "Today, much of the data generated on farms flows outwards to equipment manufacturers, software providers, consultants and industry bodies," he says. "Too often it leaves the farm with little transparency or control, and then its value is captured elsewhere. But if data is the fuel for AI, then farmers must be the ones holding the keys to the fuel tank."

To enable this, Paul proposes the creation of data co-operatives. Just like traditional agricultural co-ops, these would be farmer-owned and farmer-governed, guaranteeing data ownership stays with farmers, ensuring they control access and permissions.

He envisages that each farm within the co-op contributes anonymised data streams, like milk yields, health

records and sensor outputs, through secure, standardised protocols.

Technical specialists employed by the co-op would help clean, standardise and optimise data to maximise the value of the information provided. This would allow the co-op to negotiate partnerships with AI companies to develop decision-support platforms tailored specifically to member needs.

Accurate insights

"Systems trained on this aggregated dataset would produce insights and tools that are far more accurate and contextually relevant than anything built from fragmented or global data alone."

The co-op could then license anonymised, aggregated data to researchers and industry partners for a fee, meaning the value would remain with the farmers producing it. But time is short for such co-ops to form, he stresses. "I think we have 24 to 36 months to figure it out - if we don't, the ship will have sailed. Manufacturers of these technologies will have consolidated and will be in position to sell the insights your data creates and monetise it for themselves."

Why do some countries adopt dairy AI more easily than the UK?

The UK is lagging behind other countries in its readiness to adopt AI, according to Paul, and a lot of it comes down to the complexity of our dairy systems and focus on a low-cost model. Other countries that are in a better position to adopt AI more rapidly either have simpler systems or more capital availability.

New Zealand, for example, designs its dairy operations to be straightforward and consistent. Practices like block calving, prioritising grazing, and organising cows into large, similar groups reduce the number of decisions needed each day. As a result, technology can easily take over tasks like moving cows or co-ordinating grazing schedules - part of the reason why no-fence technology designed by Halter has scaled quickly in the past 12 months, Paul says.

In contrast, farms in the US tend to be fully housed, large-scale, and extensively automated. Instead of simplifying their processes, they overcome complexity with machinery, sensors, and personnel, enabling AI systems to optimise activities continuously behind the scenes.

The UK's approach lies somewhere between these models. It includes seasonal patterns similar to New Zealand's but without their simplicity, and it shares some of the complexity seen in the US, yet lacks comparable financial resources. This creates heavy decision loads for farmers, a challenge where AI tools often fall short - they add notifications but rarely reduce workloads.

There is some hope though, Paul suggests. Costs of hardware are reducing - ear tags that cost one-tenth as much as collars, for example, provide an opportunity to benefit from data at a much lower price point than previously. "And that's an opportunity."



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Are smart sensors earning their place on a range of dairy farms?

Technology can bring benefits to farms in better health management and efficiency, but what should producers be aware of before investing? Danusia Osiowy finds out.

Smart sensors are increasingly becoming a part of the operational backbone of modern dairy farms. As herd sizes grow and labour tightens, with management time under pressure, technology is shifting from an optional extra to a practical decision-support tool. But sensors only add value if they work for the farmer, not against them.

"The gold standard for any type of technology is a human being," says Rob Morrison, Head of Farms at the UK Agri-Tech Centre.

"Don't become a slave to the technology; it has to work for you."

"Sensors are not there to replace good stockmanship - they are there to strengthen it. The reason we use sensors on-farm to collect data is to try and help the farmer, to give more information for that decision-making process."

No stockperson can be everywhere at once, and the strength of sensor technology lies in consistency. While a sensor may be limited in capability, that is also its advantage. "It can do one thing, but it can do it again and again repeatedly."



Sensor technology provides early warnings, helping dairy farmers manage herd health more effectively

That repetition establishes a reliable baseline, making subtle changes far easier for farmers to detect before they escalate. Early warning is often where sensor systems begin to justify their investment, particularly as the cost of missed health issues - from disease treatment to lost yield - continues to rise. "Sometimes we see things happening, but we're acting on the causes. We are not looking at the triggers that happen in the first place," says Rob.

Spotting those triggers earlier allows quicker intervention. In mastitis cases, for instance, quicker action can help farmers avoid antibiotic use and protect overall herd performance. As with any tool on farm, the real test is not what

the technology promises but how reliably it performs on an ordinary working day.

Rob is equally clear that technology choice must be farm specific. "There is not one technology that's good. Every farm has a different need."

The right output

As herd sizes increase and farm numbers reduce, selecting the right mix of tools is becoming a strategic management decision rather than a technical one. However, he warns farmers to choose the right output rather than novelty.

"Don't select technology then become a slave to the technology; it has to work for you. Farmers should consider who supports the

system, how it is maintained and how much daily input is required before committing capital."

Data connectivity is another critical factor. "The last thing you want is to have a technology where you have to double enter figures. Systems with open application programming interfaces (APIs) allow data to move between platforms, protecting farmers from being locked into a single supplier and adding long-term operational value," he explains.

Rob's final advice is straightforward and encourages farmers not to be afraid of using such technology. "Just ensure it fits into your farming system, and before you spend remember it has to add value to your farm."

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'Don't let "Cowslip" down'

Pressures driving sensor adoption:

- Lameness, fertility issues and poor body condition reduce output
- Visual checks often identify problems too late
- Larger herds increase the need for continuous monitoring.

Good systems must deliver:

- Accurate data in real farm conditions
- Reliable performance in harsh environments
- Continuous, real-time monitoring
- Low burden on farmers
- API connectivity with other systems
- Independent validation.

Questions to ask before buying:

- What problem am I trying to solve?
- How much daily input is required?
- Who provides support and maintenance?
- Can the data move if I change suppliers?

More funding available for vet visits

In this issue's Farm Vet Opinion, Matt Berriman, Senior Clinical Director at Rosevean Veterinary Practice, part of the VetPartners Group, highlights why the updated Animal Health and Welfare Review can be a gamechanging opportunity for dairy farmers.

As a farm vet, it's great to see that Defra's updated Animal Health and Welfare Review now offers farmers the opportunity to apply for funding for up to three reviews and three follow-up visits per species. As well as maintaining herd productivity and preventing costly health issues on farm, the purpose is to ensure regular focus on biosecurity, especially important with risks like Bluetongue ever present.

The addition of funded follow-up visits is a welcome change, as they will significantly enhance the effectiveness of these initial consultations. Follow-ups allow us to monitor the progress of changes we've implemented and make necessary adjustments throughout the year.

This ensures ongoing issues, like calf health, mastitis, parasite management, and biosecurity concerns are consistently addressed



The BTV risk is starting to increase

and adapted to changing conditions. It helps us, along with our farm clients, stay proactive and prevent larger problems before they develop.

The improved funding available is now up to £447/farm - to include bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) testing - plus £258 per biosecurity follow-up

visit. This package means that farmers don't have to shoulder the cost of those vet visits, but do benefit from increased productivity.

As a vet, it means we can dedicate more time to monitoring specific areas of concern, like planning vaccination timings to ensure they are as effective as possible.

Bluetongue vaccination

One area we're focusing on this season is on Bluetongue (BTV-3) vaccination, as with warmer weather on the horizon, the risk of infection is increasing. Protection from vaccination takes up to six weeks to kick in - factoring in the three weeks between first and second injections - so it's essential to get going now to ensure the herd is fully protected ahead of the high-risk period.

The funded visits are a perfect opportunity to ensure your BTV

vaccination plan is tailored to the herd's needs; maximising the effectiveness of the vaccine, fitting with the booster cycle and therefore getting a good return on investment.

It's good to see the application process has been simplified too, making it easy for farmers to claim. Follow-up visits can be claimed up until September 2027, meaning you'll have plenty of time to make the most of this support.

So, if you haven't already, I strongly encourage you to apply for this scheme. Whether you're looking to address specific health concerns, monitor treatments, or ensure your herd is protected for the season ahead, these visits offer a real opportunity to improve herd health without additional costs. This funding means we can make time for the kind of proactive health management that pays off in the long run.



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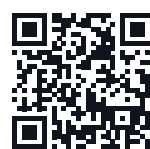
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The Big Little Farmer influencer lays foundations for a resilient business

Dairy farmer and social media influencer Tom Parkinson, better known online as The Big Little Farmer, has swapped Lancashire for a new chapter in the Midlands. With a new tenancy secured, British Dairying finds out how the move is shaping his future.

Farming has long been a passion for Tom Parkinson and his wife, Georgia, so when the opportunity arose to take on a County Council tenancy in Staffordshire, they jumped at the chance. The couple secured a 10-year Farm Business Tenancy at Lane End Farm, Haughton, taking on the holding in November last year.

Formerly a dairy unit but left vacant for the past five years, the farm required investment and work to bring it back into full production. Just three months in, Tom says progress has been encouraging, with buildings brought up to scratch and the cows settling in well.

“Georgia has always been keen to install a milk vending machine.”

Tom previously farmed in Lancashire with a herd of 67 Holstein and Jersey all-year-round calving cows. But when that tenancy came to an end, he faced a difficult decision. Determined not to give up on his farming ambitions, the move south



The farm currently has 67 Holstein and Jersey cows, but Tom is moving to all Jerseys in the coming two years

has provided a fresh opportunity to rebuild and plan for the future.

Since taking on the 34ha, fully grassland farm, Tom has installed a new 8/16 GEA swingover parlour, fitted by Yorkshire Dairy Services. The cows have transitioned well, with only minor issues around lameness due to stones.

Alongside the milking herd, Tom currently rears 27 head of youngstock, with some beef-cross

calves sold through Market Drayton before six weeks of age. Looking ahead, he aims to build the herd to 85-90 cows and transition to an all-Jersey system within the next two years.

Milk is currently supplied to Wells Dairy, where it is bottled for local distribution. “We’re keen to switch to Jerseys as they’re a better fit for the cubicles on the farm,” explains Tom. “Georgia has always been keen to install a milk vending machine, which will work well with Jersey milk. The location, close to several large villages and towns, should also support that.”

The best start

Ensuring calves get off to the best possible start is central to Tom’s plans to grow the herd. He aims to calve heifers at two years of age, which means they need to reach at least 60% of mature weight; approximately 270kg for Jerseys, by breeding at around 15 months old.

Key to achieving this is good calving management and ensuring calves receive high-quality colostrum to support immunity in the crucial first days of life. Every cow is given an electrolyte solution, Nettex Fresh Calver, as soon as the calf is born.

“It provides energy and calcium and has helped reduce the risk of milk fever,” says Tom. “It really gets them going. We had a Jersey calve recently, and within 20 minutes of giving the electrolyte, she was up and moving. It helps get the cow going and the calf onto colostrum, and we

Lane End Farm:

- 10-year County Council Farm Business Tenancy (started November 2025)
- 34ha (all grassland)
- 67 Holstein and Jersey cows currently; aiming for an all Jersey herd of 85-90 cows in the next two years
- Non replacement cows put to Aberdeen Angus or British Blue
- Calves sold through Market Drayton before six weeks old
- Average yields: Holsteins: 8,398 litres, butterfat 4.3% and protein 3.49%. Jerseys: 5,722 litres, butterfat 5.55% and protein 3.97%
- Calving all-year round, with a calving interval of 382 days
- Selling to Wells Dairy (bottled for local distribution)
- 27 head of youngstock



Tom Parkinson now farms in Staffordshire with his wife Georgia

also find it helps support the cow to cleanse properly.”

Once born, calves are left with their dam to suckle before being moved to a dedicated calf rearing area. They are housed in individual straw-bedded pens and fed their own dam's colostrum and transition milk for the first three to four days via teat buckets.

“The calves seem much brighter, much sooner.”

Calves are then grouped in pens of five and fed 2.5 litres of whole milk twice a day (equivalent to 18% of birth weight) for the first eight to 10 weeks of life, before being gradually weaned over a week and moved into loose housing.

From birth, calves are offered water, feed pellets and straw to support rumen development. If insufficient colostrum is available from the calf's own dam, frozen colostrum from another cow is used, or a high-quality



Calves are fed colostrum and transition milk, with electrolytes given twice daily to any that have scours

colostrum replacer, which Tom says he always keeps on hand.

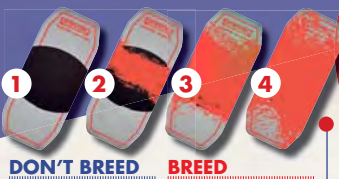
Calves are typically achieving daily liveweight gains of 0.7-0.8kg, helping them stay on track to reach target weight at breeding. Tom has experienced some issues with scours since the move, which he attributes to the stress of a new environment. However, he says electrolyte feeding has helped the calves recover quickly and avoid setbacks to growth.

“We've been giving Hydra Power Calf Electrolyte to any scouring calves,” says Tom. “We give one sachet in the morning and one at night for 48 hours, and we've found it really does the job; the scours disappear quickly. The calves seem much brighter, much sooner, which is exactly what we want, especially for our dairy replacements.”

Hygiene is also a priority, with calving pens mucked out and

disinfected between cows, and calves kept in stable groups until weaning. Calf jackets are used from birth, and calves are vaccinated against key pathogens like pneumonia, with vaccines administered by a vet tech to ensure correct timing and technique. While the move hasn't been without its challenges, Tom believes the foundations are firmly in place to build a resilient, efficient dairy business.

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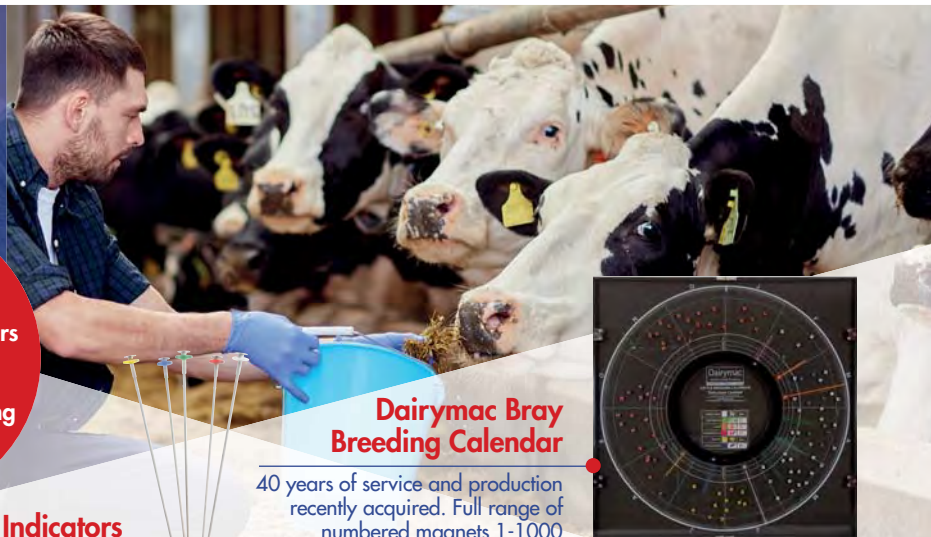
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Farmers' verdict: Silage additives

In the quest for better forage preservation, silage additives can help preserve nutrients during fermentation and reduce spoilage. But which products should farmers trust? British Dairying and Kingshay unveil the results from the latest Tried and Tested report.

Choosing products you can genuinely trust is hard. That's why British Dairying and Kingshay joined forces to offer honest, experience-based feedback from other farmers who have already tried them in a real-world setting. Our latest survey focuses on silage additives, an area that directly affects forage quality, feed value and ultimately profitability.

For many farms, forage remains the single largest home-produced feed resource, so any improvement in clamp stability or feed-out performance can make a meaningful difference to margins. "While some losses are unavoidable, many can be reduced with good management," says Sarah Bolt at Kingshay.

"Trust and familiarity are powerful influences."

"Silage additives are widely used to limit these issues by supporting fermentation and reducing spoilage. Their value tends to be greatest when conditions are challenging, dry matter is high, or the risk of aerobic instability increases."

In those situations, an additive can help protect the feed value. But with over 24 suppliers offering a bewildering range of products, choosing the right one for a particular farm and season can be a minefield, especially when the science behind different bacterial strains and enzyme blends is not always easy to compare.



Silage additives can be useful to preserve nutrients during fermentation

In our latest survey, two thirds of respondents ran grazing-focused systems. The most common were all-year-round calving herds with a grazing emphasis, and autumn or split block-calving systems, each representing 29% of respondents. Herd size ranged dramatically, from 65 to 1,400 cows, with the average herd milking 333 cows. Yields also varied widely, from 4,000 to 13,000 litres/cow annually, averaging 8,587 litres. This breadth of participants ensures the results reflect a wide variety of practical situations, farming styles, ground conditions and forage expectations.

The survey gathered detailed information about firstcut silage in 2025. Ley age varied, with 23% of fields being over five years old and 20% younger than three, while most (57%) fell between three and five years. Altogether, respondents harvested 3,706ha for first cut, with individual farm areas ranging from 30 to 570ha, averaging 106ha.

Clover was present in most swards; 51% reported medium to high clover content, while 17% had none.

Herbal leys were far less common, with nearly two thirds of farmers cutting no diverse swards at all, although around a third did include some herbal leys in their first cut. Even then, most took less than 25% of their silage from these diverse mixes. "As mixed-species swards continue to gain interest in the industry, these results offer a timely snapshot of where adoption currently stands," says Sarah.

First cuts

Cutting dates stretched from April 1 to June 5, with a noticeable concentration early in the season, as would be expected. By the end of April, 43% of farmers had already taken their first cut, and by mid-May, 86% had completed it.

Encouragingly, 94% sent samples of their silage for laboratory analysis, whether directly or via their

nutritionist, and 86% felt the feeding quality of their silage matched or exceeded what the analysis had suggested. Fermentation quality was also highly rated, with 91% describing it as good or very good. Feed value earned similarly positive ratings, with 89% saying it was good or very good, and 83% reporting good or very good animal performance from their first cut.

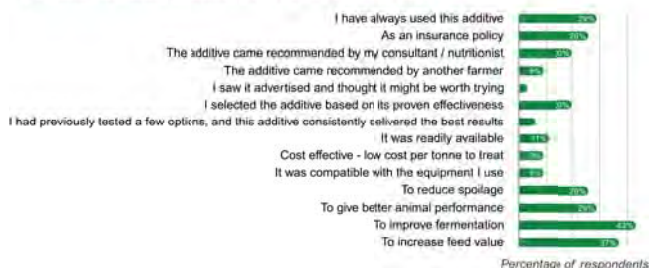
Silage additive use was widespread - 71% of respondents applied an additive to their first cut, which accounted for 2,348ha; 63% of the total area harvested. Nearly all followed the manufacturer's recommended application rate. Only two farmers deviated; one due to miscalculation, using 92% of the recommended rate, and one who deliberately applied two thirds of the advised amount.

All or nothing?

"This raises an important question for the industry - whether underdosing risks losing the benefits entirely," says Sarah. "If so, is using the correct rate or not using an additive at all a better strategy? It also highlights the importance of accurate calibration and yield estimation; small misjudgements can have effects beyond just cost saving."

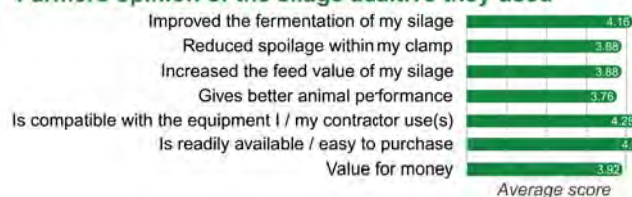
When farmers were asked why they chose a particular additive, the most common reason, selected by 43%, was to improve fermentation. A further 37% aimed to increase feed value, and 29% were motivated by the desire for better animal performance. Remarkably, another 29% admitted they simply continued using a product they had always used, a reminder that habit still plays a

Farmers decisions to select the specific additive they used



Most farmers based their decisions on ease of purchase and availability

Farmers opinion of the silage additive they used



Improving fermentation was the most common reason for using an additive

TRIED AND TESTED

significant role in decision-making on many farms. "Conversations on-farm suggest that trust and familiarity are powerful influences, especially when comparing products that appear similar on paper."

Products were sourced from eight manufacturers, with a further supplier not easily identifiable from the data. In total, 12 different products were reviewed, including 11 inoculants and one preservative. Of the inoculants, six contained enzymes, and over half (55%) were combined homofermentative and heterofermentative bacteria, while 36% were homofermentative, with the other manufacturers not stating the bacteria in their product.

Among all products reviewed, Volac additives dominated the marketplace, used by 40% of respondents. Three Volac products were included in the survey, with Ecosyl 100 the most frequently reviewed, followed by Genus Powerstart and AgriKing's SiloKing and Safesil Challenge. All remaining products only received a single review so were not included in the rankings.

Costs varied from £0.76 to £2.00/t treated, averaging £1.26. Overall

SILAGE ADDITIVES TRIED & TESTED (SILAGE SEASON 2025)

The table below summarises the scores from the Silage Additives Survey. The table shows the average of scores given by respondents. The results are listed in alphabetical order.

Products reviewed	£	Product details	Your opinion: 1-poor to 5-very good				Rating 1-low to 5-high							
	Cost per tonne of treated silage (if inoculant £ per acre)	Number of respondents	Type of Fermentation (Homofermentative, Heterofermentative)	Type of Inoculant (Type of Inoculant)	Improved the fermentation (Includes Enzymes)	Reduced clamp spoilage Gives better animal performance	Increased the feed value Compatibility with equipment	Is readily available / easy to buy	Is value for money	Recommend to others	Score			
											Score			
Agri-King Silo-King	2	£1.10	I		Y	4.50	4.00	4.50	4.50	5.00	5.00	4.50	5.00	37.00
Bonsilage	1	£1.40	I	Ho	N	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00		35.00
Genus Powerstart	3	£0.88	I	Ho	N	3.67	3.67	3.67	3.67	3.67	4.00	3.33	3.67	29.33
Kelvin Cave Activator +	1	£1.20	I	Ho	N	3.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	1.00	18.00
Lallemand Classic	1	£1.00	I	Ho/He	Y	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	35.00
Lallemand Magniva	1	£1.25	I	Ho/He	Y	3.00	4.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	25.00
Lallemand Magniva PG Dry	1	£1.40	I	Ho/He	Y	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	34.00
Lallemand Magniva PG Wet	1	£1.15	I	Ho/He	Y	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	5.00	3.00	4.00	31.00
Microferm (product unknown)	1	£0.76	I			5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	40.00
Safesil - Challenge	2	£1.50	P	-	-	3.00	4.00	3.50	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	30.50
Volac - Advance	1	£1.75	I	Ho/He	Y	4.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	30.00
Volac - Ecocool	1		I	Ho/He	N	4.00	3.00	4.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	32.00
Volac - Ecosyl 100	8	£1.46	I	Ho	N	4.88	4.38	4.25	3.88	4.75	4.88	4.13	4.63	35.75

Costs varied from £0.76 to £2.00/t treated, averaging £1.26

value for money scored 3.92 out of five. Most importantly, 84% of farmers said they would use the same additive again, while 8% were undecided, and another 8% would not repeat their purchase. Repeat intention is often one of the clearest indicators of farmer confidence, suggesting that the majority felt their

chosen additive had justified its place in the system. However, most farmers based their decisions on the product's availability and the ease with which it could be purchased.

