

South West Healthy Livestock Initiative 2009 - Dairy meeting

Date: 27/01/09

Agenda point 1

Give an example of a health and welfare issue on your farm and how you overcame that problem and where did you go for advice- who was most influential and who came up with practical solutions?

Problem 1: Mastitis

Mastitis arose about 10 years ago. I was told that I was producing too much milk and that I was over quota. I kept the lowest producing cows but in 2000 when the milk quota was no longer a problem I kept the higher producing cows.

Problem solving:

I went to my local vet (Vale vets) and then to a consultant from the VLA. They helped me get mastitis under control with regular sampling and the saving is unbelievable. I still have to cull but not as much. The combination of all 3 cracked it. I could see from the vet bills that culling was a big issue so we went out and cured it. Didn't let the problem get out of hand.

Problem 2: Having problems with grazing the herd.

The 3 big challenges are fertility, lameness and mastitis and these could all have been worse before housing. Fertility is a large problem and I don't know if we'll ever crack it. We've had an increased intensity of potassium and phosphates in the soil. Haven't spread nitrates for 2-3 years. I have to export half the poultry manure which helps the nitrogen level but not the potassium and phosphate. We will come to the point when we will have to do something about it.

Problem Solving: Housed the herd.

Mastitis is still an issue although I have good cell counts. I am below the national average but I still don't think it's at an acceptable level. Lameness is less of a problem now they are housed than when grazing, but it depends what is acceptable to you as an individual farmer. It depends where your cut-off is. I went to the vet first and then to Promar for consultancy (who were disappointing) so I went to Kingshay for consultancy. I also changed to a local vet (a one-man band) who is worryingly detailed. Other vet just left drugs and was too brief with diagnoses. It's about being open to receiving information. Also get information from the Wyvern discussion group meetings, farmers weekly and agricultural shows. There is so much information for dairy farmers, much more so than poultry (insular). I farm mainly poultry and I have few meetings through poultry, but when poultry farmers do get together they are vocal (they need a vehicle to provide meetings).

Problem 3: Fertility

We failed to reach our milk projection and fertility played a huge role in this. We found varying fertility on our farms. Even though the milk output for each individual cow was

at a normal level, over 12 months it was having a negative impact on the milk output. This indicated that fertility was to blame.

Problem solving: We wanted to have more control and to be able to see fertility and milk output as a whole. We changed our breed of cow to Montbeliarde, which is a dual-purpose breed. It's hard to put a cost on fertility but when you're not producing milk, cows need to be fertile. We do not have worthless cows.

Where did I get information?

- Vets (alliance) Shepton Mallet
- Discussion group (powerful, unbiased information with open discussion. We are trying to help one another. We are not trying to sell each other anything. There's a lot of people out there who are just trying to sell you products)
- Internal discussion group (multiple herds)
- Supermarkets (it's a 2 way flow)
- FAI (Ruth Leyton) Using the knowledge of animal welfare and how it can compromise performance want to demonstrate this to consumers and on farm.
- British Cattle Breeders Club

Problem 4: Mastitis

On-going problem.

Problem solving: Went on to take samples. We think we know how to solve the problem now. It takes time to solve. We had a new parlour which helped. We went to a discussion group and it was suggested that we wait 30-90 seconds for milk let down before starting milking. This cured the problem overnight. It's getting better all the time. There was a specialist vet at the discussion group.

Problem 5: Mastitis

There is a problem with the environment.

Problem solving: Started pre-dipping and half disappeared overnight. We also have on-going lameness grumbling away.

Discussion groups and vet were useful sources of information.

Problem 6: Mastitis and lameness

Problem solving: I work closely with vets at the university and specialists to get better information and knowledge. Does an everyday vet have the specialist knowledge to do the job? Other people prefer a local vet as they know the background of the farm.

Vet comes to do mobility scoring of cows. He's there doing it before I've even thought about doing it (pre-emptive). That's what we want. We can't sit on complacency and need to sort out problems with specialists. We can sometimes blame the vet for a lack of specialist knowledge although they are useful for some problems e.g. twisted uterus. My vet may be too old now though, doesn't get new information. I don't give him information in the first place though so it's my fault too. Large vet practices should be

able to have specialists in these areas. The biggest problem is with funding. In the long run we get the money back e.g. through cell counts.

We have nutritionist/vet/herdsman meetings once a month and share data with each other before the meetings. We email round inter-herd milk data and all contribute data. We also have an inter-herd discussion group.

Discussion about T.B

Should we be putting extra money in to help TB when the government is already putting so much in. We've been lucky not to be affected.

What is needed in the future?

- Staff training
- Recruitment/ retention of staff (staff can make or break lameness or mastitis problems)
- Mastitis/lameness/fertility need combating - the 3 key reasons for culling (it's about looking after the freshly calved cow. If we get that right you can avoid unnecessary culling. That transitional information is out there it's about learning how to get it right over the years)
- Management tools- facilitation for farmers the figures (individual cow evaluation)
- Frustration of milk price. Can't do anything about it- market forces
- Johnes. Been vaccinating for years. We don't pasteurise our milk, maybe we should. Don't know what to do other than what we are doing already, money may not help. There's plenty of advice on what to do when you have it, but we need prevention
- Need to improve biosecurity on dairy farms, farm walks etc do not help
- Calf disease, pneumonia is an on-going problem. You vaccinate against one strain and get another. Once you start vaccinating you get tied in

What sources of advice do you use?

- Vet
- Lab (starcross)-vet combination
- Consultants
- Farmers through discussion groups
- Kingshay
- Media e.g. farmers weekly
- Shows
- Dairy co.
- British cattle breeders club
- Meetings and conferences

Discussion on sources of information...

There seems to be a missing link between groups and research and farmers.

Farmer willingness and time is a big issue for accessing information. E.g. mobility scoring is a practical system to use on farm. It's getting someone out to do it each month. On my farm Sainsburys paid for it to be done but that was a one off. I've decided to ask the vet to continue doing it. You have to be keen to do this though. It's easy to get stuck in a closed mind set and think that there's a lack of time. How hard would it be to learn the skill of mobility scoring and to train within a group?

Need to pick and choose which meetings and conferences to go to, there's so many out there. There's sometimes too much information, but there is something for everyone. You have to pick and choose by what you think is right, what is high on your agenda.

The problem with on farm discussion groups is the time it takes to travel. They are often not intensive enough and you don't want to go to a fantastic place, you want to go somewhere with similar problems to see how you can combat your own difficulties. It is useful to keep it local to your area. You have to have respect for the people in your discussion group and a problem shared is a problem halved. If you have 'top' people in the group it helps. If you don't respect people in your group or they are not farming at the same level as you there is no point being in a discussion group together. It's important to have a good facilitator.

The Wyvern discussion group has been going on for years. A consultant is the facilitator. Dairy