"Understandably, the question farmers most often ask us is: 'Which product is best?' While this survey offers useful insight, the limited

data means it is not yet possible to deliver the level of robust comparison farmers want," notes Sarah. "To do that, we need more responses, more opinions, and more real-world experiences of the products farmers are using every day. In many ways, the success of these reports depends on the willingness of farmers to share their experiences openly, helping others make informed decisions and avoid costly mistakes."

Win-win with a quick survey

That is why we encourage you to take part in our future Tried and Tested surveys. They take around 12 minutes to complete, and every submission helps to build an independent, farmer-led resource that benefits everyone. Participants are also entered into a prize draw for a £100 Amazon gift voucher, which this month was won by Karen Kendall from Bodmin, Cornwall - congratulations.

The next survey will focus on cow brushes; both static and motorised, and we would greatly value your input. These reports grow stronger with every response, and your insight could help another farmer choose the right product for their cows and their system.



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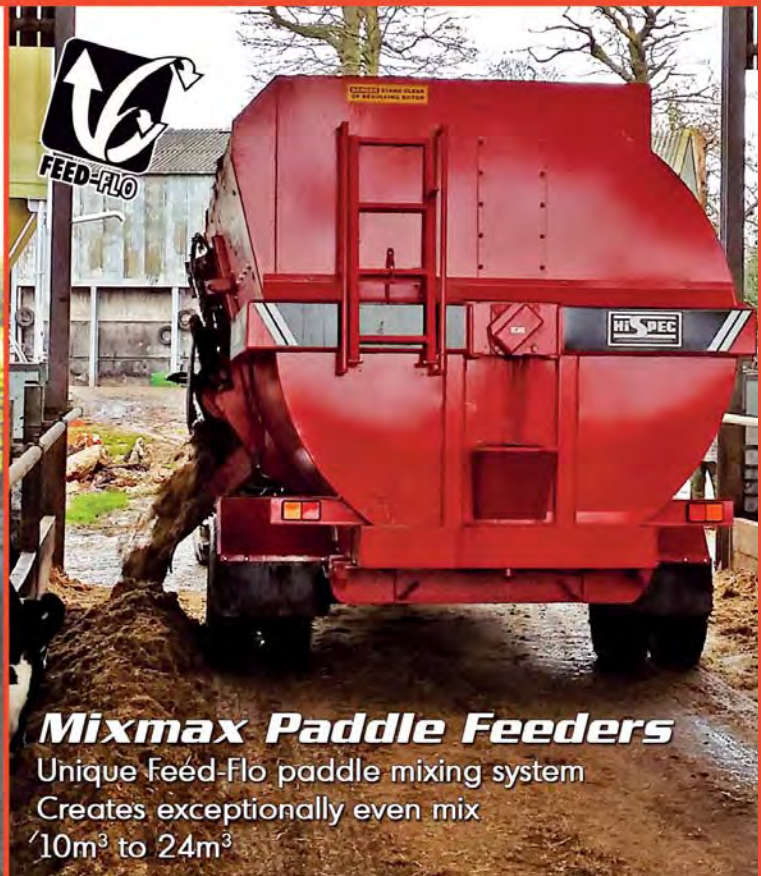
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Celebrating little wins in order to overcome the big challenges

When Iain Dick left a successful veterinary career to run a large dairy herd, it wasn't just a professional shift – it was a mindset one. He tackled mental challenges by setting achievable targets and building strong support networks, as British Dairying discovers.

After two decades as a farm vet – most recently serving as a practice director – Iain Dick made a move that surprised many across Dumfries and Galloway. In November, he stepped away from veterinary practice to enter a share farming agreement at Hardgrove Farm, Carrutherstown, taking on responsibility for a 630-cow dairy operation.

"It's not the norm," he admits. "People at my level don't tend to leave the vet medicine industry in their forties." Yet for Iain, the decision felt less radical than it appeared. Raised on a beef and sheep farm in Peeblesshire, farming had always been part of his identity. Despite building a successful veterinary career, the desire to run his own enterprise never fully disappeared.

"Life is about the small wins because that's what makes you feel good."

"I worked with farm animals most days, and we had a smallholding of our own, but there was always a feeling of wanting more," he says. "Then last year, I ended up in talks with Alistair Marshall, who'd been a client for 20 years, about me coming into the business. I believed I would always regret it if I didn't give it a go, when would an opportunity like that come up again?"

While the physical demands of dairy farming held no illusions for Iain, the emotional challenge of leaving practice proved far greater than expected. "Saying I was stopping was one thing, but actually finishing, saying goodbye to people who are genuinely friends – my colleagues and clients – that was really hard," he reflects. "That's probably the thing I miss the most, the varied social aspect of it."



Iain, his wife Jo and his children in the newly constructed calf shed

For 20 years, he had been a trusted adviser – someone farmers turned to not only for animal health issues but for perspective and reassurance. Now, the roles are reversed. He is the one making the calls and carrying the responsibility.

Still, his years in practice have not gone to waste. "Everything I learned is getting used – just slightly differently now," he says. "Understanding animal health and nutrition, spotting problems early, the diagnostic approach to issues – it all translates. I'm just applying it to my own livestock rather than someone else's."

Although this is his first time running a dairy farm, Iain arrived at Hardgrove with a rare advantage: Decades of exposure to working farms, particularly dairies. "Probably around 60-70% of our veterinary work was on dairy farms," he explains. "The animal husbandry part – I

always knew that's what I'd find easier because that was my background."

Beyond the technical skills, his time as a vet shaped how he handles pressure. "As a farm vet, you're dealing with problems all the time. When it comes to stress, you have to be able to switch it off and be professional. That professional aspect still comes into play for me now. I probably deal with things more clinically and try not to let the emotion take over."

Perspective

Years spent supporting farmers through disease outbreaks, labour pressures and market volatility have given him perspective. "I've been involved in so many different issues on farms that I probably have a slightly different outlook to it."

Now three and a half months into the venture, Iain's philosophy is simple but deliberate: Focus on progress, however incremental. "I'm

not really that driven by money," he says. "What really pleases me is when you put something in place and see the fruits of it: See the animals doing better, growing better, with less health issues. That's the pleasing aspect and I make a point of taking notice and appreciating the success."

One of his first initiatives was constructing a new calf shed – a project he had never previously undertaken. Beginning on his first Monday morning, the team worked together to deliver it. "That's been the biggest achievement," he says. "The calf husbandry has massively improved, the growth rates have improved, health issues have decreased. That has been a real buzz for me, seeing that work."

Wellbeing

For Iain, these improvements are about more than productivity – they are about wellbeing. "Life is about the small wins because that's what makes you feel good," he explains. "If you feel good, you'll enjoy it, you do a better job, and you don't get as stressed or down. You've got to make targets achievable. If I make a target for five years' time, that's fine, but I'll step those targets, so I get the small wins along the way."

Iain's top tips for success

1. Set achievable targets

Break big goals into manageable steps and recognise progress along the way – it boosts motivation and reduces stress.

2. Don't go it alone

Build a support network of family, friends or colleagues. Share challenges and use trusted sounding boards.

3. Reframe challenges

Focus on what's working, learn from setbacks and keep your attention on progress rather than problems.

Clear goals - increasing calf growth rates to a kilo per day and pushing milk yields toward 40 litres/day - provide direction. But it's the steady progress that sustains motivation.

Although new to this side of the industry, Iain is not navigating it alone. He works alongside Alistair, who remains actively involved, supported by a team of seven staff. "I'm lucky that I don't feel isolated," he says. "To socially connect with others is really important for me."

Family

He is candid, however, about the areas he could improve personally. "Do I look after myself as well as I could physically? No, I don't. I'm really bad for not eating lunch," he laughs. But he has been intentional about creating space for family life. His wife Jo and their three children are set to move to the farm in the summer, reducing commuting time and adding flexibility.

And structuring the farm as a shared operation means he can occasionally step away without everything grinding to a halt. "The farm has to run without me sometimes," he explains. "Alistair gets that we need family time. I'm



An opportunity came up for Iain to join Alistair (right) on the farm, on which Alistair is still actively involved

still ferrying kids to activities, still involved in their lives. I didn't want that to change."

Mental resilience remains central to his approach. "A former colleague at the practice would say I'm very good at mindfulness. I try not to let things get me down. I reframe what I can, move on to the next thing and focus on the good stuff. That's what keeps me looking forward."

Just months into the role, Iain still pauses to appreciate the leap he

has taken. "Not many people get to do what they want to do, and that's effectively what I've done here," he reflects. "I've left a really good job that I enjoyed. But now I'm actually getting to do what I've always wanted to do. That's quite rare, and I do feel quite privileged."

Celebration

For others contemplating a significant change - or simply feeling the weight of farming's demands - his advice is grounded and practical. "Set realistic

targets - achievable ones. Celebrate the small wins. Don't be scared to try things. And definitely don't try to do it alone. Connect with other people, have those sounding boards, and don't bottle things up."

He adds one final thought: "And focus on the good stuff. There are always going to be challenges and problems. But if you can notice the improvements, the small wins, the things that are working - that's what makes you feel good. And if you feel good, you'll do a better job."



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UK genomic evaluations pass one million milestone as crossbred genomics move into delivery

UK genomic evaluations have reached a major milestone, with more than one million genotypes now included in AHDB's national evaluation programme.

The achievement demonstrates how genomics has become a core part of dairy breeding in the UK. Growing uptake across the industry is giving farmers greater confidence in genomic information to support faster and more accurate breeding decisions.

Funded largely through the dairy levy, AHDB's genomic evaluation programme provides an independent, industry-wide service for UK dairy farmers. Ongoing investment in data, systems and collaboration ensures access to reliable genomic information that supports sustainable genetic progress across herds of all sizes and breeding systems.

Alongside this milestone, AHDB also marked the availability of genomic evaluations for crossbred females, widening access to genomic information for herds using crossbreeding as part of their breeding strategy.

Initially, genomic evaluations for crossbred females are available for a targeted set of key traits: production, lifespan, somatic cell count (SCC), fertility index and maintenance. These traits have been prioritised for their direct relevance to herd health, efficiency and farm profitability.

This year, the service will be expanded to include a wider range of traits, with plans also in place to extend genomic evaluations to crossbred males. This phased approach is designed to maintain robustness and reliability while allowing farmers and industry partners to build confidence in the data.

Marco Winters, AHDB Head of Animal Genetics, said: "Reaching one million genotypes shows how firmly genomics is now embedded in UK dairy breeding. The scale of the reference population strengthens the reliability of evaluations and supports more confident breeding decisions on farm."

"The introduction of genomic evaluations for crossbred females recognises the growing demand of genomic insight by crossbreeding UK dairy systems. A phased and measured approach ensures the information provided is robust, relevant and fit for practical use."

Crossbred genomic results are being released on a monthly basis initially. Further updates will be shared as the service develops.

Further information on UK genomic evaluations and crossbred genomics is available at breedingdairy.ahdb.org.uk.



Cornish herd takes gold

The 2025 RABDF/NMR Gold Cup was presented to Paul Broad of T N Morrow and Partners. Ruth Wills visits their standout herd at Treveale Farm near Ladock, Cornwall.



The family business has expanded over the years to allow for the next generation to come in

When driving into Treveale Farm, the two words that come to mind are immaculate and impressive. It's clear from the outset that attention to detail and thoughtful design are two priorities for the family. And a family business it truly is, with Paul Broad and his wife, Wendy (née Morrow), together with Wendy's brother, Irwin Morrow, and Paul and Wendy's sons, David and Philip all playing their part in the system. "Wendy and I do most of the milking, Irwin and Philip do the tractor driving, and David does the youngstock," says Paul.

The Morrow family originated from Northern Ireland, and settled at the then 52-ha Treveale Farm in 1979. Originally opting for British Friesians, they eventually swapped to Holstein Friesians and haven't looked back, becoming pedigree in 1985.



Calves are housed in groups of 14 in igloos

"In 1992, I married Wendy, and my father-in-law, Neville, bought the farm next door, which was another 80ha - that was a fair gamble at the time," explains Paul. "So we went from 70 cows up to 280 and gradually acquired more ground over the years to take us up to 202ha."

David and Philip both developed a passion for farming, which spurred on another significant change to the system. "In 2011, we realised that both boys wanted to go farming, so we set our sights on building a new unit," says Paul.

"We toured different farms and decided what we wanted."

The greenfield site was selected just down the road from the original farm. "It took us until 2014 to get planning permission, then we started building in 2016. We started with one silage pit, then a shed, then in 2018 we built the dairy - when the milk price was down at 16.7ppl," he says.

And the herd has expanded too. "We have gone from 280 cows up to 470, just gradually building over the years, keeping our own heifers - except a couple bought in from the Willsbro herd."

They went from milking in a 24/24 herringbone parlour to a 40/40 rapid exit. "With a herringbone,

MEET THE GOLD CUP WINNERS



Building at the greenfield site started in 2016, allowing herd expansion

the cows are at a 35° angle, and now they're at a 90° angle, so they had to take a step around, which opens up the divider for the next cow," explains Paul. "It took some time for them to get used to it, particularly because we don't feed in the parlour."

A HerdVision camera is installed to track body condition score and lameness. "It's an aid, and it does help with the body condition scoring. We also have a foot trimmer every three weeks."

Housing

When it came to the housing, a lot of attention was paid to the design. "We designed it all ourselves; we didn't bring in a consultant - we toured different farms and decided what we wanted," says Paul.

"We have long, wide centre feed passageways with self-locking yokes - they have been a game changer. They were the first thing we put in the shed, and I wouldn't be without them - we have one for nearly every animal now. There is no stress on the animal, for vet visits, vaccinations, tail clipping - it's easy, for the people and the cows."

And the centre passageways are designed to protect the good quality forage. "The centre feed passageways add 20ft onto the shed, but we don't spend all this time and money getting the feed right for it to be fed on the outside of the house," he adds. "Whichever way you feed it, one side, one day will get rain on it - we're making the most of our forage."

One thing we have learnt is that the cow doesn't know what the milk price is; we still have to feed her to realise her full potential, whether it's 50ppl or 32ppl."

That said, the family are strict on culling. "We only have so many spaces for cows, so if we have one in there that has the potential to give 45 litres, and another one giving 28 litres, and we're feeding for 37 litres, we're losing eight litres on that cow. We might as well have something that will give us 40 litres."

The family opted for resin on the feed passageways. "I always say, we don't eat our breakfast, dinner and tea off the same plate, but they are, so you

Continued on page 66.



The central feed passage and locking yokes have been a game changer

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Continued from page 65.

must keep it clean. If we had just put concrete down, after seven years the acid load would have made holes in it, but the resin is like new," Paul says.

Not only are the shed floors designed to collect rainwater, which is then used to wash down the parlour, but they offer good ventilation too. "We have a 17° pitch in the roof; most sheds are 12.5°, so we have better ventilation - we don't have any fans in the sheds. We don't have any skylights either, because in the summer it's like a magnifying glass, but we do have a ridge up the centre of the feed passageway, so that brings light in.

"You look after the cow and the cow will look after you."

"We also have LED lighting, which comes on at 5am and goes off at 9pm, so it gives 16 hours a day of light. It replicates spring daylight, which is when the cows give the most milk, so in the autumn it's worth at least one kilo a day of milk."

The cows are bedded on deep sand. "The sand is brilliant for comfort as well as mastitis levels - we're milking 12,100kg twice a day across the herd, so the cows are carrying a lot of milk. We bed them up twice a week and rake the beds every night."

Due to the sand bedding, the slurry must be separated. "We're in a nitrate vulnerable zone (NVZ) so we have had to spend more on slurry storage, but the separator allows us 20% more capacity, so we have storage for 2.7m gallons," he explains. "We take the solids away and spread them on the maize ground, and then the liquid is spread



The family designed the sheds after visiting other units, and they are light and well ventilated with sand bedding

after each cut of silage. It's a valuable fertiliser, it has 10 units of nitrogen in every 1,000 gallons, so we put on 28,061 litres/ha (3,000 gallons/ac) after every cut."

The family have complete control over each element of the system, particularly feed. "The biggest thing we have learnt from the new unit is control; we have big silage pits and take seven cuts of silage a year. We layer the pit, so we feed it out the same way it goes in," notes Paul. "It's about having the continuity, which is all Holsteins want."

The farm grows 107ha of maize, 64ha of winter wheat, and the rest is Italian ryegrass leys, which are cut roughly every 21 days, starting in mid-April, with 18ha allocated to grazing in-calf heifers. A cover crop of ryegrass is grown on the maize ground, while a cover crop of ryegrass and vetch is grown on the wheat ground.

"We have been growing cover crops since before it was trendy," laughs Paul. "We had these maize stubbles, and the soil was being washed away. But with cover

crops, not only do you stop that, but you get a double crop, which is important on limited acreage."

The cows are fed a full total mixed ration (TMR). "They're on roughly 14.5kg/head of concentrates, which contains an oilseed rape blend, homegrown urea-treated wheat, Megalac and ground maize," he says. "We always try to have a six-month buffer of feed, so we don't run out if we get a dry year."

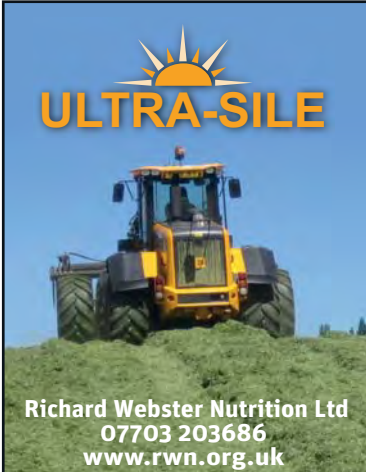
High-quality forage

The family aim to produce top-quality forage. "The cheapest thing we can produce is grass and maize - so we make it as good as possible. We reckon we only need 12 to 14 dry days a year (for silage making), because we're not grazing it at the same time - we don't waste any grass," says Paul.

Most operations are undertaken in-house, except picking up the grass with a forager, for which they use a local contractor - Roy Davey. "We cut it, ted it and rake it ourselves; for

Farm facts:

- 202ha owned, 80ha rented
- Fully housed, all-year-round calving herd
- 470 Pedigree Holstein Friesians, 461 followers
- Arla contract
- Full TMR diet, eating 27kg dry matter/day
- 4,000 litres from forage
- Average annual milk yield is 12,362kg, at 4.26% fat and 3.44% protein
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The family moved from a herringbone parlour to a 40/40 rapid exit one

us it warrants having the control over when we cut it.”

The milk is sold on a contract to Arla. “We’ve always stuck with the co-ops, and I think our loyalty has paid off. Everyone waits to see what Arla’s price is and prices accordingly. The main thing is we have always had an evergreen contract - so they pick up however much milk we produce. And with us wanting to expand over the years, it would have been foolish to give that up.”

Youngstock

David takes charge of the youngstock side of the business. “We’re aiming to produce 200 heifers a year, so we use sexed semen on the best 50% of the cows twice, followed by beef, then 70% of the heifers get two goes of sexed semen, then they’ll go to beef,” explains Paul.

If the farm is clear of TB, then all beef will be sold. “They’re sold either as calves or stirks; some go to Holsworthy market, or to our neighbour to rear,” he says.

They use calf igloos to house the calves. “We have had igloos for 10 years; they’re brilliant for calf health. We put a group of 14 in there; it’s safe, clean and disinfected before



Calves get colostrum then pasteurised milk, and are weaned at eight weeks

the next batch. They get four litres of colostrum, then milk from the second and third milkings for three days. After that, it’s all pasteurised milk, which we find they grow well on. It’s always fed at 42°C and they are weaned at eight weeks before going onto a concentrate diet.”

The replacement rate runs at between 25% and 30%. “We’re picky

about getting the right type of cow; we want to continue improving the overall quality of the herd,” notes Paul. “We look for good feet and legs, a good udder to hold the milk, and the capacity to eat plenty of forage.”

The age at first calving is roughly 23 months, and the heifers are kept in a separate group to reduce

bullying when they enter the herd. “The heifers stay together for their first lactation; they’re in with their peers rather than in with the big cows getting pushed around,” he says.

The herd is John’s disease and bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) free. “We have worked on eliminating the risks of John’s disease and BVD over the years,” he says. “We began by testing and then gradually weeded it out. Pasteurising the milk has also helped reduce the risk to the calves.”

Next generation

It’s clear that efficiency, alongside cow health and welfare, is key for the family. “By building this modern dairy unit, it has increased our ability to produce milk more efficiently, as well as look after the cows to a higher standard. You look after the cow and the cow will look after you,” he says.

And the family have invested with the future generation in mind. “In the past eight years, we have reinvested in the future,” notes Paul. “We’re putting our money where our mouths are for the next generation; they have the enthusiasm, and you’ve got to have youth in farming.”

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Farm matching – can we make it work?

Bringing farmers, banks, consultants, educators and other industry professionals together, British Dairying recently organised a round table at the House of Commons to explore the potential for a new land matching service. Sarah Peacocke reports.

Are you looking for a farming opportunity, as a tenant, equity partner, share farmer or another option that gets you on the first rung of the ladder? Or are you a landowner, wondering how to step back or retire, looking for someone to come and run your unit while keeping the farm in the family and making an income? This was the subject of a highly successful round table at the House of Commons in late February, organised by British Dairying and sponsored by Lely Atlantic.

Farming leaders, under the chairmanship of the Shadow Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Robbie Moore, found plenty of common ground discussing the need for an industry forum that could match potential candidates with landowners.

Benefits and options

"I don't know why it hasn't been done before," said Robbie. "I think we should talk about the benefits and see how we could encourage something like this to develop into a framework. Where you've got different parties willing to offer capital, assets, shares, or equity structures; not just the land, we need to look at the options."

"Having something like a matching service that enables different parties to come together is interesting for me to work with, to see what role policymakers, legislators or the Government can play in doing this. The dairy sector is very forward-thinking and has a lot of capital invested; it's going through



The farm matching service could connect aspiring farmers with retiring landowners seeking succession

big changes through innovation and automation.

"Succession is always a challenging conversation, and we're not as good at it as other countries," he added.

"I think there's a lot of learning to be done in this space that can be rolled out across not just dairy but all sectors, ultimately helping them to flourish," Robbie continued. "Matching is a really good service. It's something that has certainly opened my eyes, just based on the level and depth of conversation we had in the House."

Such a system already operates very successfully in Scotland, under

the banner Scottish Land Matching, but currently has five potential candidates for every possible match. In the past five years, it has received over 1,000 enquiries.

There is certainly a population of young people keen to get into farming, but who don't have a succession route through family farms or the ability to access the capital necessary to start the journey. The matching service was seen as a body that could pull together those looking to get into the industry and equally those who are looking to exit.

Set up and funded by the Scottish Government, Scottish Land Matching been operating for five years and has had a big buy-in from the rural industry. Today, it has a website and a registration process, and its role as an independent adviser is to start the engagement process.

Predominantly focused on dairy, livestock, sheep and cattle enterprises, the scope is widening. And around the table there was genuine support and belief that such a body should be set up in England, linking together with the Scottish organisation as well as similar set-ups in Wales and Ireland.

However, there are many more aspiring farmers than opportunities, with any tenancies gathering huge

numbers of applicants; often from young people with very credible backgrounds who already own machinery or animals. Older farmers need to understand that they don't have to sell their farms or their cows - there are other options available.

This is a progressive route to continue farming; having someone else do the hard graft for you so you can enjoy your life's journey in a different way as you get older. But finding these producers and then joining them up with someone who can do the job well is the issue.

Financial edge

Let's suppose you find the right opportunity - and the right person. The next problem is finding the capital. Agricultural universities represented were asked to look at the financial elements of the courses they run. All too often matching services find a young farmer with cows, machinery and technical knowledge, but without an understanding of balance sheets, cash flows, budgets and financials.

Agricultural educators are very good at teaching history lessons; how agriculture was in the past, but instead need to be looking at what the picture will be in 10, 15 or 20 years.



Farm matching roundtable discussions were held at the House of Commons

When applying for tenancies, for example, it is vital to have a workable and realistic business plan. This is where consultants can offer support, and banks can consider being more flexible when looking at loan options.

Bank representatives admitted that any new business startup is riskier in terms of offering finance, and traditionally security has been offered against machinery but not livestock. That is now changing and will, with the right business plan, make it easier for new entrants to borrow.

There are also opportunities for the bank to pay for consultancy and advice for the first three years of a new business operation; something which could be key to its success. And while some applicants approach banks with robust plans, in many cases, there is an inherent lack of understanding about what a lender needs.

Share farming in New Zealand is often promoted as a route for young farmers to follow, but there was a general feeling that today we need to think outside the box. There may be options to increase equity levels in livestock, machinery or land, but each case needs to be looked at individually, with both partners willing to explore longer-term opportunities.

“British Dairying is going to lead the concept of Farm Matching forward.”

Participants agreed they are seeing a move away from longer-term tenancies with more two- to five-year agreements. This does concern the industry as so many producers are having to invest in new facilities to meet the changing requirements of their milk buyer - without long-term security.

It is vital to start conversations early, to ascertain exactly what each partner wants from the new arrangement - and to remain flexible. Worries about inheritance tax (IHT) and succession may drive more of these relationships forward, and one dairy farmer was keen to point out that it is really ‘only in Britain’ that we have this obsession with land ownership. He cited an example of a radio journalist who always wanted to work for a radio station but never had an ambition to own a radio station.

This industry leader has grown his farm holdings from 40 cows 40 years ago, yielding 100,000 litres annually, to 1,600 cows and nearly 10m litres today. A couple of years ago, he realised that ‘people’ are fundamental to his business and that his four children aren’t necessarily going to succeed him.

So, he’s brought his three managers into the business and believes they hold the future success of his company in their hands. A lot of development is about upskilling, and it’s important to remember that an average dairy farm with 280 cows is now a million-pound business, he reminded the table.

So, where do we go from here? British Dairying is going to lead the concept of Farm Matching forward and will be holding future meetings to look for ways to set up and develop the concept.



Banks say strong business plans improve new entrants’ chances of securing finance

In the meantime, we’d love to hear from any farmers who are interested in offering an aspiring young farmer a chance to play a future role on their farm - or to hear from young farmers looking for such opportunities.

We would also love to talk to anyone who has entered into such an agreement as a case study. Please email olivia@britishdairying.co.uk and a member of our editorial team will get in touch.

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College farm in Lancashire takes profitable steps towards net zero

Use of robust data and close collaboration has driven measurable progress towards a self-set Ag Net Zero Challenge at Myerscough College Farm. British Dairying reports.

Myerscough College Farm has developed a clear four-step pathway to net zero. It has focused on improving efficiency and productivity, reducing purchased inputs, improving wildlife habitat and biodiversity, and increasing energy offsetting from the grid.

Its ambitions span the entire mixed enterprise involving 160 milking cows, 200 dry cows, 1,000 lambing ewes, and 100 finishing cattle, along with a small pig unit. The farm grows 81ha of multi-cut grass silage and 49ha of cereals and legumes, aiming to produce all of its own forages.

“I’m big on increasing access to the farm.”

Andrea Gardner, Director of Farm Operations and Innovations, has adopted a whole-system approach to achieving net zero. Over the past two years, particular focus has been placed on improving feed efficiency in the dairy herd to achieve measurable financial and environmental gains.

“The Ag Net Zero Challenge was an initiative funded by the Department for Education,” explains Andrea.



Fans have helped reduce heat stress



Chris and Andrea are working to improve the feed carbon footprint

“The Skills Development Fund was managed by the Lancashire Colleges Group, with Myerscough College harnessing the funding to invest in farming equipment. This equipment was used to demonstrate practical skills to Lancashire farmers on how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on farm. We were keen to demystify the ‘carbon jargon’ that was being widely discussed, so we conducted carbon audits across farms in Lancashire.”

This work aligned with wider industry calls for nationally co-ordinated demonstration farms, eventually contributing to the creation of the School of Sustainable Food and Farming (SSFF), powered by Harper Adams University, and Landex Colleges’ network of farms, including Myerscough College, demonstrating the best steps to net zero.

Knowledge and progress

The SSFF brings together its college members to meet regularly, share knowledge and discuss progress on their respective farms. “It’s not just about hitting financial targets any more; it’s also about doing the right thing for the environment,” says Andrea.

Since the challenge started in 2022, Myerscough has invested in robotics and automation, cow housing, genetics, nutrition and nutrient management. Many of the improvements were driven by

the farm’s first Alltech Navigate report, which identified areas of under-utilised feed and highlighted opportunities to improve feed efficiency and the potential return on investment.

“The report highlighted a lot of heat stress, so we installed fans, and the fertility since has been fantastic (see box), with no impact on milk yields in summer,” says Andrea. “With the extra energy required to power the fans, we installed 100kW of solar panels and storage battery back-up to get us back to our offsetting target. We’ve also improved the lighting levels in the shed to optimise cow activity. All in all, we’ve created an

ideal environment for that building.” The next question was how to go about removing soya from the diet. After researching options and with buy-in from their feed supplier and vets, Andrea and the team removed soya from the diet and replaced it with a non-protein nitrogen source called Optigen. “We pretty much did this overnight and saw no milk reduction whatsoever,” she says.

“The Keenan self-propelled diet feeder has also definitely improved our feed management overall - clamp management and the daily analysis of feed waste from the InTouch software is phenomenal,” adds Andrea.

A follow-up assessment 27 months later demonstrated significant improvements across performance, health and efficiency (see table).

Improvements

Milk yield increased from 31.2 to 35 litres/cow per day, while feed conversion efficiency (FCE) rose from 1.19 to 1.62 litres per kg of dry matter intake (DMI); a gain of 0.43. Mastitis, milk fever, lameness and displaced abomasum rates all fell sharply (see box), and pregnancy rates improved from 21.3% to 32%.

For Andrea, the FCE is the key metric. By converting more feed into milk, the farm has reduced cost per litre and lowered methane

	Assessment 1 July 2022	Assessment 2 Oct 2025 *1	Improvements (27 months)
Herd size (Holstein Friesian)	154	170	↑16
Milk yield (litres/cow per day)	31.2	35.00	↑3.8
Butterfat (%)	4.15	4.40	↑0.35
Protein (%)	3.28	3.40	↑0.13
TMR ration cost*2 (per kg DMI)	0.197	0.265	↑0.068
Feed conversion efficiency (litres/kg DMI)	1.19	1.62	↑0.43
Mastitis rates (%)	41	15	↓36
Displaced abomasum (%)	3.0	0.5	↓2.5
Milk fever (%)	9	1	↓8
Lameness (%)	24	7	↓17
Retained placenta (%)	8	1.5	↓6.5
Ketosis (%)	1	1	-
Calving interval (days)	389	385	↓4
Conception rate (services)	3.1	2.2	↓0.9
Pregnancy rate (%)	21.3	32	↓10.7
TMR wastage (kg/day)	390	325	↓65

*1 Mean average of two milking groups including first calving heifers housed separately.

*2 Inclusive of in-parlour feed costs. *3 Including grass clamp and maize clamp.

emissions and nitrogen losses. Based on a milk price of 42.37ppl, the FCE improvement alone equates to more than £11,300/year across the herd.

"I'm big on increasing access to the farm; I really want to put the college farm back on the map for future students," explains Andrea. "I view the farm as being in the heart of the wider farming community and something I want local farmers to be proud of. We conduct five open mornings on a Saturday during the year, a big college open day as a bi-annual event with access to the farm, and every other year we have Open Farm Sunday," she adds.

"All-in-all, in 2023/2024, we had 3,500 visitors to the farm. It's what we should be doing - training the young farmers and engineers of the



Feed conversion efficiency rose from 1.19 to 1.62 litres per kg of DMI

future and potentially - as robotics in farming increases across the UK - the skills to become robotic dairy herd leads. We're not just showing them how to be farmers, we're demonstrating the wider skills of how to mend equipment,

manage projects, feed livestock, and manage nutrients."

A new strategic plan for the farm, shaped by the views of local farmers, stakeholders, researchers and universities, now separates the enterprise into productive

and regenerative farming zones. "Overall, the ambition is to drive sustainable production in farming through effective environmental management," notes Andrea. "I believe that if I'm drawing from the environment to produce food for the livestock, I need to ensure that biodiversity measures across the farm provide food and a habitat for insects all year round."

And every decision must be sustainable. "I see myself as a caretaker of this beautiful mixed farm in the heart of Lancashire. I surround myself with the right people who I know will go the extra mile for the sake of Myerscough College Farm; people I trust to loyally drive our ambition profitably to achieve net zero."

Efficiency and sustainability

Chris Talbot, Key Account Lead at Alltech E-CO₂, worked with the farm to model the impact of dietary changes. His first visit was to carry out both an E-CO₂ Dairy Carbon Assessment and a Feeds EA Assessment - both tools that run on-farm observations, information and data through a model that calculates opportunities.

"We compared their previous diet, which included soya, to a diet with soya completely replaced by Optigen," he says. "The dairy carbon assessment

illustrated the potential to reduce the carbon footprint by 14%. On average, the global warming potential (GWP) of the new diet would be one-third less due to the performance benefits.

"It's also important to consider the GWP of the purchased feed, alongside its impact on cow methane emissions," adds Chris. "Feed efficiency and carbon footprint go hand-in-hand. While increasing yields was not the primary aim of the dietary changes, the team

have achieved this by stimulating fibre digestion and creating a far more productive rumen environment."

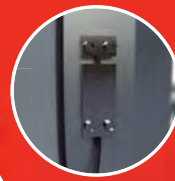
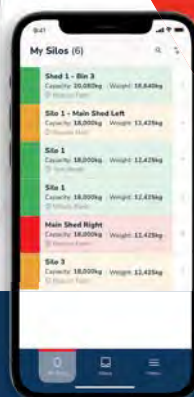
Looking ahead, Chris suggests that even a 0.1 improvement in feed conversion efficiency could add up to £62,000/year in additional margin. Priorities include continued diet monitoring, protecting against mycotoxins, improving clamp compaction and optimising feed and water access.



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Open Farm Sunday dispels dairy myths

With this year marking the 20th anniversary of Open Farm Sunday, British Dairying spoke to Buckinghamshire producer Will Lacey about his long-term continued support for the event and how it helps break down barriers between farming and the public.

Open Farm Sunday gives dairy farmers the opportunity to build stronger bonds with their local community and dispel misconceptions about the sector, according to one long-standing participant.

Will Lacey and his family run Lacey's Family Farm at Bolter End Farm, near High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, where they milk 130 Guernseys alongside running a farm shop, a beef herd and an arable enterprise on 181ha.

“Visitors are always surprised by the attention to detail on the farm.”

Half their milk is processed on-site and sold through the farm shop, with the remainder supplied to Arla, one of Open Farm Sunday's sponsors. And while the farm shop provides an established link to consumers and the nearby village of Lane End, Will says the annual initiative allows even stronger connections to be formed with local residents and the wider public.

With the campaign celebrating its 20th anniversary on June 7, 2026, this year marks the Lacey's ninth year of involvement. “Open Farm Sunday is absolutely crucial when it comes to building those links with



Open Farm Sunday is a great way to promote dairy farming to the wider community - and it's incredibly popular

the public,” says Will. “Farming has always struggled to establish its own positive PR, and this initiative does a great job of promoting what the industry has to offer.”

LEAF's own research shows that creating a connection with the public, alongside promoting a positive view of the industry, are key motivations for farmers taking part. Following last year's event, 86% of farmers who took part in the event wanted to promote a positive view of British agriculture, while 80% wanted to positively connect with their local communities.

Event size

For the Lacey's, their event has grown so successful that they now cap numbers at 2,000 for the day. But whatever the size of the event, Will believes it is making the connection to the public in the first place that really matters.

“I would encourage anyone to get involved, but do what you are most comfortable with. You do not need big numbers, and even if you have 10 or 15 people turn up, it's the engagement that really matters,” says Will.

“We must not forget that farmers are part of the community and make up a large part of the population in rural areas. The day therefore, enables you to build bonds with neighbours, and it gives them an insight into what you are doing on farm.

“It will also help them be more understanding the next time they are stuck behind a tractor on the road, or more aware of your farming practices. Engaging with people and showing them something thought provoking is absolutely amazing and provides a lot of personal satisfaction.”

Pride and passion

It is also a prime opportunity to show members of the public the pride and passion behind the dairy industry. “Visitors are always surprised by the attention to detail on the farm and the levels of technology and science that goes into farming,” says Will.

“They also get to see the passion we have for the industry and the

care we give our animals, which is not always reflected in the national media. We find that the public is really interested in farming, but don't always get the opportunity to engage with it. That is why Open Farm Sunday is crucial.”

With such a landmark year again, campaign organisers LEAF are keen for more farmers than ever before to get involved and register for the event.

More information about opening your farm is available via the Open Farm Sunday website at www.farmsunday.org. Free promotional materials and information packs are available once registration is complete.

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Open Farm Sunday helps farmers build trust with their local communities

SCI changes: What's afoot?

Responding to feedback from producers with spring-calving herds, the AHDB has redefined how the spring calving index is created. Independent Breeding Consultant Kevin Lane looks at what changes are coming our way this April.

The spring calving index (SCI) has been around for over a decade and was designed to help spring-calving herds choose bulls that will be suitable for their systems. These systems will vary slightly, but are of an overriding type. In the main, these herds produce lower volumes of milk than autumn-calving or all-year-round calving herds, rely on grazed grass as the main ingredient in the ration, calve in a tight block and improve their milk price with higher constituents.

The cattle are usually smaller and very efficient at converting grazed forage into litres, and many farms have simple set-ups for milking, with good grazing layouts of tracks and paddocks within an easily accessed platform. The SCI value is a financial one and represents the additional



Spring-calving cows require specific health traits, not just high production

profit a bull is expected to return from each daughter over her lifetime, compared to a bull with an SCI of zero.

Herd yields can range from 3,000-3,500 litres/cow per year on once-a-day milking with little or no concentrate feeding, to the more common 4,500-5,500 litres with 500-1,000kg/head of cake, up to some herds managing over 6,000 litres. The aim of many herds is to keep a 500-550kg liveweight cow producing 500-550kg of milk solids.

The breed mix in spring-calving herds covers the spectrum of just about any main dairy breed that you can think of. The Jersey - particularly from New Zealand (as well as the UK

Continued on page 74.



HJ Lea Oakes

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Continued from page 73.

and Denmark) – is popular, as are Kiwi cross bulls from New Zealand, Holstein Friesians from New Zealand and Ireland, and British Friesians from the UK. Other popular breeds include the Scandinavian Reds (from Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway), Dairy Shorthorns, Guernseys, Normandes and some 'grazing type' Holsteins.

This huge variation in breeds made it difficult to calculate an across-breed index but it was achieved by applying a number of principles to the proofs. The SCI promotes milk quality rather than volume, and also places a very strong emphasis on fertility; the foundation of spring-calving herds. Many of these herds turn out early; often at the beginning of February, so the smaller sized animal is beneficial for minimising poaching. She also has a lower maintenance cost to make the litres profitable; so reduced maintenance costs are included.

The index also includes udder health – comprising somatic cell count (SCC) and mastitis – and leg health, with a strong emphasis on longevity. Many spring-calving cows comfortably complete eight lactations and a few go on to a dozen or more. They also need to pop out the calf and quickly get into the parlour and thence to pasture, so calving ease is also in the mix (see chart right).

Many Holstein bulls on the list offer lower production alongside a smaller frame, good components and solid health traits; particularly fertility and lifespan. For this reason, 74 of the top 100 proven SCI bulls at the December 2025 proof run are by Holstein sires, with the other 26 sired by Jersey. To break that down further, six Holsteins are UK-bred; mainly Denovo but also including one from Huddleston. Three are Swedish Holsteins, three are NZ Holstein Friesians, the same



Granure Genny 1219, dam of grazing specialist bull Granure General

number are Dutch-bred, with six from Canada, 52 from the US and one from Italy. Of the Jerseys, 15 are Danish (with a VJ prefix) and 11 are from New Zealand.

The proven list covers over 1,000 bulls with an SCI index, and apart from the above breeds in the top 100, the list includes Ayrshires, Guernseys, British Friesians, Scandinavian Reds, Montbeliardes, Brown Swiss, Irish Holstein Friesians, Fleckviehs, North American Guernseys, Jerseys and Ayrshires and Island Guernseys and Jerseys.

Genetic Advisory Forum

Many farmers, however, have found that the list does not meet their requirements – and they want to see fewer Holsteins and more bulls of other breeds. As a result of this intelligence, the Genetic Advisory Forum (GAF) formed a small sub-committee (including this writer) to investigate the options for changing some of the index details to include more breeds without compromising on the principles of spring calving genetic requirements.

Led by Marco Winters, who has run some modelling for committee discussions, the changes in SCI will reflect industry demands to broaden the range of bulls in the top 100.

There were a number of points raised to include breed corrections (effectively penalising the Holstein and other larger, heavier breeds). Outside of the traits included in SCI are other elements that can be adjusted for breed effect, like rearing costs, cull cow value and dairy bull calves (not, at present, dairy beef calves). However, there is generally a lower use of sexed semen in block-calving herds and the beef calves

requirement beyond a certain level – and this penalty rises steeply to ensure that these bulls are not on the same level as those with a lower DMI requirement. When the actual bull data is applied with the penalty it shows that the higher milk bulls broadly fit into the expected pattern.

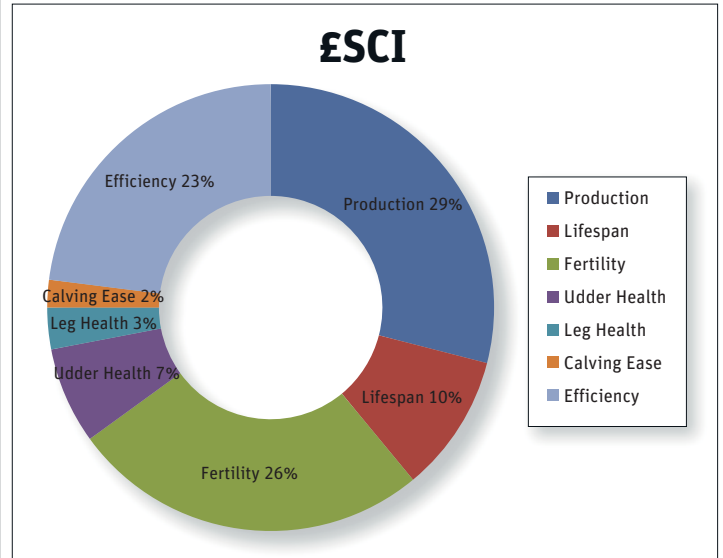
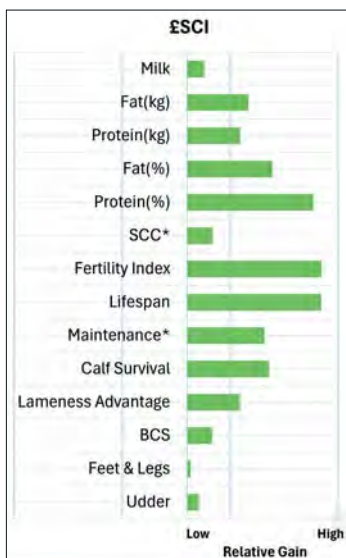
A similar story applies to the maintenance element, with bulls that have a higher value (i.e. are larger in frame) also suffering a similar penalty to the DMI modelling. This is to ensure that the right 'type' of sire needed for the spring calving index comes to the fore and doesn't have to compete with bulls offering good fertility, milk components and lifespan but are much bigger/heavier and need to eat more for maintenance.

A better mix

The redefined table now has a better mix, with the top 100 bulls made up of the following breed mix: 53 Jersey, including 31 from Denmark and 16 from New Zealand; 45 Holstein, including 10 NZ Holstein Friesians and eight Irish Holstein Friesians; and two Ayrshire bulls.

The profile for all SCI bulls excluding Holsteins (see chart below left: Traits with an * are reversed for presentation purposes) shows a moderate positive for milk, bigger positives for fat and protein kg and even larger gains for fat and protein percentages, particularly protein.

SCC is also an improving trait (shown to the right of the chart, whereas it is actually a trait where negative is more desirable – the same applies to maintenance). Fertility and lifespan, two of the key SCI traits, show the largest gains alongside positives for calf survival, Lameness Advantage, body condition score (BCS), feet, legs and udders.



Hopefully, the new data will be available for the April proof run, so although most spring-calving herds will have selected sires for this breeding season, the new system will have time to bed-in for 2027. The roll-out plan will initially be to describe the 'base cow' on which the data is calculated, and agree key messages that will alert farmers to the changes. These will be included on the AHDB website and on social media prior to the April proof run on April 7, 2026.

Spring-calving farmers and herd managers have indicated that they

are looking for cows that are efficient producers and breed back easily, have less reliance on expensive concentrates, include genetics that reduce replacement rates and list bulls that deliver cows suitable for the UK's spring-calving system. Therefore, the new SCI is built exactly around those priorities.

There is now less emphasis on 'big output' and more on animals that are 'right for the system.' The bulls in the SCI list will now breed offspring of a moderate size, that are efficient grazers, are very fertile with good survival and low empty rates. Most importantly they must produce high milk solids from grass to suit the farm's milk price structure.

The changes are designed to cut purchased feed costs by utilising grass as the best, and cheapest, feed. Farmers will notice a different look to the rankings, which is intentional, as they will see most big production bulls drop and bulls that breed an efficient grazing cow rise, making it easier to select genetics for spring-calving systems.

In summary, the new SCI is designed to breed a cow that is fertile, efficient in converting grass to milk solids, moderately sized,



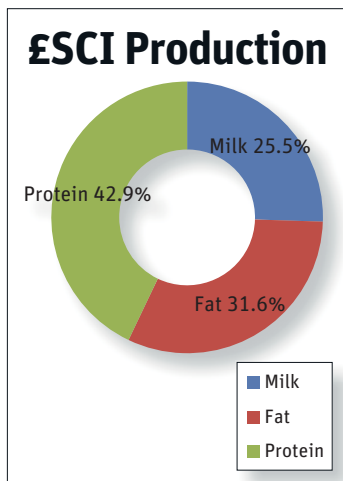
There's more emphasis on breeding cows which are right for the system

and ultimately profitable under a spring block-calving system. Also, it is important to note that under the new SCI the core data behind the bulls won't have changed (other than the usual proof run to proof run differences). The rankings will be based on the way that the formula and penalties are applied to each bull under the new index structure.

Finally, the excellent AHDB breeding website (www.breedingdairy.ahdb.org.uk) gives more information on all indexes. Clicking on the SCI bull page will bring up the entire availability list but

with the very useful options to filter by a number of traits (click filter on the right-hand side). Most obvious of these will be breed, so you can select specific breeds that you are interested in (to choose more than one breed hold down the Ctrl key and click each breed required).

You can also select on milk, fat and protein (kg and %), fertility and so on by using maximum and minimum slider bars to reduce the list to manageable numbers (the view number in the bottom right-hand corner will show how many bulls are selected).



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Trial shows FerAppease boosts pregnancies

Applying FerAppease to cows at breeding lifts conception rates by 26%, according to a new trial.

The trial, covering 375 Holsteins on two dairy farms in Argentina, saw the cows synchronised and inseminated at 65 days in-milk. The treated group received FerAppease - a maternal bovine pheromone - at insemination, while the control group received a mineral oil. Their pregnancy status was measured at 32 days - and the treated group averaged a conception rate of 60.2% against the control at just 47.7%.

"To jump to that kind of level is crazy," says Rob Drysdale, Technical Vet at Fera. "Anecdotally, we had good results in synchronised heifers here in the UK, with an 8-10%



increase in some groups, and now it's been proven in peer-reviewed research." Cornell University is now looking to replicate the research across more than 5,000 animals.

The pheromone reduces production of the stress hormone, cortisol, and has already shown benefits at weaning and other stressful events. "Synchronising

and inseminating cows incurs a lot of stress," says Rob. "This could be affecting fertility a lot more than we realised."

At a cost of £3.50/application, the return on investment is 833%, he claims. "If you're using expensive semen or trying to keep your calving interval tight, then if you can get one in 10 extra animals pregnant it's worth it. One cow's milk is worth £60-70 over a month - and it could be the difference between culling or not."

The spot-on pheromone effect lasts for 14 days, so it makes sense to treat at the onset of synchronisation, to cover the whole handling period.

www.ferappease.co.uk

Moist feed to boosts margins



now Mole Valley Farmers (MVF) is working with Duynie to make it available to producers elsewhere.

"Milk prices are under pressure, so farmers are trying to produce higher fat and proteins to maximise the price paid," says Shaun Hambley at MVF. By mixing TraffordGold with wheat, sugar beet and brewer's yeast, the co-op can produce a low-cost, low-carbon moist feed to maximise feed intakes and milk quality.

Mole Gold First and Mole Gold Supreme are both 17% protein; the latter is high in starch to boost milk protein, while the former is high in fibre to increase butterfat. Both also include cider yeast, supporting rumen health.

The co-op has also created a new mineral product range with Calci-Buph, which supplements calcium and acts as a rumen buffer to maintain rumen pH. www.moleonline.com

Livestock farmers across the South-West, Wales and the Midlands can now access a new moist feed blend designed to boost milk quality and maximise forage utilisation.

The range includes TraffordGold, a moist feed which was previously only accessible in the North. But

Compact straw bedding option

Farmers looking for straw bedding and feed machines for restricted height sheds could now have the answer with Kuhn's Primor GII 110.1 Polydrive.

The latest edition to the Primor range features an 11m³, 5.5m-long bale bed, allowing it to carry two 2.7m square bales with the tailgate closed, and up to four 2m round bales with the tailgate lowered. The compact 2.6m transport height extends to just 2.9m high during spreading, to ensure complete coverage in low slung buildings.

Featuring the Polydrive hydraulically-controlled feed rotor system, the machine is not only adaptable to building height but fodder type, too.

In addition, a two-speed gearbox powers the turbine rotation speed (310-620rpm) and a patented Unroll System, with hydraulic clamps inside the body, secures waiting round bales during straw-blowing. To improve longevity, the company's K-Nox treatment has been applied to the bottom of the turbine to offer resistance to silage acids and abrasion. www.kuhn.com



Wide spectrum herbicide for grassland

Thistlex Pro, a new systemic herbicide from Corteva Agriscience, offers grassland farmers a solution to tackle broad-leaved perennial weeds.

The newly formulated product contains the active ingredients clopyralid and halauxifen-methyl and is particularly effective in the control of perennial weeds like thistles, buttercups, dandelion, hogweed and cow parsley.

Suitable for use on grazed grassland, the product can effectively reduce perennial weeds, improving

grass quality for grazing and forage use. This helps to improve overheads by maintaining stocking densities or reducing purchased feed.

Applied on actively growing weeds between 150 and 300mm in size, at a rate of 1.67 litres/ha, the product works by translocating to the plant root, ensuring good plant kill. Where plants have grown beyond the recommended growth stage, it is possible to top and spray when regrowth has reached the correct stage. www.corteva.co.uk

Clamp sheet to reduce silage losses

A new two-in-one clamp sheet could help farmers save silage from spoilage on the top and shoulders of their clamp. Dry matter losses average 25% in the UK, and Visqueen's one-step Synergy clamp sheet increases forage

protection with no additional labour. The product combines two crucial processes, offering both a flexible vacuum sheet and a thicker, durable, top sheet in one application.

The combination provides an improved oxygen barrier to enhance fermentation and prevent spoilage, says Lloyd Dawson at Visqueen. "With silage worth £60-70/t this year, a 25% loss to spoilage in a 1,000-t clamp could mean a financial loss of up to £17,500."

www.visqueenpolycrop.com



New Harpers Feeds tool to manage production costs

Harpers Feeds is offering dairy farmers in the South West of England a new tool to manage milk production costs.

The tool highlights the financial implications of producing specific milk volumes and qualities, relative to individual production costs, with consideration of milk buyer and contract.

Milk price cuts are compounding the lack of demand for 'B' or 'C' litres, says Richard Waters at Harpers. "This requires a new level of cost management. The new model enables each farm to calculate when their milk is going to be produced and to what value. It works out break-even costs and implements a 'minimum litre threshold' for cows."

If farmers can't send the volume of milk they desire, they need to major on milk quality to improve their returns, be it components, bactoscan or cell counts, he adds. "It has never been so critical to know the cost of producing a litre, and how that

is broken down. The tool provides clarity on individual business needs, coupled with the ability to manage cows in and out of the system and provide an early warning of times of challenge."

www.harpersfeeds.co.uk



Richard Waters at Harpers Feeds

On-farm antibiotic milk test delivers fast and clear results

Progiene Dairy Hygiene has launched COMET8, a new on-farm antibiotic milk test offering a rapid, flexible and easy-to-interpret solution.

The kit allows up to eight milk samples to be tested at any one time and is sensitive to the full range of antibiotics used in milking cows. New samples can be added after previous samples have been put in place and testing has begun, giving clearly presented results via a

phone app or email notification within two-and-a-half hours.

Alison Clark of Progiene says: "Antibiotics will always have a role to play in UK dairy herds. Avoiding antibiotic failures, which can be costly, is an essential aspect of good herd management. COMET8 can allow not only simple, effective testing but speed and versatility as well."

www.progiene-dairy.com

Liquid nitrogen foliar fertiliser for maize

Timac Agro UK has launched a new high-efficiency liquid nitrogen foliar fertiliser, following trial results showing a significant improvement in maize yields.

Infolen, which is made up of nitrogen, phosphate, sulphur and magnesium, has been trialled by the Maize Growers Association, and demonstrated an 11% dry matter yield increase. The metabolisable energy (ME) in the crop also increased, by 17.3KMj/ha, says the



firm's David Newton. "This could potentially produce an additional 3,200 litres of milk per hectare." www.timacagro.com



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Neil Howie

Political correspondent

1967, 2001, 2007... Nobody knows the next number in the sequence. We all fervently hope there will not be one, but many of us believe there will. I write this with a heavy heart, and fully aware of the pain many of you will revisit as you read it. It is 25 years since the horror of the 2001 foot and mouth disease (FMD) outbreak, and a year since there were outbreaks in Germany, Slovakia and Hungary.

I remember the 1967-1968 outbreak. I know people who still find it hard to talk about their experiences from that time. Everybody old enough to remember 2001 knows something of the chaos the nations experienced, and many of you suffered excruciating trauma to yourselves, to friends and loved ones.

But we need to talk about what will happen when FMD next enters the UK. Imagine, some years from now, a report is published into an outbreak of FMD which is yet to happen. Such reports were written after 1968, and 2001, so there would be one.

**“Keep it out.
Find it quickly.
Stop it spreading.
Stamp it out.”**

Consider your feelings if the major conclusion of that report was that the epidemic became much more extensive, resulted in many more herds and flocks being destroyed, crippled many more rural businesses and broke many more people than would have been the case if only the response to the infection had been quicker and more effective.

I want to know that our nations are as well prepared as can possibly be for the day FMD arrives here. I hope I am wasting my time and energy; that it will never happen. But spending a little time and energy to be ready will be invaluable in the event that the virus gets here.

There are universal principles in infection control, which can be applied to many of the diseases our herds experience, not just notifiable epidemic infections. Keep it out. Find it quickly. Stop it spreading. Stamp it out.

Logic suggests that as an island nation we should be able to stay free of infections we do not have and desperately do not want. But tonnes of meat and thousands of people arrive here undetected and unchecked. We have given up the advantages of our island status for complex social, political and economic reasons.

Our borders are ‘porous’. It’s a fact we have to get used to. Wishing it were not so will not change things, and even if there were a political decision to invest in everything it would take to change the risk, it would take years to achieve ‘impermeable borders’.

I recently travelled through an American airport, where there was clear signage about restriction on bringing in any sort of food items. I was impressed by a sniffer dog, handled by a Department of Agriculture agent, who told me the dog would find any food item coming in in personal belongings or luggage. When I arrived back at Heathrow, I looked in vain for signs about the risk of bringing infection with me, let alone any competent agent.

The routes by which the virus reached Germany, Slovakia and Hungary last year are unclear. We know where the strains of virus concerned are normally found, and it is presumed they were carried by people. Is it not reasonable to think that it could arrive here just as easily?

Learning from the past

We have to accept that we have failed to ‘keep it out’ in the past. Other countries have failed recently; and there is every reason to believe we will fail again. We have to assume that the virus will be found after some animals are infected. That may be by a vet examining animals on-farm, at an abattoir or in an investigation facility.

How confident are we that we will ‘find it quickly’? I travel these shores in my work, and get to speak to farmers, vets and many of the other folks who are integral to the keeping and moving of live and dead stock. You all have a thousand things to do, just to get through every day. In my opinion, every person associated with livestock farming should be considered to be on the front line, on guard, aware and able to be the one who ‘finds it quickly’.

All of us can take the responsibility to be part of that team, and part of a team which functions efficiently by knowing the communication channels. We used to have wonderful networks with farmers, practicing vets, ministry vets, abattoirs, fallen stock businesses and countless others able to pick up the phone and keep each other informed about the humdrum and the critical. We can all take responsibility to find a current version of what we miss.

Current movements

‘Stop it spreading’ can be achieved before the infection is found. It is the principle behind the ‘six-day rule’, which assumes that by not moving animals away from new arrivals for that period of time, infections will become apparent before they are spread. Are the realities of current movement records and restrictions adequate, bearing in mind the changes in farm sizes, with multiple holdings under the same management?

Every animal farming business should know what would happen if there was an absolute stop on moving animals. We did not stop it spreading

in 2001 until multiple outbreaks were established. Are we ready to do better?

There are endemically infected countries in the world where living with the virus causes disease, welfare problems and reduces productive lives. That is not our way. We will ‘stamp it out’. The only questions are how quickly, and how much damage will there be along the way?

‘Find it quickly’ reduces the workload required to ‘stamp it out’. It is inevitable that if we have robust systems to find it quickly, and all responsible people are ‘on guard’, there will be some false alarms. We have to be understanding of that fact. If there is some temporary inconvenience while a false alarm is cleared, be kind to those involved. The alternative is that an opportunity to identify a true positive may be missed, and the virus will have spread before we know it.

‘Stamp it out’ has its own policy options. Will vaccine be part of the strategy? If so, will that be to create a firebreak of protected animals which are slaughtered shortly after the disease centre is cleared? Will pre-emptive slaughter, taking out herds and flocks which might increase the virus load if infected, be a reasonable strategy? If so, who will decide to take which herds?

**“Our governments
should trust
us with what
they know.”**

‘Stamp it out’ calls on multiple agencies and teams with specialised skills and equipment. They need to be ready, fully aware of their roles and resources on day one. I was part of a team which trained hundreds of vets and others to be ready, to check for infection and to vaccinate. I know how much effort went into that training. Slaughter and clean-up teams were not in our brief, but we all know how important and demanding those roles are. Every hour spent recruiting, training and resourcing key personnel will be an hour the virus could be spreading. Are we ready?

I am campaigning for all relevant representative bodies to meet with government officials and agencies. I believe that hearing, at the same time, and being able to discuss policy, strategies and logistics will be integral to an effective and decisive day one action plan. Our governments should trust us with what they know, and we should return that trust by doing all we can to be in the team, playing whatever roles we can.

Anything else could make 2001 look like a job well done. Those of us who still shed tears after that experience know we must do all we can to encourage our nations to be ready.

• Neil Howie is an Independent Veterinary Consultant and former Senior Farm Partner at the Nantwich Veterinary Group.



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Starting strong is good, finishing strong is ‘epic’

YES, it’s a tough world out there are the moment, some might think not watching the news each day may improve our health somewhat!
It does appear over the last year or so that the fundamentals of global trade and supply are no longer as predictable as they once might be.

The knock-on effect to farmers is often far quicker than it needs to be too – it doesn’t take much in the supply chain to for uncertainties to translate into price hikes.

Now more than ever farmers will be scrutinising costs, and with that in mind, a whole host of advisers, and supply companies will be there to help you make the best decisions for your herd.

Strategies that will save you money further down the line, risk management protocols to ensure healthy happy calves.

So, we hope that you find this supplement provides some insight into some of the calf health issues you may be faced with, as some of the brightest and best supporters for UK farmers tell you about their products and strategies to help.

There are many farm stories to read in this edition: Page 12-14 Dorset family farmer Charlotte Wallbridge, who runs a herd of 180 cows at the 144 hectare Perry Farm, discusses her calf rearing strategies and the importance of new energized calf milks in producing resilient and robust young animals, for the best start in life.

The implementation of dam vaccination protocols in late pregnancy – to boost colostrum antibodies against a range of highly infectious scour-causing pathogens – has had a transformative effect on early life calf health at the Manor Farming Company in Shropshire, run by George Lester and his father Jeff and mother Judith. See page 16-17 for more.

‘Heifers completing their first lactation should produce more than 75% of the average mature milk yield for the herd.’ But the latest 500-NMR herd KPI report published by the University of Reading shows that in half of the herds just two thirds or fewer first lactation cows achieved this target in the year ending August 2025. On page 32 of this edition, youngstock specialist Bianca Theeruth, points to shortfalls in dry cow care close to calving and the rearing period as being a possible cause for this shortfall.

We hope you find this edition useful, there will be a follow-up edition in October from British Dairying too.



If you want to give any feedback or ideas for future editions please email: caroline@calderwood.cc

Enjoy the issue!

Caroline Calder
Editor

“Calves are the most valuable animal on the farm, but they are also the most vulnerable”

Ray Foy, Teemore Engineering talking about the foundations of effective calf rearing, page 37.

Caroline Calder is Editor of the weekly e-newsletter for British Dairying magazine, Organiser of the Cream Awards – Dairy Industry Trade Awards and a Director of Grove House Media Ltd.

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“First and foremost, prevention will always be better than a cure with any disease risk.”

Dr Alison Bond, talking supplements to reduce the risks of BRD in calves, page 30.

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Contacts:

Editor - Caroline Calder
E caroline@calderwood.cc

Publisher - Alan Whibley
E alan@whibleys.net
Tel: 07786 993789

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Protecting your future milking herd starts right here

Investment in nutrition and management of youngstock, from in-utero until first calving, sets up future performance benefits.

As dairy producers face another challenging period, taking the long-term view and seeing today's youngstock as the future milking herd, can pay dividends.

An approach based on precision nutrition, high levels of heifer management, and focusing on steady and controlled growth, will help shape the future performance and profitability of the milking herd.

The period between weaning and first service is one of the most critical stages in the life of a dairy heifer, potentially determining future milk yield, fertility, longevity and overall herd efficiency.

Supporting growth rates at a time when animals are building frame size, mammary tissue, rumen capacity and skeletal strength, is crucial.

"When we think of heifer rearing, a KPI is age at first service (AFS), and consequently age at first calving (AFC), ideally, at 24-26 months of age," explains Trident MicroNutri ruminant technical manager, Anna Dinsdale.

"Reduced rates in daily live weight gain (DLWG) between weaning, first service through to first calving, can result in late puberty and postponed conception, with each additional day before calving increasing rearing costs, without generating income.

"The sooner the dairy heifer is producing milk the better, as she will start to pay her rearing costs back sooner, and earlier milk production will help offset her GHG emissions produced throughout her lifetime so far," she adds.

View today's youngstock as the future milking herd



Anna Dinsdale

"The sooner the dairy heifer is producing milk the better, as she will start to pay her rearing costs back sooner"

Investment in the future

These heifers should be considered an investment in the future dairy herd. Dairy heifers should be reared to enable them to realise their full genetic potential, with management and nutrition in place to support that, particularly in the first two years of the animal's life.

"With the amount that is invested into the genetics of these young dairy animals, we want to support that potential. It is therefore important that we keep meeting nutritional targets all the way through until first service and indeed, first calving," says Ms Dinsdale

When could investment in feed additives start to support the next generation?

In fact, calf performance can be influenced at the prenatal stage and can be affected by the nutrition and management of their mothers during the dry period.

"Dry cow management is not only important for the performance of the cow in her next lactation, but it also can have a huge impact on the unborn heifer's health, from birth to first calving, and their lactational performance, as well as impacting on the granddaughter's performance, in an example of epigenetics," she continues.

Ensuring good dry matter intakes in dry cows and having a source of high-quality metabolisable protein, impacts colostrum quality and quantity, and this will support calf health in the pre weaning period.

A growing body of research and studies also show that feeding choline during late gestation, can not only provide benefits in colostrum quantity and improved IgG levels, but also improve youngstock growth rate, immune function, future milk yield and longevity.

Why is it important to maximise heifer growth?

High performing heifers are those which have calved at 85% of their mature bodyweight at 22-26 months of age. These heifers are desirable because of the reduced number of unproductive days, as calving at 24 months instead of 30 months can reduce rearing costs by over 25%.

"They are also able to physically compete with older cows in the herd, and this can encourage higher feed intakes postpartum, in turn supporting improved production," says Ms Dinsdale.

"Conception rates are also improved, as is longevity, with the higher performance meaning fewer heifers will be culled before second lactation. On top of this, calving after 26 months can also reduce milk yield by up to 2.4kg a day," she adds.





Choline is essential for the growth and health of all animals

The role of Rumen Protected Choline (RPC)

Studies have shown that choline supplementation can improve heifer LWG. Choline is essential for the growth and health of all animals. In human nutrition, choline is an essential nutrient. Many studies have been carried out to show the benefits of choline supplementation during pregnancy, for brain and nervous tissue development.

“Likewise, research from the University of Florida has seen cows fed a rumen protected choline (RPC) during gestation, show a range of benefits in colostrum and also for the calf,” explains Ms Dinsdale.

“Calves born from cows fed the RPC, ReaShure®-XC (Balchem Corporation, Montvale, NJ), 21 days pre-partum, were born lighter, improving calving ease, but had a higher ADG, meaning they were 13kgs heavier at 12 months of age, and 36kg heavier at AFC. (Table 1).

“This would suggest that these heifers are more likely to meet 85% mature bodyweight at their first calving, while the difference in ADG could be attributed to



the improved colostrum quality from the cows fed the RPC, enabling the calf to fight immune challenges more effectively,” she adds.

Indeed, this is supported in the study by reduced incidences of fever in the first 21 days of life, from calves born from cows fed RPC supplementation, indicating a more mature immune response.

Stress factors

Research has also indicated that maternal pre-natal choline supplementation can also help the calf to manage stress situations, which could impact on future performance.

“In normal rearing systems calves are under a lot of stress, be that from environmental factors or group housing, for example,” continues Ms Dinsdale. “Feeding RPC in-utero does seem to enhance the calves’ ability to

cope with these stresses. Calves in the study had lower rectal temperatures, higher concentration of red blood cells and select white blood cells compared to the control non-RPC group.

“As well as a higher survival rate compared to the control group in a disease challenge study, 94% and 75%, respectively, heifer calves from cows fed the RPC supplement had a higher milk yield in their first lactation, averaging 2.2 litres per day per head more,” she adds.

Positive effects on early life and lifetime performance

It is therefore essential to ensure excellent dry period management and nutrition, as this plays a key role in supporting the calf in their early stage of life and subsequent performance.

“Ensuring high dry matter and quality metabolisable protein intakes, will aid improvements in colostrum quantity and quality, while utilising feed additives, like ReaShure®-XC encapsulated choline, to provide in utero nutrition to the calf, will have positive effects on both early life and lifetime performance,” concludes Ms Dinsdale.



TABLE 1

Age	Control	ReaShure®-XC
Birth, kg	40.4	38.3
2 months (weaning), kg	76.7	77.6
12 months, kg	322.2	335.3**
Post-calving, kg	534.0	570.0**

Cows supplemented with choline 21 days prepartum produced heifers 13kgs heavier at 12 months old ** (P<=0.05) (Zenobi et al. 2018) and 36kg heavier post-calving** (P<=0.05).

Lung scanning 'game-changer' for tackling calf pneumonia

Thoracic ultrasound scanning (TUS), also known as lung ultrasound scanning, is rapidly gaining ground on UK farms, with some vets describing it as a "game-changer" in the fight against bovine respiratory disease (BRD) in calves.

BRD remains one of the costliest and most persistent health challenges in youngstock, affecting growth rates, fertility, milk yield and overall herd profitability. Yet diagnosis on many farms still relies heavily on visible clinical signs such as coughing, nasal discharge and raised temperature, often after lung damage has already occurred.

Now, vets are encouraging farmers to consider routine lung ultrasound scanning to spot disease earlier and treat calves more precisely.

"Thoracic ultrasound allows us to see what's actually happening inside the lung," says Will Bower, veterinary surgeon at Fosse Way Vets. "In many cases, we're identifying lung lesions before a calf looks sick. That early window makes a huge difference to treatment outcomes."

Earlier diagnosis

Research shows lung ultrasonography offers high sensitivity and specificity when detecting lung lesions associated with BRD. This reduces the risk of underdiagnosing sick calves and overtreating healthy ones, a key issue as the industry faces renewed pressure on antimicrobial use.

Figures released by the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture (RUMA) alliance at the end of 2025 show calf oral antibiotic sales more than doubled in 2024, rising from 1.92 mg/kg defined daily dose for animals (DDDvet) to 4.03 mg/kg DDDvet. RUMA has since introduced a target to reduce calf oral antibiotic use by 10% year on year, underlining the need for more accurate diagnosis in youngstock.

"Ultrasound helps us make evidence-based decisions," says Mr Bower. "We can target treatment to the calves that genuinely need it and avoid blanket therapy and unnecessary treatments. That's better for the calf, better for antimicrobial stewardship and better for the farm business."

A recent study reported that weekly lung scanning combined with clinical examination enabled BRD cases to be detected several days earlier than



Will Bower scanning a calf's lung to assess respiratory health.

"Thoracic ultrasound allows us to see what's actually happening inside the lung."

standard scoring systems. Calves treated promptly showed high success rates, low relapse rates and rapid healing of lung lesions, with subsequent growth and carcass quality comparable to unaffected animals.

How lung scanning works

Scanning is typically carried out from around six weeks of age in the pre-weaning period, but is often left till around 10 weeks for maximum benefit on investment. Each lung is assessed using an ultrasound scanner and scored on a 0–3 scale. A score of one may indicate mild lung lesions without clinical justification for treatment, while a score of three suggests more severe consolidation likely to have longer-term impacts.

Benefits

"By the time a calf is dull and off its feed, lung damage can already be significant," Mr Bower explains. "If we can intervene earlier, we're far more likely to protect long-term performance."

Beyond immediate health benefits, TUS is also shedding light on the hidden production costs of early-life respiratory disease.

Studies have shown dairy calves with lung lesions detected by ultrasound are more likely to suffer reduced survival, poorer reproductive performance and lower milk production later in life. In one study of more than 600 heifers, animals with lung consolidation at weaning were 4.7 times more likely to be culled before first calving. Another study linked early lung consolidation with a 525kg reduction in first-lactation milk yield.

"Less lung capacity means less ability to grow efficiently," says Mr Bower. "That has knock-on effects on daily live-weight gain, age at first calving and lifetime productivity. Ultrasound gives us a much clearer picture of which calves may not reach their full potential."

For dairy producers rearing their own replacements, this information can inform more strategic selection decisions and reduce the risk of carrying forward underperforming animals.

At herd level, ultrasound scanning can also expose gaps in BRD detection and help shape preventive strategies. Farms may discover subclinical disease is more prevalent than previously thought, prompting a review of ventilation, stocking density, colostrum management, nutrition and vaccination protocols.

Mr Bower recently worked with a unit buying in dairy cross beef calves at three to six weeks old for rearing and finishing. Pneumonia had historically been a problem.

All calves were vaccinated with Bovilis Bovipast RSP to protect against key viral and bacterial BRD pathogens. Half were also given Bovilis Nasalgen-C, an intranasal vaccine targeting respiratory bovine coronavirus.

“Early findings have revealed that calves vaccinated against coronavirus had increased daily liveweight gain, reduced mortality and scored better for lung lesions,” he explains.

“The data opened our eyes to the impact coronavirus can have in a herd. Coronavirus typically causes initial lung damage, which then allows other



pathogens to establish secondary infections, leading to further lung damage. Without scanning, we wouldn't have had such clear evidence of what was happening.”

“Seeing lung lesions on a screen can be quite powerful,” he adds. “In this case, it helped the farmer understand the true scale of the issue and supported more informed conversations about prevention through vaccination, housing and nutrition. It also visually highlighted the impact on the lungs, with fewer lesions in the group vaccinated against coronavirus.”

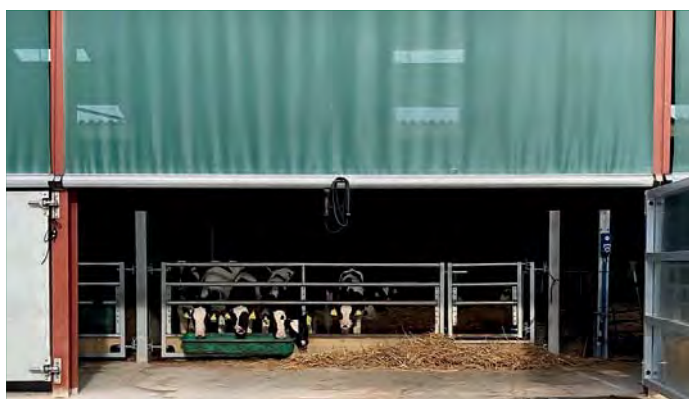
Equally, TUS can highlight situations where calves are being unnecessarily treated, supporting more targeted therapy and reduced antimicrobial use.

Vet Kat Baxter-Smith from MSD Animal Health says results from 347 ultrasonic examinations on 47 calves on Scottish dairy farms highlighted that farmers were misdiagnosing BRD in youngstock. Only 13% of calves highlighted as abnormal on scanning were treated by the farmer, while 75% of those classed as normal on scanning were treated unnecessarily.

“The results clearly highlighted that TUS on UK farms may improve diagnostic rates and accuracy, reduce the unnecessary use of antimicrobials and demonstrate the value of preventive healthcare programmes,” she said.

Mr Bower says TUS can easily be incorporated into routine visits, with the ability to scan around 40 calves per hour.

“With the technology now readily available, there's no reason not to consider it where respiratory disease is a concern,” says Mr Bower. “It's about being proactive rather than reactive.”



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Giving calves the essential edge: a strategy for superior health and growth

Calf scour is significant when it comes to the future health and performance of every herd, but controlling it can be a challenge. Virbac experts take a comprehensive look at the causes and multifactorial approaches to control.

A healthy calf is the foundation of a productive cow, and recent data suggests that injectable trace minerals (ITMs) can provide the “essential edge” needed to navigate the high-risk period of early life.

While nutrition and environment remain the cornerstones of rearing, Multimin™, a unique prescription-only combined trace mineral injection containing Zinc, Copper, Manganese, and Selenium is proving to be a vital tool for boosting calf immunity and performance when it matters most.

Reducing disease rates

The pre-weaning phase is a battleground for calf health, with scours and respiratory disease often acting as the primary barriers to growth. The evidence supporting Multimin's ability to protect youngstock is compelling.

In a key study involving dairy calves, those supplemented with Multimin™ at 3 days and 30 days of age demonstrated a significant reduction in common calf-hood diseases compared to controls¹. The study recorded 8% fewer cases of diarrhoea and 7.5% fewer cases of pneumonia and otitis¹. Furthermore, a study has shown when calves are administered Multimin™ in the first 24 hours after birth, mortality and morbidity rates in the groups that received ITMs was half that of the control group².

If disease does strike the herd, boosting mineral levels can still offer significant support. For herds battling Bovine Respiratory Disease (BRD), recent research has shown that when Multimin™ is administered alongside or ahead of antibiotic treatment for Mannheimia haemolytica, calves achieved better clinical outcomes than those receiving treatment alone³. This suggests that “topping up” trace minerals helps the immune system fight back more effectively during active infection.

Supercharging your vaccine investment

Vaccination is a standard protocol on



modern dairy units, representing a significant financial and labour investment. However, a vaccine is only as effective as the immune system's ability to respond to it.

Research demonstrates that calves administered injectable trace minerals alongside vaccination produced antibodies at a faster rate⁴ and maintained higher antibody levels⁵ than those administered the vaccine alone. Essentially, Multimin ensures your calves are “vaccine ready,” helping to maximise the protection provided by your vaccination protocols and ensuring that your investment in herd health pays off.

Driving growth and performance

Beyond fighting disease, adequate trace mineral status is essential for growth. The “trace mineral gap” often occurs during periods of stress, such as weaning or housing, when oral intake drops just as the body's demand for minerals spikes.

Bridging this gap with Multimin™ has been shown to improve Average Daily Gain (ADG)⁶, helping farmers meet critical weight targets for breeding and calving down at 24 months.

By bypassing the rumen, the injection ensures that levels of Zinc, Manganese, Selenium, and Copper peak in the blood within 8-10 hours and are stored in the liver within 24 hours⁷, providing rapid support exactly when the calf needs it.

Strategic timing for maximum impact

To see these benefits, Multimin™ is best

used strategically at specific “pinch points” in the calf's life:

- **At Birth:** While colostrum is the first line of defence, supplementing the dam pre-calving can boost the mineral status of the calf. For the calf itself, an injection at birth or early life helps bridge the immunity gap.

- **Weaning, Housing and Transportation:** These are classic stress periods where immunity dips. Supplementing at weaning or upon arrival at a rearing unit helps youngstock cope with the transition and maintain growth rates.

- **At Vaccination:** Maximise investment in vaccination to support immunity and reduce disease in the herd.

Conclusion

Reducing disease rates by even a few percent and ensuring vaccines work harder can lead to significant marginal gains across a herd. By integrating Multimin™ into your calf rearing protocol, specifically at birth, vaccination, and weaning, you can provide your youngstock with the essential edge they need to thrive, securing the productivity of your future herd.

Discuss with your veterinary surgeon how an injectable trace mineral protocol can fit into your youngstock rearing plan.

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1. Teixeira et al. J Dairy Sci.2014; 97:4216–4226 2. Arthington and Havenga. J Anim Sci.2012; 90:1966–1971 3. Roberts et al. Prof Anim Sci.2016;32(6):842–848 4. Bittar et al. Prof Anim Sci. 2018;34(1):59–66 5. Hong et al. Bio Trace Element Res. 2024;<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12011-024-04251-z> 6. Bates et al. Vet Rec.2019;184(22):680.

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Feeding for colostrum quality

Youngstock represent the future performance and profitability of every dairy enterprise, with the decisions made in the first few hours, days and months of life, having long-lasting effects on growth, health, fertility and milk production potential. Kite Consultancy's Technical Consultant **Becky Hewlett** provides some insight.

The earliest stages of youngstock can also affect the epigenetics of the calf, which can be described as how the environment, nutrition and stress, impact the gene expression of the calf.

"Epigenetic activation occurs within the first few days of life, and colostrum quality strongly influences this process," explains Becky Hewlett.

"Although the principles of colostrum management are simple, there are obvious shortcomings, as evidenced when we consider that 15% of heifers fail to reach first lactation," she adds.

The key is to consider the core principles of the '6 Qs' of colostrum feeding – **Quickly, Quantity, Quality, sQueaky clean, Quietly and Quantity.**

Quickly

There is no transfer of immunity between the cow and calf before birth, and 20% of calves experience failure of passive transfer. These calves are 1.5 times more likely to scour, and 1.8 times more likely to get pneumonia.

"The calf's gut wall will start to close from six hours after birth, so it is a race against time to ensure those antibodies and immunoglobulins (IgGs) can be absorbed. Colostrum needs to be fed ideally two hours after birth, and no later than six hours for the first feed, to maximise that process," says Ms Hewlett.

"At 24 hours, the calf gut is fully closed and becomes unable to absorb the large antibody molecules. Quantity of IgG also decreases by 3.7% per hour after birth, so speed really is of the essence."

Quantity

Maximum protection is achieved when colostrum is fed at 10% of birthweight within two hours, and a second feed within 12 hours.

"It is worthwhile feeding colostrum/first milk for three to seven days, to allow for gastrointestinal development, and to decrease the risk of scours," she continues.

"The relatively low lactose content in colostrum is gentler on the immature neonatal gut, supporting the calf's low tolerance at birth."



Becky Hewlett

sQueaky clean

Every effort should also be made to reduce bacterial contamination from buckets and utensils, reducing the burden on the calf.

"Contaminated colostrum reduces the ability of the calf to absorb IgG. The gut is not selective, and is open to absorbing harmful bacteria as well as the beneficial IgG.

Bacteria will multiply exponentially, and so equipment needs to be heated to 49°C as a minimum, and cleaned with a chemical," she advises.

Quantify

"Be clear on the colostrum administration protocol, making sure feeding volumes and timings are recorded," continues Ms Hewlett.

"Routine measurement of calf IgG levels, from a random number of calves less than four days old in each batch, is an excellent way to monitor effectiveness of colostrum administration.

After four days, the IgG concentration starts to decline, so samples taken after will be less representative."

Poor growth rates, or high disease and mortality rates, can all be an indication of poor colostrum management. Weighing calves and setting KPIs, such as achieving a minimum of 0.85kg DLGW/day through the weaning period, is also an effective way of measuring colostrum success.

Quietly

Ensure that the colostrum is being administered in a calm environment. Stress can have the ability to reduce the absorption of IgG across the gut.

Quality

It is critical to measure colostrum quality, with huge variations on farm. These variations can be caused by breed, age, dry period length and feeding, as well as poor hygiene and cow health. Ideally colostrum should come from the calf's own dam, but if this is not possible, fresh or frozen colostrum from another cow can be used.

"The easiest method to measure colostrum quality is by using a Brix refractometer, targeting a reading of >25% for heifer calves. If using a colostrum, ensure that it is >50g/litre IgG. If you are persistently seeing lower colostrum quality, then consider looking at the dry cow diet," explains Ms Hewlett.

"For close up calving cows, prioritise a higher protein diet and maximising intakes. IgGs are made from protein, so by feeding a higher protein diet, you are providing the building blocks for those precious IgGs.

To help maximise this, farmers should be targeting a minimum of 1300g of metabolisable protein, ideally across a range of good quality protein," she adds.

Feeding a rumen protected choline (RPC) can also help increase colostrum quality, helping in the development of a more robust immune system, as demonstrated in recent studies.

"In one study, supplementing with the RPC ReaShure®-XC, in the pre-calving period, increased IgG concentration by 27% (Zenobi et al 2018). Furthermore, Holdorf et al., (2023) found that supplementing with ReaShure®-XC in the 21 days pre-calving had a 57% increase in colostrum yield," says Ms Hewlett.

"One of the many challenges of feeding quality colostrum is ensuring there is enough banked, at the desired quality. Feeding a rumen protected choline can help achieve this, as well as providing additional benefits to the cow in improving liver function and reducing metabolic disease risk," she continues.

"By following the simple principles of colostrum management, we are able to positively influence the future health, fertility and milk production potential of our youngstock."



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Feeding for optimum calf health

Maximising calf health and growth rates underpin the rearing system at a Dorset family farm where maintaining the calving block is central to the farming system.

Kenton Bennett and his partner Charlotte Wallbridge run a herd of 180 cows at the 144-hectare Perry Farm at Bagber in the Blackmore Vale. Kenton is the third generation of the family on the farm. Predominantly clay soils, the farm is mainly down to grass with some cereals.

The cows are mainly Holsteins and Ayrshire with a few Danish Reds. They are looking for a resilient, general-purpose cow. The cows which are averaging 8750 litres are autumn block calving and graze when conditions allow, typically from March to November.

Around 50-70 heifers are reared per year, which Charlotte admits is more than they need given the replacement rate is below 20%, meaning they can sell some freshly calved heifers every year. However, she confesses to loving cows and not wanting to serve too many to beef.

Heifers are reared to calve in at the start of the block at 23 months old. Beef calves are usually reared on and sold as stores 14-18 months old, but this year they have sold calves at 3-4 weeks old to make the most of strong prices.

"Calf rearing is really key to our system," Charlotte explains. "Labour is always tight and we get a lot of calves in a short window. So we want them fast growing and healthy so we don't have to devote time to dealing with sick calves and can reduce the pressure on the system."

Charlotte pays close attention to colostrum feeding. As soon as a cow calves she is milked within half an hour and the colostrum bottle fed to the calf. Calves are typically consuming four litres but will take up to five litres. Charlotte will get up several times per night as required to ensure calves get colostrum promptly. Any surplus colostrum is stored in a catering fridge and is not frozen.

Health strategies

To check the effectiveness of passive immunity transfer, blood total proteins are regularly checked and there have been no problems. They focus on the transition diet to ensure good quality colostrum.

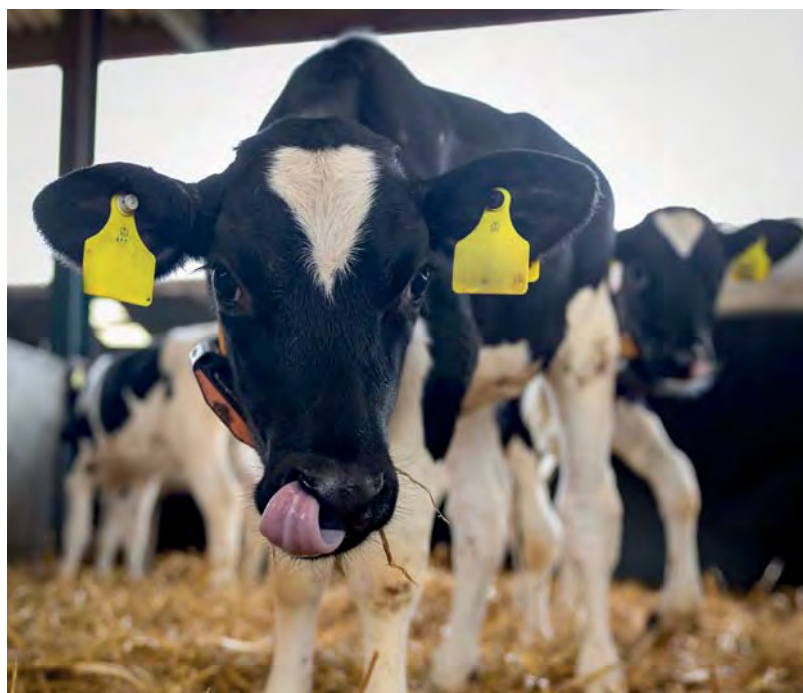


Photo credit: Rod Kirkpatrick Photography

"Labour is always tight and we get a lot of calves in a short window"

Calves continue to be fed fresh milk from the dam for three days. On day four they move onto a machine feeder being kept in groups of 15-20 depending on pen size and they stay in these groups until weaning.

"We fed adlib for 40 days and then calves are weaned gradually over three weeks," Charlotte continues. "Calves are also fed adlib starter pellets and have access to chopped straw from day one. Just before weaning we move them onto an adlib rearing nut."

In previous years, Charlotte had used a whey-based milk replacer and calves were consuming up to 15 litres per day, around 150kg of replacer before they were weaned. Bloat had been a major problem, and they were also seeing problems with calves cross-suckling.

Dr Laura Tenant from Trouw Nutrition explains that bloat can be a problem with whey-based powders as they do not form a clot in the abomasum and are digested more quickly.

"A whey powder will be digested in around 20 minutes compared to 2-3 hours for a skim-based powder which has formed an abomasal clot," Dr Tennant explains. "The other consequence is that calves will feel hungry again sooner leading to higher intakes. If they are unable to satisfy their suck reflex they will also look to cross suckle."

In addition to bloat, Charlotte says calves were experiencing problems with pneumonia. So twelve months ago she decided to look at changing milk replacers and was advised to try Trouw Nutrition Milkivit One as it most closely resembles cow's milk.

"The closer a milk replacer is to cow's milk the better for the calf," Dr Tennant explains. "Cows' milk is more complex than most people know, but everything in cows' milk is there for a reason."

Most milk replacers have lower protein and fat content than cows' milk but higher lactose. Increasing fat in milk replacer should be a priority as fat is the highest energy component of milk and increasing fat will increase ME/kgDM.

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Photo credit: Rod Kirkpatrick Photography



Charlotte Wallbridge at Perry Farm

Energized Calf Milks are formulated to be closer to cow's milk with higher fat and protein contents to better meet calf requirements.

"The fat in bovine milk contains over 400 different fatty acids, making it one of the most complex fats in nature. Fat composition is crucial to calf development. When we compare whole milk with the vegetable fat blends typically used in calf milk replacer there are some significant differences. Vegetable based fats are missing the shorter chain fatty acids meaning the overall fat is unbalanced and deficient compared to cows' milk."

These shorter chain acids bring multiple benefits to the calf. Most significantly they play a key role in the development of the rumen and gastrointestinal tract, helping make calves more resilient and less prone to scours.

"Calves are born with a naive, under-developed digestive system, functioning as simple-stomached animals for the first 2-3 weeks of life. The rumen, reticulum, and omasum are inactive at birth, meaning the abomasum is the primary site of digestion.

"The full digestive system develops in the crucial first three weeks, so it is important calves have access to the fats crucial for gut development so that by the time they are weaned the rumen is better able to digest concentrates.

"If the gut is better developed you will see higher concentrate intakes but crucially you will see lower incidence of scours. And if calves are fighting an immune challenge due to scours, they are at an increased risk of pneumonia."

"Trials confirm the benefits of feeding a fatty acid profile which more closely resembles the fat in bovine milk."

Solutions

"Lactofat Pro, a new patented fatty acid product only available in Milkivit ONE Energized Calf Milk has also been shown to improve rumen development meaning calves were better placed to move onto solid feed, consuming 26% more starter feed over the milk feeding period when fed milk replacer ad lib. The combination of higher intakes of a higher energy milk replacer and greater solid feed intakes combined to increase overall energy intakes for faster growing, stronger and more robust calves.

"Trials confirm the benefits of feeding a fatty acid profile which more closely resembles the fat in bovine milk. The biggest difference is in the development of the gastrointestinal tract, where the villi, the absorptive area in the gut, were longer and more developed. This means there was a bigger surface area for absorbing nutrients.

"The improved gut integrity plays a vital role in protecting calves against scours. Feeding Milkivit ONE compared to a traditional Energized Calf Milk was shown to reduce the incidence of scours. In addition these calves required fewer treatment days and had a reduced risk of mortality.

Success story

Charlotte and Kenton started feeding Milkivit ONE to heifer calves born in autumn 2025, making no other changes to the system. Beef calves were kept on the whey-based replacer.

"While calves were still eager feeders, daily intakes were reduced with calves averaging 11 litres per day despite having ad lib access," Charlotte explains. "This makes sense because as the replacer has more fat and a higher-energy density calves are meeting their energy demands sooner. We have seen a reduction in cross suckling and have no bloat this year.

"We have had no pneumonia cases this season either which has reduced vaccine use. We have used no antibiotics and have had zero mortality. The calves are noticeably more vibrant and playful which is nice to see. And having healthier calves makes them easier to look after which is important as we always have plenty to do.

"What matters now is how the calves continue to grow, when they calve down, how well they perform and how long they last in the herd. But hopefully we have produced resilient and robust young animals and have got them off to the best possible start," Charlotte concludes.



Dr Laura Tennant, Trouw Nutrition Senior Technical Advisor



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Dam vaccination delivers transformative boost to calf health

Implementation of dam vaccination protocols in late pregnancy – to boost colostrum antibodies against a range of highly infectious scour-causing pathogens – has had a transformative effect on early life calf health at the Manor Farming Company in Shropshire.



George Lester, who farms the family dairy unit in partnership with his father, Jeff, and mother Judith, had been at his wits end until new vaccination regimes helped stabilise debilitating infectious calf scour problems.

“Cryptosporidiosis caused by the *Cryptosporidium parvum* parasite being present persistently in the rearing environment was the main issue,” said George.

“We saw it in four-to-five-day-old calves particularly, with the bulk of cases tending to occur during October and November every year. Infected calves could look perfectly normal and healthy first thing in the morning but by the evening these same animals were visibly sick and needing re-hydration therapy. Then, by the next morning, could even be found dead, despite overnight intervention. It was just so quick I found it soul-destroying – and as well as being highly costly, the whole situation was depressing.”

Calf disease incidence on the all-year-round calving holding tended to be lower during the warmer summer months but would return with a vengeance as autumn closed in each year.

George readily admits that his calf rearing set-up is not as good as it could be but works hard to mitigate inherent challenges caused by limitations with the current available housing.

“Calves are reared in the same pen area as any dry cows calving and this proximity doesn’t help, so we try and be meticulous with hygiene protocols. Unfortunately, with cryptosporidiosis being such a highly contagious disease – with millions of oocysts being shed from infected calves and spreading to pen mates via the faecal-oral route – we are always up against it, despite a rigorous pen disinfection regime,” said George.

Oocysts can persist in the environment for months, and calves often become infected from contaminated bedding, feeding equipment or contact with other calves. Once present on a farm, eradication is nearly impossible



Pre-weaned heifer calves are currently being reared in proximity to the calving pen, which George Lester says is not ideal. When investment is available for a new building, the Lesters hope to rear their calves separately from the milking herd and dry cows.

“We saw it in four-to-five-day-old calves particularly, with the bulk of cases tending to occur during October and November every year.”

– making on-going disease management critical. Because the infection dose is so low, even the cleanest-looking calf sheds can pose a risk if not rigorously managed. To make matters worse, only certain disinfectants are effective against the *C. parvum* parasite, making environmental hygiene a crucial control point. This is why so many farms wrestle with calf cryptosporidiosis problems.

Dam vaccination

Interestingly, it was a visit by George’s father Jeff to a dairy unit in Anglesey that first opened their eyes to the benefits of dam vaccination to boost colostrum antibodies. Jeff returned home keen to discuss the potential for boosting calf health on their own unit.

“Dad said that the calves he saw on Anglesey looked tremendous, despite the unit also having a historic problem with infectious calf scours. At the time, there were only dam vaccines available for protecting calves from rotavirus, coronavirus and *E. coli*, but since they started to vaccinate the dams and then feed the fortified colostrum to their calves, calf health there had been much improved.

“We talked to Shropshire Farm Vets and agreed such a regime could probably help us too. Although, we knew cryptosporidiosis was our main challenge (and at that time there was no vaccine available against *C. parvum*), faecal testing highlighted the fact that the other main infectious pathogens were present alongside it. These were therefore potentially causing disease issues too, so it made sense to see if

dam vaccination could help alongside improved hygiene protocols. And it did,” said George.

The improvement the Lesters saw was enough to build their confidence in the benefit of dam vaccination – so much so that when the calf cryptosporidiosis vaccine,

Bovilis Cryptium, became available late in 2024, they were keen to use it straight away.

Administered to pregnant cows in the third trimester of gestation, the vaccine requires two doses to be given four to five weeks apart, with the final dose completed at least three weeks before calving. For subsequent pregnancies, only a single booster is required.

“By vaccinating cows in late pregnancy with Bovilis Cryptium, antibodies against *C. parvum* are raised in colostrum, reducing clinical signs of disease in newborn calves when fed this fortified colostrum,” explained vet Duarte Monteiro from Shropshire Farm Vets.

“MSD Animal Health advises that this fortified colostrum and transition milk from vaccinated cows should be fed to newborn calves for five days for maximum benefit. Protection of calves does depend on adequate intake – and when this disease management protocol is implemented alongside excellent colostrum management and strict hygiene protocols, calf health can be improved,” he added.

“I told Duarte that because of our disease history we wanted to be first in the queue for this new vaccine and vaccinated our first dry cows during the 2024/25 winter,” said George.

When calves are now born to their vaccinated mothers, they are bottle or tube-fed their own dam’s colostrum/transition milk for four days before moving onto two different milk feeding regimes. The recommended time for feeding this fortified milk is five days.

The female heifer calves are grouped after colostrum feeding, trained onto a computerised feeder and fed milk replacer according to a pre-programmed growth curve. The male beef calves are fed unsold milk from the milking herd.

Herd replacements are weaned over a two-week period from seven to eight weeks of age, at which point the youngstock are moved to a neighbouring tenanted unit just up the road.

“Since we started the new cryptosporidiosis vaccine alongside the other dam vaccine the results have been truly transformative. Our calves look so much healthier now; they grow better too, and we are no longer losing high value heifer replacements or beef calves to this debilitating disease. Thankfully, the reduction in calf mortality alone more than



George Lester (left) of the Manor Farming Company with vet Duarte Monteiro from Shropshire Farm Vets.

pays for the vaccine use in the dams and we are also spending significantly less on calf treatments.

“Duarte calculated that, previously, 50% of the whole farm’s antibiotic and anti-inflammatory usage was going into calves under 14 days. Now that’s no longer the case – a highly positive improvement that we are all delighted about,” said George.

“As there is a correlation between calves suffering from scours and bovine respiratory disease (BRD), Duarte also now scans the calves’ lungs every two weeks to check for any damage caused by sub-clinical pneumonia. It’s been very illuminating how much lung consolidation we do pick up, even in apparently healthy calves. So much so that we now vaccinate calves themselves to help protect them from key pneumonia pathogens.”

Vet Duarte Monteiro adds that in the past, youngstock mortality rates at

Manor Farming Company were above 5% in some years and calves didn’t always achieve the 0.8kg daily liveweight gain target.

“But after these changes, we are comfortably under 3% mortality and would like to see it drop to under 1%. And two years on from starting lung scanning, our daily liveweight gain target is now 1kg/day for every calf, which we believe is achievable.”

As a result, George says he is now a committed vaccination advocate.

“There’s no doubt that employing effective preventative health measures boosts early life calf health and certainly beats chasing your tail fighting fires,” he said.

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FARM FACTS:

- Farming 141 hectares (347 acres), owned and rented
- Greenfield site (from 2016)
- Housed, all year-round calving herd of 180 cows milked through three robots
- Calves currently reared in main cow shed but planning secured for bespoke calf housing in the future
- Growing maize, grass and wheat in rotation
- Robot feeding programmed to mix rations and feed cows up to 10 times a day
- Currently supplying Muller/Tesco dairy group

Protect health & long-term performance with quality CMR

As milk price falls farmers are being urged to avoid the temptation to feed whole milk to calves and to recognise the value of feeding a quality calf milk replacer.



Ian Watson



Farmers risk compromising calf health and the long-term sustainability and yield potential of their herd if they make attempts to cut costs by feeding calves whole milk.

Ian Watson, Global Technical and GB Sales Manager for Feed For Growth (Volac Milk Replacers Limited) says the milk feeding period lays the foundations for success and any attempts to cut corners will be detrimental in the long run.

"It's always worth investing in calf growth, whatever the milk price," he explains. "Ultimately, you're investing in your herd's future."

Young calves require energy and protein for healthy growth and frame development. Ensuring that both are delivered in abundance, and in the most digestible form in a quality CMR enables a calf to easily utilise the feed and convert it into liveweight.

"The relative ability of the calf to turn feed nutrients into growth is at its highest during the milk feeding period and immediately post weaning, so if you cut back now, you're not making the most of this high feed conversion efficiency," Mr Watson adds.

"By feeding whole milk, you could also inadvertently introduce disease, which could have a detrimental impact on growth and stop heifers from calving in at 24 months, which is the optimum for health, survival and higher lifetime daily yield."

There are five main reasons to opt for a quality CMR:

1 LOWER HEALTH RISK

Whole milk poses a particular risk for Johne's, Bovine TB and Mycoplasma bovis. Mr Watson says a hygienically prepared, precision-formulated CMR is the best way to safeguard against disease spread. "Calf milk replacers will always be the best option as they are bio-secure and hygienic because they are made from pasteurised milk," he explains. When feeding whole milk cannot be avoided, pasteurisation should be considered and pooling should be avoided. Milk from Johne's positive cows must never be fed.

"It's always worth investing in calf growth, whatever the milk price"

2 BETTER CONSISTENCY

When mixed and fed correctly, CMR delivers a consistent macro and micro-nutrient supply to the calf, whereas the quality of whole milk can be hugely variable.

3 MORE HYGIENIC

As whole milk is collected directly from the cow, there is more chance of faecal contamination which poses a disease risk to calves. Mr Watson stresses that whether feeding whole or CMR, milk should always be prepared in hygienic conditions and stored in clean containers. "Always clean feeding equipment between groups of calves and disinfect after every feeding to help reduce the spread of disease between calves," he stresses.

4 ENCOURAGES STARTER INTAKES

High quality calf milk replacer products, such as any formulation from Feed

for Growth (Volac Milk Replacers), tend to be lower in fat, but higher in lactose than whole milk, which will encourage a better solid feed intake, Mr Watson adds.

"In comparison, whole milk can postpone the intake of solid feed by the calf, which may delay the age of successful weaning or result in post-weaning growth checks, which could compromise hitting a target age at first calving of 24 months."

5 CAN PROVIDE ADDITIONAL HEALTH PACKAGE BENEFITS

A CMR can be selected to include an appropriate additional health package to provide calves with an extra boost and help meet specific rearing goals.

For example, certain hydrolysed yeast cultures can help mitigate the effects of a number of harmful pathogens, including crypto. Incorporating a milk oligosaccharides – or natural milk sugar – can also positively influence the gut by feeding beneficial bacteria, helping to build a healthy gut and immune system. It also positively influences the intestinal wall meaning the calf can absorb feed better and become more resilient.

Various plant extracts have also been found to support the growth of beneficial microbiota in the intestine, whilst improving intestinal integrity. Speak to your local calf rearing specialist for advice on a suitable health package to meet your needs.

MILK REPLACER GOLD STANDARDS

The gold standard is to feed pre-weaned calves 50-57kg of a good quality calf milk replacer (CMR) at:

- 16-19% fat (anything over 20% fat can suppress starter intakes).
- Over 23% protein (from quality skim or concentrate whey protein).

This is ideal for building lean muscle mass for dairy heifers.

- 900g of milk solids per day.
- Provide palatable, fresh starter feed, water and chopped forage (3-4cm).
- Consider using a CMR with an incorporated health package to help support the gut.
- Speak to your local calf rearing specialist for advice on choosing the best CMR to meet your specific objectives.



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Making the right decision on calf feeding

Farmers are under pressure. Today, every expenditure comes under scrutiny and use of calf milk replacer (CMR) is no different. But while whole milk may appear a cheaper option, when long-term animal performance and herd efficiency are factored in, the case for sticking with CMR becomes clearer.



Ann Coombes

Given current low milk prices, more farmers are considering using whole milk as a cost-effective, natural feed for dairy calves. However, while the perceived savings may be appealing, the wider nutritional, health and long-term financial implications deserve careful consideration before making any switch.

"Reviewing costs is sensible and something to be encouraged," says Ann Coombes, Youngstock Product Manager at ForFarmers. "But early life nutrition is not an area where cutting costs pays off in the longer term."

The first few months of life represent a critical growth window for youngstock, with calves converting feed into lean tissue extremely efficiently during this period.

"The milk feeding phase is one of the most efficient growth periods in a calf's life, providing the best return on investment in terms of feed inputs," continues Ann. "Supporting that stage properly sets the foundation for heifers efficiently hitting first calving before 24 months and entering the milking herd as robust, productive animals."

Moving beyond the 24-month calving target carries a financial penalty, with AHDB research suggesting rearing costs can rise by around 16% when calving is delayed to 26 months.

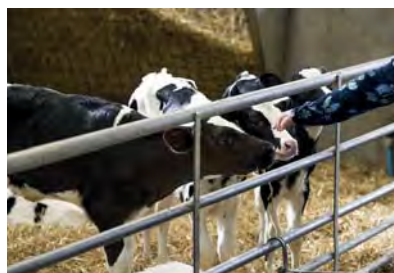
Whole milk considerations

While whole milk can provide good natural nutrition, with plenty of protein and energy, its composition varies considerably depending on the stage of a cow's lactation, diet and season.

"For a calf with an immature digestive system, this variability can negatively affect intakes and reduce feed efficiency," continues Ann. "In contrast, a well-formulated CMR delivers consistent energy, protein, vitamins and trace elements at every feed."

"Calves – or rather their developing rumen – thrive on consistency, with stable nutrient supply supporting rumen development and smooth transition through weaning."

Modern milk replacers are also formulated to support gut integrity and



"A straight comparison of cost rarely tells the whole story"

microbial establishment which are both critical as a calf develops.

"This thinking underpins the recently revamped ForFarmers VITA calf range where inclusion of PrimeGut yeast aims to support early growth and rumen development," continues Ann.

But nutrition and consistency are only part of the picture when it comes using whole milk, with hygiene and disease risk two other factors that need careful consideration.

"Whole milk can introduce additional health challenges for calves," explains Ann. "Feeding calves milk from cows with mastitis has been associated with increased mastitis incidence later in life and there is also potential for pathogen transfer, including Johne's and E. coli, alongside concerns regarding antibiotic residues affecting gut flora."

Temperature and storage management add further challenges, with whole milk needing to be stored, handled and fed correctly to minimise bacterial growth.

Looking at the numbers

Cost is the big motivating factors when dairy farmers are considering switching from CMR to whole milk calf feeding, but the financial gap between the two is often narrower than expected.

"Using a standard 12-week feeding programme recommended by our

youngstock specialists and based on a calf consuming 493 litres in total (68.63kg of powder), a premium milk replacer such as VITA Omega Gold priced at £2,295 per tonne equates to 32.13p per litre when mixed. This represents a total cost of £158.41 per calf across the full 12-week milk feeding period.

"At a whole milk value of 32ppl, the same 493 litres would be worth £157.76 if sold, leaving a difference of 64p per calf between whole milk and CMR over the entire 12-week programme. When you look at the figures, the direct saving from feeding whole milk can often be lower than expected."

Other options within the VITA range compare very favourably too. For example, using VITAMILK Classic comes out at over £18 cheaper than whole milk, per calf on a 12-week feeding programme.

"And a straight comparison of cost rarely tells the whole story," continues Ann. "The opportunity cost of diverting saleable milk, the variability in quality and the potential health implications of using whole milk all influence the true cost per calf."

"When those factors are taken into account, any additional cost of milk replacer is often modest, particularly when weighed against the benefits of improved calf performance and the positive long-term impact on herd productivity."

Safeguarding future performance

The milk feeding stage represents a relatively short period in a heifer's life, but the impact of decisions made during that time can shape herd performance for years to come.

"In a volatile dairy market, and with the longer-term optimistic outlook for dairy, it's important to protect the parts of the system that drive long-term performance," Ann concludes. "When milk prices strengthen again the farms best placed to benefit will be those with heifers coming through the system on time and in good condition. Protecting that pipeline now and investing in things like CMR, helps ensure a business is ready to capitalise when the market improves."

Getting calves off to a flying start

Calves are the future of your herd, and getting them successfully from birth to first calving and then lactation is a huge investment of time and resources.

Veterinary adviser at Boehringer Ingelheim, Becca Cavill, says that neonatal calf mortality from birth to three months of age has been reported to be 6% for dairy calves and one of the major contributors is calf diarrhoea, or scour. "Scour causes damage to the intestines but it is severe dehydration that commonly causes calves to die," Dr Cavill explains.

"To immediately address the issue of lost fluids, giving an oral rehydration therapy (ORT) with a good balance of potassium, sodium, glucose and other vital ingredients is important," she advises. "This needs to be given swiftly and in the right quantities and, if unsure, consult your vet to establish milk and ORT feeding rates."

In severe cases of infectious scour, the gastrointestinal tract lining in young calves can be damaged allowing bacteria from the intestines to move into the bloodstream causing a septicaemia. This can cause a high or low temperature, and the calf becomes collapsed, unable to suck and appears very unwell.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) are important for reducing temperature and inflammation. Research has shown that appropriate NSAID use, under veterinary direction, has been shown to increase consumption of milk, solid feed and water while providing pain relief.

One of the main prevention strategies is separating the calf from the source of infection, which is faeces, both from adult cows in the calving yard, and from other calves in the calf shed.

There are multiple different pathogens involved with neonatal diarrhoea, with the cause of an outbreak commonly involving more than one pathogen. Cleaning and disinfecting both the housing environment and feeding equipment is also really important. Ensuring that equipment and housing has all organic matter removed before thoroughly washing, drying and disinfecting with an appropriate disinfectant for the pathogens identified is key to reducing the environmental infection pressure.

"Research has reported that approximately 30% colostrum samples fed to dairy calves are classified as dirty (total bacterial count >100,000 cfu/ml), yet these dirty samples are not visually dirty or contaminated meaning it could unwittingly be fed to calves," she adds.

"The timing of colostrum feeding is also hugely important, to ensure the nutrients and all-important antibodies can be absorbed efficiently. The permeability of the intestinal wall to colostrum antibodies quickly decreases, completely disappearing by 24 hours of life," Becca explains.

The recommendation is that calves receive colostrum within the first two hours of life, or as quickly as possible. Recommendations are to feed 10–12% bodyweight of good quality



Fencovis can be administered to pregnant dams to pass on immunity to calves

colostrum (>22% Brix) in the first feed, in order to ensure that the critical cut off of over 150g of IgG is consumed. Colostral antibodies can be boosted against the enteric pathogens Rotavirus, Corona virus and *E.coli* K99 pathogens through the vaccination of the dam in the dry period with Fencovis®.

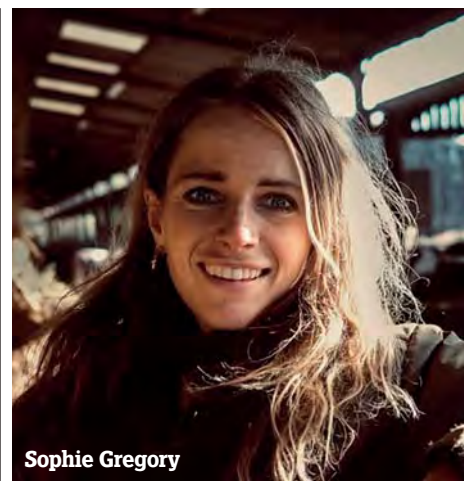
Fencovis® is an inactivated rotavirus, coronavirus and *E. coli* K99 scour vaccine and is licensed to prevent scour caused by rotavirus and *E. coli* K99, whilst reducing the incidence and severity of coronavirus and is available from your vet.

Vaccination of the dam is beneficial as vaccines have limited use in calves during the risk period (<3 weeks of age) because of their immature immune system and the interference of maternally derived antibodies (MDA). Calves from vaccinated dams will have significantly higher antibody levels against these pathogens than those born to non-vaccinated dams which will be associated with reductions in both the severity of diarrhoea and the level of viral shedding.

- Fencovis® is an inactivated rotavirus, coronavirus and *E. coli* calf scour vaccine available in the UK and is the first licensed with a prevention claim against rotavirus and *E. coli* K99.
- The vaccine is prescription only in both the UK (POM-V) and Ireland (POM) and is also distinct from others on the market as it contains an oil-free adjuvant and comes in single doses as well as 5 and 25 dose packs so you have exactly the right amount of vaccine for the number of cows being dried off.

References available on file

Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health UK Ltd. Email: vetenquiries@boehringerIngelheim.com



Sophie Gregory

Organic farmer Sophie Gregory, also known as @farmer_in_training on social media, milks 600 cows on the Dorset and Devon border across both organic and conventional systems, with calving split into spring and autumn blocks. With a lot of calves born in a short period of time, Sophie and the farm team work hard to make sure protocols are followed so every calf gets the best possible start.

Following discussions with her vet at Synergy Farm Health, Sophie now uses the Fencovis vaccine ahead of calving as part of the farm's newborn calf health plan. Fencovis is given to pregnant heifers and cows in the weeks before calving so antibodies are passed through colostrum, supporting passive immunity in the calf against key causes of neonatal diarrhoea such as bovine rotavirus, bovine coronavirus and *E. coli* expressing F5 K99.

"Being able to protect the calf from day one by improving its immune system is really beneficial and helps them get off to a flying start," she says. "When you have lots of calves arriving together, anything that helps stack the odds in their favour matters. It fits nicely alongside the basics we never compromise on, clean calving areas, quick and calm attention at birth, and making sure every calf gets plenty of good quality colostrum as soon as possible. The vaccine gives us extra confidence that we are doing everything we can to reduce early life challenges and keep calves bright, thriving and growing from the very start."

Transitioning heifers onto robots

We talk to Liz Newman and Olivia Edgerton from Advanced Ruminant Nutrition to find out the steps we should all be taking for our heifers to achieve robotic milking success first time round!



Getting it right starts before birth

Getting heifers ready for robotic milking isn't just about a few training sessions - it starts from day one. Trials show that heifers already comfortable with robots enter the herd and milk more often, producing higher yields. However, before training even begins, the way they're raised lays the foundation for success, helping them adapt quickly, saving producers time and money. The result is heifers that perform efficiently and productively in the robot from day one.

Getting it right from the start

Nutrition, training and facility design all play their part, and the earlier the better. Genetic selection plays an important part before they are born. According to ruminant nutritionist and former support manager for a major robot manufacturer, Olivia Edgerton suggests dairy producers should look beyond traditional production traits and also place a strong emphasis on functional characteristics that directly influence robot performance and cow adaptability. "Milk speed is especially critical as it's one of the biggest contributing factors to gaining or losing capacity on robots and can be a significant limiting factor for robot efficiency. I would encourage any farmer, even if they are remotely considering robots in the future, to start looking at milk speed. Other considerations include udder confirmation, potentially looking at teat length if they are currently short as well as space between them. Leg stature can also be worth looking at."

The right type of growth

There is increasing pressure on heifers to be large enough when entering the robot, alongside a common misconception that more mature animals automatically settle in better. While this may appear in some cases to be true, we need to carefully evaluate whether it makes financial sense and challenge this assumption.

Liz Newman, Heifer Rearing Manager at ARN explains, "There's a trade-off between achieving good growth and avoiding over-conditioning. Over-conditioned heifers risk issues such as ketosis and reduced dry matter intake



Aim to produce heifers that perform efficiently from day 1

"Milk speed is especially critical as it's one of the biggest contributing factors to gaining or losing capacity on robots"

(DMI). Additionally, robots tend to expose poorly grown heifers more than a traditional parlour, which can affect not only milk yield but behaviour and reproductive performance. Although the default solution often points to older heifers being preferable, the key factor is the right weight rather than age. Ensuring appropriate growth is essential to optimise health, performance, and long-term productivity."

Nutrition plays a major part in getting the right type of growth in heifer rearing but once we get them in calf, the transition diet is also critical to success. "We need to think about avoiding udder edema," notes Liz.

Studies show a better outcome for heifers which transition on a non DCAD transition diet. Reduced edema leads to fewer 'cow touches' including less interventions for issues like ketosis and other associated metabolic problems. A more positive outcome was found on heifers transitioning on diets where a binder is used, such as X-Zelit. Less interventions at the point of calving is key, but in these studies, less interventions included fewer collections to the robot needed which is another positive.

Mobility

Liz also notes that heifer mobility can be affected during the rearing phase and it's essential that we do all we can to prevent lameness, especially with voluntary milking systems. "When neck rails are set too low, heifers are forced to adopt unnatural postures to access feed, placing excessive strain on their front legs," she says. "Combine this with feed that is not regularly pushed within reach, and animals are left stretching, shifting their weight forward repeatedly. Over time, this avoidable pressure can lead to mobility problems such as corkscrew claw."

Grouping

"Reducing stress is key to the reduction in cow touches but there are other areas and times when we can reduce stress for

the heifer,” explains Olivia. “Gradually changing groups as they grow helps them learn to navigate social hierarchies, find their place, and cope with interactions with older cows in the robot shed.” However, Olivia does note that constant mixing should be avoided, as this can be counterproductive.

Providing calves with pair or small-group housing while they are still on milk can further support development. Calves reared together from an early age have greater opportunities for social learning which encourages adaptability. Research shows that paired or group-housed calves adapt faster to new situations, such as learning to use robots, and develop important skills like feed competition.

Familiarity with the robot environment before calving is also crucial: allowing heifers to explore gates, noises, and the robot area encourages curiosity and reduces fear, while studies indicate that early training programs, such as using a phantom to accustom heifers to the automatic milking system, improves learning and adaptation.

Dedicated heifer groups in robotic systems makes monitoring easier, reduces competition from older cows, and provides a quieter environment that accelerates learning and performance.



Familiarise heifers with the robot environment before calving

“In our experience we do find a heifer group to be beneficial, one farm in Scotland has seen an uplift of 1 – 1.5Kg in milk yield. However, producers need to consider what’s best for their own units as there are financial and operational trade-offs to consider. Heifers often milk more slowly than mature cows, so dedicating a robot or a separate group to them may reduce overall throughput and the total number of animals that can be milked efficiently.

The great collection debate

“Our data and practical experience suggest that intensively managing and collecting heifers during the first 2–3 weeks of lactation significantly improves long-term performance in robotic systems,” notes Olivia. “By encouraging visits to the robot early on, a higher percentage

of heifers learn to milk independently, with many achieving three or more voluntary visits per day.” This early support accelerates adaptation, reduces stress and competition, and lays the foundation for smoother lactation and consistent milk yield. Heifers that are properly trained take to the robot more readily, resulting in fewer fetches, more predictable intakes, and ultimately less time and effort required from staff. Coupled with good milk yield relative to mature cows, this approach demonstrates that a short period of focused attention in early lactation delivers lasting benefits for both animal welfare and farm productivity.

Transitioning heifers onto robots isn’t a one-week task, it’s a long-term strategy that begins well before calving. The heifers that do well in automated milking systems are the product of deliberate, well-aligned decisions around genetics, targeted growth, structural soundness, mobility, and early-life management.

Olivia notes, “If our aim is to produce healthy heifers that perform efficiently from day one, then every decision we make, from breeding choices to rearing protocols, need to support that outcome. By the time they enter the robot pen, producers will then start to see heifers that are easier to manage, have predictable intakes and ultimately produce more milk.”

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Managing disease risk is key for optimum calf health

Cryptosporidiosis is a common problem on calf units, but adopting an integrated prevention strategy can help reduce its impact, according to **Mollie Freeston** from TBA Ltd.



Mollie Freeston

The AHDB state Cryptosporidiosis is the biggest cause of infectious calf scours in the UK, being responsible for around 38% of all cases,” she comments. “The biology of the parasite and its ability to persist in the environment makes complete eradication extremely difficult. However, our understanding about how the disease spreads and affects calves means a focus on preventative measures can help reduce both incidence and severity.”

Cryptosporidiosis is caused by the parasite *Cryptosporidium parvum*. Calves typically become infected shortly after birth having ingested oocysts (eggs) which are highly resistant and can survive for prolonged periods in the environment. Clinical signs most commonly show around five and seven days old. Oocysts can be present in bedding, feeding equipment, contaminated feed and water and can be transferred from other calves and from peoples’ hands.

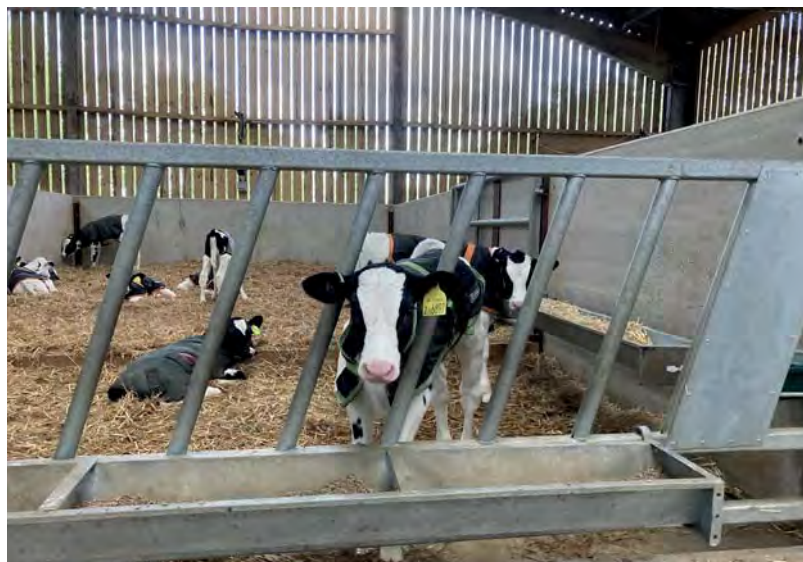
Once ingested, *Cryptosporidium parvum* attaches to the small intestine lining and begins multiplying. This damages the gut wall, impairing nutrient absorption leading to diarrhoea. The calf sheds oocysts into the environment, creating a cycle of infection.

Following infection, calves continue shedding oocysts for two weeks or longer, potentially excreting billions of oocysts, yet it needs less than 20 to establish a new infection.

Kat Hart from the George Vet Group says the severity of the signs of disease vary depending on the dose ingested and resilience of the calf. “Damage to the gut wall results in a watery scour and reduces the calf’s ability to digest food, which together result in the calf becoming dehydrated and having reduced feed intakes and feed efficiency.

“The immediate consequences of an infection will be a poorer growth rates, but infected calves will never fully recover due to scar tissue and damage to the gut wall. Feed Conversion Efficiency may be compromised and yield and production will be impacted, possibly leading to earlier culling.

“Calves that are infected with cryptosporidiosis are at increased risk of



A preventative approach will help reduce the impact of cryptosporidiosis

“The AHDB state Cryptosporidiosis is the biggest cause of infectious calf scours in the UK”

developing pneumonia, as their immune system has been severely challenged. This immunosuppression leaves them more vulnerable to secondary infections.

“There is little value in thinking you can eradicate the problem and there is no single solution to preventing infections. Instead, adopt an integrated management approach, aimed at reducing environmental contamination and limiting the level of exposure so calves are less likely to become severely affected.

“The big initial challenge is building immunity as calves are born without a functioning immune system, relying on passive transfer from the dam until such time as their own active immune system develops. So colostrum management is of paramount importance.”

Management protocols

Strict protocols should be adopted to ensure calves receive an adequate volume of high-quality colostrum to optimise passive transfer of immunoglobulins IgGs.

Kat advises feeding four litres of Brix-tested colostrum within the first four hours of life to maximise antibody absorption.

Alternatively, a two-feed protocol can be adopted, with three litres administered within one to two hours of birth, followed by a further three litres seven to eight hours later.

“Colostrum quality should be tested and look to feed colostrum with a Brix of at least 22, and ideally over 25. Freeze surplus colostrum to ensure you always have sufficient available.

“To check the effectiveness of passive immunity transfer, blood sample calves between one and seven days old and measure total serum protein levels. Target total proteins of greater than 5.2g/dL, although many well-performing farms are now achieving 50% of calves with levels exceeding 6.0g/dL.”

Kat says many farms are having with success with extended colostrum feeding where colostrum from the first milking is fed as early as possible with transition milk from the second milking fed at one litre/calf/day for a few

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Reference: 1. APHA 2012-2019 Neonatal, Prewean, Postwean calf groups. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/veterinary-investigation-diagnosis-analysis-vida-report-2012>

Bovilis Cryptium[®] contains inactivated *Cryptosporidium parvum* Gp40. **POM-V**. Bovilis[®] Rotavec[®] Corona contains inactivated rotavirus, coronavirus and *E. coli* strain CN7985, serotype O101:K99:F41. **POM-VPS**. Vecoxan[®] contains 2.5mg/ml diclazuril. **POM-VPS**. Bovilis[®] Bovivac[®] S contains inactivated cells of *Salmonella dublin*, strain S342/70 and *Salmonella typhimurium*, strain S341/70. **POM-V**.

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Farm Vet Kat Hart

days, supplementing calf milk replacer. This approach can provide additional antibodies to further support immunity during the early high-risk period.

“Alternatively, consider feeding transition milk which is milk harvested from days 2-4 of lactation. Ideally feed 1-2 litres/day for the first seven days, supplementing the milk feed. The minimum you should feed is half a litre per day. Ideally transition milk should be pasteurised and kept in clean conditions.

“Both these approaches can support passive immunity. Another tactic to improve protection against cryptosporidiosis is vaccinating cows prior to calving which increases the antibodies against *Cryptosporidium parvum* in colostrum.

In the first year of vaccination the vaccine has to be administered to the dam twice 4-5 weeks apart with the final dose given 3-4 weeks before calving so this needs to be carefully planned. In subsequent years a single dose is administered 3-4 weeks before calving.

“Both the colostrum and transition milk of vaccinated dams have raised *C.parvum* antibodies which help give the calf better protection in the crucial period while active immunity develops,” Kat observes. “Feed rates for colostrum and transition milk are the same as from unvaccinated dams, but calves are receiving increased support from elevated antibodies

Nutrition also plays a crucial role in the development of the active immune system to provided continued protection beyond the period of passive immunity. Mollie Freeston stresses that calves are born immunologically naïve which is why passive immunity from the dam is so important.

“This passive immunity will soon begin to decline meaning the calf must be able to switch to active immunity, producing its own antibodies. There is a particularly crucial period around 10 days old when this cross over occurs when they will be particularly vulnerable.

“It is vital to establish high intakes of a high-fat milk replacer as early as possible to ensure energy intake remains adequate during this critical transition. If calves are required to fight disease, they can quickly fall into negative energy balance at precisely the time their immune system is under the greatest pressure.

“Careful selection of calf milk replacer is particularly important when it is being fed alongside transition milk, as the nutrient profile needs to complement and closely match that of the transition milk. The replacer should be high in fat to support energy density with low osmolality. For example, TBA Britannia



Calves need high energy intakes to build active immunity.

“Both the colostrum and transition milk of vaccinated dams have raised *C.parvum* antibodies”

Energized Milk Replacer is specifically developed to closely resemble whole milk with 25% fat, 50% British skim milk and 100% dairy proteins.”

Kat Hart emphasises the need to keep feeding milk to calves showing signs of any scour. She explains that infected animals have an elevated demand for energy and reducing or stopping milk feeding can put calves in energy deficit, making the more susceptible to the pathogens. “If calves are scouring, keep feeding milk and feed electrolytes as a separate drink to help reduce the consequences of dehydration.”

Ensuring effective feeding of colostrum and maintaining high energy intakes will help calves fight infection, but Kat stresses it is vital to also do all that can be done to reduce exposure to the cryptosporidiosis pathogen. She emphasises that it is a very resilient bug and that once a calf is infected the cycle of infection can be rapid and substantial.

Good hygiene is paramount

“Adopting thorough hygiene protocols can help reduce the risk of calves becoming infected, but on many farms environmental cleaning protocols are often an area that can be improved.

Ideally scouring calves should be

isolated from healthy calves and not mixed again until at least a week after scouring has stopped, although this is often difficult to achieve in practice.

“All pens should be cleaned to remove all organic matter before being steam cleaned or pressure washed. Cleaning is vital before disinfection as you cannot disinfect dirt. Use a disinfectant that is DEFRA approved for *C.parvum* and coccidiosis.”

After disinfection, pens should be left to dry out and left empty for ideally 14 days to help break the cycle of infection.. Kat accepts that this is easier for block calved herds than all year-round calving but recommends as long a break as possible.

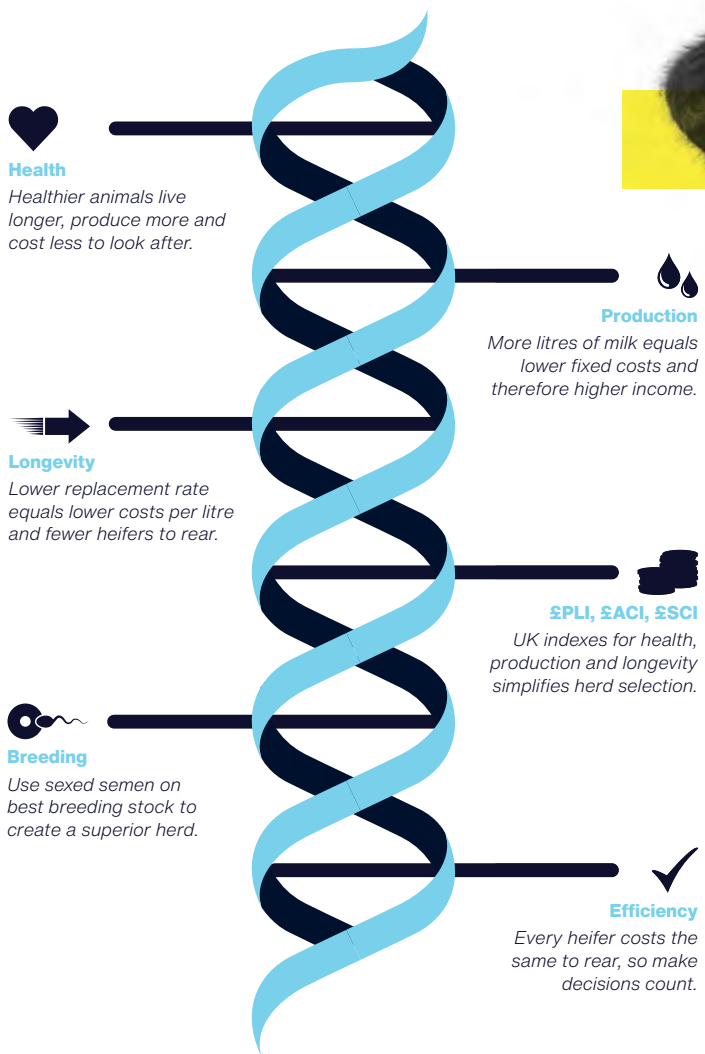
All feeding equipment including buckets, teats and machine feeders should be regularly cleaned. As cryptosporidiosis can be spread by people handling livestock, she recommends having disinfectant at the entrance to all calf housing.

Mollie Freeston believes an integrated approach to cryptosporidiosis prevention could bring significant benefits, reducing both the short- and long-term consequences.

“We know we will probably never eradicate the problem but on all farms, it will be possible to reduce the infection risk by keeping buildings and equipment clean so that the pathogen finds it harder to survive.

“Then by following strict colostrum protocols, ideally supported by vaccination, it will be possible to boost passive immunity. Finally, ensuring calves have high energy intakes will support gut development and the development of the active immune system to help calves fight any infection,” Mollie concludes. “When the farm team, vet and calf nutritional advisor work together you can see substantial improvements on farm.”

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Scottish dairy farm transition to modern calf rearing system

The Vance family from High Skeog Farm in Whithorn, Dumfries and Galloway, is focusing on improving youngstock welfare through the introduction of cutting-edge calf housing.



Ross Vance

Third-generation farmer, Ross Vance works alongside his wife and parents. Farming 290 acres, the family manage a herd of 200 Holstien Friesians, milking 170 cows, with yields averaging at 9,500 litres with 4.5% butterfat and 3.5% protein content.

Youngstock

Over the past two years, the Vance family have turned their attention to improving calf health. Running a year-round calving system, calves had typically been spread across various sheds, making feeding labour-intensive.

Having struggled with recurring disease issues in their youngstock due to inadequate housing, Mr Vance decided it was time to make a change.

"We knew the environment wasn't right. The drainage was poor, the airflow was inadequate, and calves were exposed to second hand air from older animals," he says.

"It's easy to make excuses and accept that you'll always have health problems with calves. But the high cost of treating pneumonia and scouring calves was a key driver for investing in the new shed."

Lightbulb moment

Mr Vance contacted Andrew Gardner, the technical director at the livestock housing specialist, Galebreaker, to scope out the new building's requirements.



Calves in the new CEVEC building

"Investing in the right environment is key and often the missing piece of the puzzle."

"A lot of our ideas were aligned, in terms of providing an environment that would give calves the best start," says Mr Vance.

After successfully applying for grant funding through Digital Dairy Chain as part of a two-year research project in collaboration with SRUC, Galebreaker developed CEVEC (Cost Effective Ventilated Environment for Calves). The result a state-of-the-art shed backed by a scientific evaluation of the newly implemented calf-rearing system.

The value of collaboration

Mr Vance explains how the collaboration with Galebreaker and SRUC

was integral to the project's success, and instilling a mindset of continuous improvement as the new system was fine-tuned over time.

"We set out with the goal to create the best environment, and Galebreaker's expertise was key to achieving that. The building design provides optimal conditions through consistent ventilation and by reducing heat and cold stress," he says.

The new shed features individual pens and an automated feeding system that allows calf nutrition to be managed more effectively.

"The automatic feeders have been a huge labour-saving benefit. Feeding had been physically demanding and time consuming, with milk being carted around by my mum who oversees calf rearing. The new system frees up time for other tasks," Mr Vance adds.

Holistic approach

Mr Vance says that the integration of technology within the new design allows all five critical aspects with the calf environment - fresh air, air speed, temperature, moisture and hygiene - to be managed effectively.

"It's a holistic approach that balances all aspects of the environment that can impact animal welfare," he says.



CEVEC calf shed at High Skeog Farm



Calf health has improved at High Skeog

Throughout the project, SRUC researchers, led by Prof. Carol-Anne Duthie, gathered and analysed data to assess animal performance comparing calves reared in the purpose-built shed against those housed in traditional hutches.

The results have been a resounding success, as Prof. Duthie explains: "The new system resulted in a stark reduction in lung damage compared to previous practices. The more effective early-life management led to healthier calves and better growth rates during the pre-weaning period."

Additionally, labour time spent (per calf per day) dropped from around 15 minutes in hutches to about 3 minutes in the CEVEC system – equating to savings of £60,136 annually.

Having automated monitoring gave invaluable insight into how calves were progressing.

"The building provides environmental data, and individual animal data, so that really allows Ross to target the calves that need treating," she adds.

"It's all about quantifying, isn't it? We were able to use data to guide those decision-making processes on farm."

Focusing on youngstock

Mr Vance believes sustainable dairy farming lies in healthy youngstock. "The first few weeks of life are critical. Investing in the right environment is key and often the missing piece of the puzzle," he says.

"The CEVEC project has reinforced the importance of staying proactive with disease management and finding ways to improve."

"The new calf shed gives us the ability to keep adapting. It's an investment that's improved our system for the benefit of our livestock and the farm's long-term success."

FACTS AND STATS FROM THE STUDY

- **Growth** – 0.81 kg/day DLWG in the CEVEC shed vs 0.69 kg/day in hutches at the same milk allowance, an uplift of 120–150 g/day; up to ~1.0 kg/day on higher milk (10.5 L/day)
 - **Respiratory health** – Lower exit lung scores, indicating fewer pneumonia scars
 - **Labour** – ~3 min/calf/day vs ~15 min in hutches
 - **ROI** – Building expected to delivery return on investment in 4.4 years
- Following the CEVEC project, Galebreaker has commercially launched its fully customisable building CalfHub.



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t: +44 (0)1300 345711

e: enquiries@tbagri.co.uk

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SCAN ME

Yeast supplement cost effective in controlling BRD

More dairy youngstock will be affected by bovine respiratory disease (BRD) than by any other disease beyond four weeks of age, with only scours being a greater threat in younger animals, reports Rumenco Technical Services Manager **Dr Alison Bond**.

With a good proportion of infected cattle being lost, and those surviving likely to suffer setbacks in growth rates and future performance, it persists as a major drain on milk producer profitability.

One of the main challenges facing vets and farmers is the complexity of the condition. There are potentially many different bacteria and/or viruses involved in BRD (also called pneumonia), some of which may exist naturally within the bovine respiratory tract without causing harm, only emerging as a threat in the event of stress, poor nutrition, or weakened immunity.

Dr Alison Bond explains, there is a lot that can be done in management terms to reduce the risks of BRD. This, she says, includes nutrition, following independent trials that clearly indicate a beneficial role for prebiotic and probiotic nutritional supplements.

"First and foremost, prevention will always be better than a cure with any disease risk," she says, "and that's all the more important in the case of something like BRD where it can be so difficult to identify the organisms responsible for an outbreak."

"The starting point is to ensure you are providing an environment that eliminates the key risk factors, by minimising any stress, and ensuring calves are housed in clean, well-ventilated, free-draining buildings, at optimum stocking densities."

"Alongside this, feeding to maximise gut health, to give calves the best protection internally and the strongest immune response to any challenge, is increasingly recognised as a key factor in combatting BRD."

This leading-edge thinking is one of the reasons why Rumenco now includes the fermented yeast culture Celmanax in a number of its cattle blocks and buckets, including Maxx Cattle Booster and Maxx Calf Health. Celmanax consists of refined functional carbohydrates (RFCs) that are biologically active prebiotics and postbiotics, and deliver a host of gut health benefits that give livestock



"First and foremost, prevention will always be better than a cure with any disease risk"

the capabilities to fight off a broad range of challenges, including BRD.

"Including a fermented yeast culture in rations is now quite well understood in terms of stabilising the rumen environment, improving dry matter and protein digestion, and boosting intakes," adds Dr Bond. "However, with Celmanax, there are specific benefits in relation to the refined functional carbohydrates, with mannan oligosaccharides (MOS), for example, supporting the growth of beneficial bacteria, and mannose able to bind to pathogenic bacteria to minimise their impact. Other elements, like beta glucans, will support the immune system and minimise the effect of stress factors such as mycotoxins."

"There is now good trial data to show that the improved gut health and immune function resulting from feeding these refined functional carbohydrates has a direct effect on the incidence and impact of BRD in cattle."

Dr Bond refers in particular to a large scale study carried out on a commercial feedlot in Alberta, Canada, in which a total of 3,000 cattle, averaging around 270kg liveweight, were split into randomised groups of 150 head per pen.

The cattle were on a forage and concentrate ration, and all health checks and protocols were carried out as standard. The treatment pens received 2g per head of Celmanax and the control group none of this supplement, and the performance of the cattle was monitored over 66 days.

"This was a very extensive study, looking specifically at whether this feed additive has an impact on BRD, as well as any potential benefits for growth rates and profitability," Dr Bond continues.

"Firstly, it showed a significant reduction in BRD cases, with 32.4% in the treatment group compared to 42.4% in the controls. This translated into improved growth rates over the period, with the cattle receiving Celmanax achieving 1.37kg/day compared with 1.25kg/day in the control groups. At the end of the feeding period, the treated cattle were on average 9.7kg heavier."

"When both the reduced treatment costs and the improved weight gains were taken into account, this trial demonstrated a 19.5:1 return on investment when feeding Celmanax."

Another substantial study involving beef heifers has shown similar results in relation to BRD cases and average daily liveweight gains. This study also included bacterial analysis of faecal samples following transport, with a reduction in key organisms indicating that feeding the refined functional carbohydrate supplement lessened the effects of stress.

"The link between gut health and its impact on conditions such as BRD is complex, and -within the livestock sector - we are still building our knowledge," concludes Dr Bond.

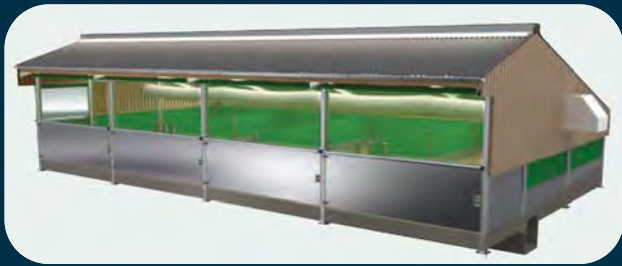
"However, more and more research is pointing to the benefits of feeding supplements that support gut health, with products like Celmanax at the forefront of this 'prevention not cure' approach to management."

"When you take into account the cumulative costs of vet time, treatments, reduced performance and losses, including a supplement that will reduce incidences of BRD is in most cases likely to be a highly cost effective solution."



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Early calf care package promotes lifetime performance

Every day counts in the rearing process, starting before birth and extending to calving, to achieve production targets. Cargill's youngstock specialist **Bianca Theeruth** highlights how to keep on track, starting with dry cow care.

Heifers completing their first lactation should produce more than 75% of the average mature milk yield for the herd. But the latest 500-NMR herd KPI report published by the University of Reading shows that in half of the herds just two thirds or fewer first lactation cows achieved this target in the year ending August 2025

And in the top quartile, 79% or more first lactation cows achieved this target while the bottom quartile had only 53% or fewer first-lactation cows achieving this target.

"Shortfalls in dry cow care close to calving and the rearing period will affect heifer production and could extend throughout the animal's productive life," says Bianca, adding that growth delays can happen even before the calf is born.

"We know that if dry cows are under stress, their offspring's performance can be affected. For example, heat stress in dry cows can affect the lifetime production of her offspring, with in-utero stress reducing growth rates and mammary development in the post-weaning phase.

"It's important to provide dry cows with a high-quality diet that includes feed ingredients such as the energy-boosting liver-priming feed supplement LiFT. This supplement, included in dry cow diets in the close-up period, is also in the coolant feed product CoolCalver used in dry cow diets throughout warmer months.

Once calves are born, the aim is to achieve consistent growth rates and avoid any slips. "This continues throughout the rearing period and up to calving," adds Bianca. "There's no compensatory growth, so a setback at any stage will have a lasting effect."

From day one, calves require a combination of quality nutrition, management and environment. "One doesn't work in isolation," she adds. "A challenging environment, or a low-quality diet, even with top-class management, will compromise calf performance.

Nutritional requirements must be met throughout rearing. The well-publicised golden rules around colostrum must be



"From day 1, calves require a combination of quality nutrition, management and environment. One doesn't work in isolation."

followed to the tee, and this attention to detail should continue beyond the first few days of life. "We shouldn't ease our foot off the gas after the first few days. Advanced calf milks, offering more precise formulations that meet specific growth targets have raised the bar to ensure target growth rates are met," she adds.

"And including a starter pellet from day one, alongside fresh clean water and straw, is an essential ingredient."

The starter feed will encourage rumen development and promote the calf's immune system. "Calves need to learn to eat starter feed so that when they are weaned, and the diet moves on to 100% solid feed, they're well prepared."

She encourages weighing calves and heifers throughout the rearing period, adding that while it's more common to check calf weight gain, heifer growth rates post weaning are often left to guess work.

"We're looking for consistency in growth rates and target 750g to 850g a day for Holstein animals over the whole rearing period, typically 24 months. "By three months of age, post-weaning, they should be 16.5% of their mature body weight," adds Bianca.

Presenting a heifer for breeding when she's not quite mature enough and has suffered setbacks will put her under stress and affect her performance in her first lactation, and possibly her lifetime performance.

"Rearing the next generation is a significant investment. If the rearing programme starts early and targets consistent results this should ensure a good return on the investment."

Climate solutions from Abbi-Aerotech

Healthy cattle form the basis for healthy farm profits



Laws and regulations around animal welfare, phosphate, and ammonia emissions have been putting your business to the test for many years, and recently, a new challenge has been added to the list: climate change. With an increase in temperatures and the number of hot days, heat stress has become a very real threat to your livestock. Not only for your dairy cows, but certainly also for your young stock.

Fresh air and a draught-free environment are of vital importance to calves.

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Tube ventilation is also an alternative for supplying fresh air and cooling in dairy barns with low ceilings. In low-ceiling barns or areas, fan placement can sometimes prove too complicated, or the air speed may be too great. For example, this system can provide a great solution in milking parlours.

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Calf vaccines identified as low-hanging fruit in antibiotic reduction

Reducing antibiotic use in calves could represent a significant opportunity for dairy farmers to cut overall antimicrobial usage, according to the latest industry data^{1,2}, which highlights oral antibiotics as a growing contributor to on-farm antibiotic use.

Figures released by RUMA at the end of 2025¹ show that calf oral antibiotic sales more than doubled in 2024, rising from 1.92 mg/kg defined daily dose for animals (DDDvet) to 4.03 mg/kg DDDvet. RUMA has now introduced a new target to reduce calf oral antibiotic use by 10% year on year, underlining the importance of addressing antibiotic use in youngstock.

Supporting this, the latest Kingshay results², covering 967 dairy herds across 136 veterinary practices, show that while average total antimicrobial usage has continued to decline, falling to 12.2 mg/kg PCU in 2025, down from 12.7 mg/kg PCU in 2024 and 15.7 mg/kg PCU in 2020, usage remains heavily concentrated within a subset of farms.

The data² revealed that herds ranking in the highest quartile for antibiotic use accounted for 50% of total antibiotics used, with oral products, often administered to calves for respiratory disease and scour, making up 13% of total antibiotic use within these higher-using herds.

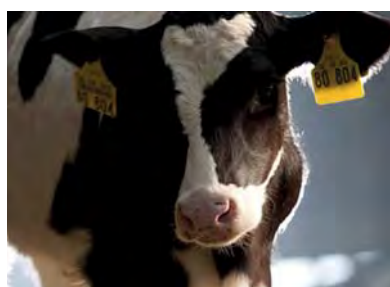
While Kingshay data² showed calf oral antibiotic usage fell from 1.38 mg/kg PCU to 1.05 mg/kg PCU between 2024 and 2025, the contrasting RUMA figures highlight that oral antibiotic use in calves remains a key area of focus for the industry.

Emma Puddy, Kingshay Farm services specialist and report co-author, said the use of oral antibiotics in calves can significantly increase overall antimicrobial usage.

“If you use oral antibiotics within calves, you will see that your usage is significantly higher than maybe the group average, and I think that is really highlighted in our report,” she said.

Ms Puddy added: “Oral antibiotics tend to really increase your overall antimicrobial usage. Injectable treatments are for just one animal and involve only a small amount of product, whereas if you’re treating a whole pen of calves, because 5% of them are getting sick and you want to stop the rest, that’s when oral antibiotics tend to be used more.”

Kingshay training consultant and vet Michael Head said a strong starting point for reducing antimicrobial



“Oral antibiotics tend to really increase your overall antimicrobial usage”

use is monitoring disease incidence through an effective herd health plan, with vaccination forming a key part of that approach.

“Effective vaccination strategies form part of this because people can tend to reach for antibiotics, but the benefits of strong immunity, genetic advances and good nutrition mean cattle are better able to resist disease and, in turn, reduce the need for antimicrobials,” he said.

Despite this, the latest AHDB vaccine report³ shows that fewer than 50% of calves are vaccinated against respiratory disease, while only around a quarter of producers vaccinate for calf enteritis (calf scour).

Mr Head believes the introduction of two vaccines, Bovilis Cryptium[®] for protection against calf scour caused by cryptosporidiosis, and a vaccine for *Mycoplasma bovis*, could make a meaningful difference.

“Their use is certainly increasing at pace, and I’m already hearing farmers recommending the use of vaccines to other farmers,” he said.

He also highlighted the longer-term consequences of disease in calves.

“Calf diseases have significant onward consequences with regard to the future health of those animals, their longevity and their disease resistance,” he said.

Dr Kat Baxter Smith, a vet at MSD

Animal Health, said the Kingshay findings underline how oral antibiotic use in calves can quickly influence overall farm figures and why prevention through vaccination and management changes could provide a low-hanging fruit for farmers to reduce overall antibiotic use in their youngstock.

“Respiratory disease and scours remain two of the most common reasons antibiotics are used in young calves. By tackling these challenges earlier through vaccination and good management, farmers can significantly reduce the need for antimicrobial intervention.”

“Scours caused by *cryptosporidiosis* can be particularly difficult to manage, and while some antibiotics don’t always treat the underlying cause, they are often used to manage secondary infections. There have also been reports of some resistance to paromomycin⁴ in *E.coli* K99, a commonly used antibiotic for treating *E.coli* K99 infections and is also licenced for use against cryptosporidiosis,” she said.

She added that vaccination can play an important role in reducing disease pressure.

“Using vaccines such as Bovilis[®] Rotavec[®] Corona for rotavirus, coronavirus, and *E. coli* and Bovilis Cryptium[®] for *Cryptosporidium parvum* is one of the most effective ways to reduce the incidence of neonatal diarrhoea. Vaccination used alongside good management such as housing, ventilation and colostrum management not only helps aid calf health, but supports better lifetime performance, resilience and productivity within the herd.”

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2. Kingshay Antimicrobial Focus Report 2025 Antimicrobial Focus Report - Kingshay
3. AHDB Vaccine uptake report for cattle and sheep Vaccine uptake report for cattle and sheep | AHDB
4. March 2025 Cattle Highlights Report from the Royal GD in the Netherlands

Bovilis Cryptium[®] contains *Cryptosporidium parvum* Gp40. POM-V.

Bovilis[®] Rotavec[®] Corona contains inactivated rotavirus, coronavirus and *E. coli* strain CN7985 serotype O101:K99:F41 POM-VPS.

www.msd-animal-health.com

Getting fibre right in young calves: protecting growth through weaning

Calves with consistent intakes before weaning are far more likely to maintain growth afterwards.

Weaning remains one of the most costly pressure points in calf rearing. Drops in daily liveweight gain, loose dung and erratic starter intakes are familiar frustrations on many units — and in most cases the root cause lies in pre-weaning nutrition rather than the weaning event itself.

The reason is physiological, explains David Cubitt, Director at Sundown Products.

He says, “A pre-weaned calf is not yet a functional ruminant. Milk bypasses the rumen and digestion relies largely on the small intestine and hindgut. Early growth and health are therefore driven by gut stability, not just milk volume.

“Fibre is central to this, but only when it is correctly balanced. Too little fibre destabilises hindgut fermentation and increases scour risk, while too much or poorly digestible fibre reduces energy intake and leads to growth checks. Young calves do not need ‘filler’, they need fibre that passes efficiently through the



rumen and supports microbial activity further down the digestive tract.”

Stable hindgut fermentation encourages the production of beneficial short-chain fatty acids such as butyrate, strengthening the gut wall, improving dung consistency and helping calves cope with the dietary change at weaning. Calves with consistent intakes before weaning are far more likely to maintain growth afterwards.

This understanding led to the development of Sundown’s Complete Calf Feed range, which is designed to meet the needs of calves from birth to six months.

Sundown’s calf feeds include NIS (nutritionally improved straw) which provides non-inert structural fibre that’s crucial for this stage of development. NIS has a controlled particle size that transits the rumen quickly, is digestible, delivers its benefits in the hindgut rather than diluting dietary energy, and removes the nutritional requirement to feed supplementary straw or forage

Alongside fibre, the three palatable, age specific feeds, provide high levels of NFCs to stimulate early and sustained, rumen development, and good quality protein to power skeletal and muscular growth

“The result is improved gut health, better dung consistency, reduced scour pressure, seamless growth rates and faster weaning, without the familiar post-weaning growth slump,” explains Mr Cubitt.

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How good is your calf housing?

Good housing should be the foundation for effective calf rearing, helping to ensure healthy, fast-growing calves than can be managed as efficiently as possible.

Calves are the most valuable animal on the farm, but they are also the most vulnerable,” comments Ray Foy from Teemore Engineering. “They deserve the best buildings yet too often are housed in sub-standard accommodation that negatively affects performance and rearing costs.

“A negative start in the life of youngstock has a life long detrimental effect of health and productivity, but once the requirements of youngstock are clearly understood, it does not require substantial investment to improve early life performance.”

The fundamentals of good calf housing are hygiene, ventilation and comfort and Mr Foy says good building design can improve all of these leading to better calf welfare.

He advises the starting point when reviewing building design for youngstock housing is to understand how the building will fit with your system.

“How many calves do you need to accommodate? I always advise increasing this to allow for herd expansion and any eventuality that mean calves may stay on the farm longer. Then consider how many calves will be housed per group and what this means for pen sizes.

“Depending on their age, calves can require between 1.5-2.4m² so you need to ensure pens will be



Ray Foy

“Calves are the most valuable animal on the farm, but they are also the most vulnerable”

large enough. Then what is your management system? How will calves be fed and what will be the impact for pen design? What facilities will be needed for feed preparation? How many isolation pens do you need? How will calves be

bedded and what are the protocols for cleaning pens out between batches?

High levels of hygiene and biosecurity are crucial to keep calves healthy and reduce the risk of pathogenic disease, so Mr Foy says it makes sense to make buildings as quick and easy to clean and disinfect as possible.

He also emphasises the importance of ventilation and drainage. Good ventilation removes stale, humid air, which presents a health challenge due to dust, moisture, ammonia and pathogens. Many buildings will benefit from a mechanical ventilation system to ensure sufficient changes of air.

As calves will typically lie down for 17 hours a day it is essential for provide adequate drainage to keep bedding dry and reduce humidity in the building which can support pathogen growth. “Floors should have a 1:20 slope with adequate collection points for any liquid run off.

“Investing in a well-designed functional building will help ensure calves are reared as efficiently as possible. Our Mono Calf housing has been designed by Jamie Robertson, livestock health specialist and can be tailored to any system for cost-effective calf rearing.

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A strong start begins at birth

Consistent colostrum management, high quality transition milk and high quality milk powders are key, say Wynnstay

Providing calves with high quality colostrum is vital for immune protection, early growth, and long-term health. For Ian Wadman, who runs a 240 cow pedigree Jersey herd in Somerset, colostrum management is central to maintaining herd health.

Faced with challenges such as John's disease, the business moved to using Wynngold C-250 Colostrum Replacer, delivering consistent and reliable results.

With a year round calving system, calves are born at all hours of the day and night. Using Wynngold C-250 ensures every calf receives a high quality feed immediately after birth, eliminating delays associated with collecting or testing maternal colostrum. "It takes the guesswork out of feeding and gives us confidence that every calf is getting what it needs" says Ian.

As well as that all important liquid gold first feed, feeding transition milk for 7-10 days is particularly important for Jersey calves, which have lower brown fat reserves and a greater surface area relative to body weight when compared with Holsteins, making them more vulnerable to hypothermia and slower to stand and suckle colostrum.

Research shows that feeding transition milk and colostrum substitute products improves average daily gain, reduces inflammation and haptoglobin levels, and lowers the incidence of scour and respiratory disease, leading to reduced antibiotic use (Hutjens, 2024).

Wynngold C-250 Colostrum Replacer can be added to milk replacer providing valuable bioactive compounds such as growth factors, lactoferrins, and oligosaccharides, supporting localised gut health and overall calf performance.

Colostrum Protocol

At Elliscombe Farm, calves receive two litres of colostrum at birth, followed by a second two-litre feed within six hours. Following a cryptosporidium outbreak, Ian implemented a transition milk protocol with the aim of supporting recovery and resilience.

Wynngold C-250 colostrum powder is now added to Wynnstay Energiser milk powder to create a transition milk. This transition mix is fed for seven days, ensuring calves receive high levels of energy, protein, and bioactive components without dilution. This elite



"It takes the guesswork out of feeding and gives us confidence that every calf is getting what it needs."

combination supports gut development, nutrient absorption, and early growth, critical factors for Jersey calves, which typically have lower early-life feed intakes.

The inclusion of Wynngold C-250 has further improved calf-rearing outcomes at Elliscombe Farm. "It mixes easy and feeds through a teat or tube smoothly," explains Ian. Calves maintain intakes well, even when facing health challenges during the rearing period. "Even when we have the odd case of crypto, calves bounce back quicker and don't crash in the same way," he adds.

In recent months, Ian has worked closely with the Wynnstay Calf and Youngstock team to review and refine early-life nutrition protocols. Taking a whole-system approach to calf nutrition is key to maximising long-term performance. Regular visits allow for ongoing performance monitoring and the continual optimisation of health and growth protocols.

Higher milk feeding rates, rising from four to seven litres per day, combined with Wynnstay 'Start n Wean' containing Diamond V, are driving improved

growth efficiency and early-life resilience at Elliscombe Farm. Using a specifically formulated calf starter to support optimal rumen development plays a pivotal role in achieving target daily liveweight gains of 0.8–1.0 kg. Improving DLWG is essential for both financial and carbon efficiency, reducing rearing costs and supporting improved first-lactation milk yields (Hyde *et al.*, 2021). Diamond V's unique postbiotic work to nourish rumen microbes and balance their different populations, supporting rumen health and digestive function, helping drive performance from day one. With around 75% of a cow's immune system residing in her gut, helping calves to develop a healthy gut with a diverse range of microbes is key to supporting immune strength for life.

Achieving success

With consistent colostrum management, high-quality transition milk, and reliable milk powders, Ian is confident that calves are getting off to a stronger start, growing healthier, and building a solid foundation for lifetime performance.

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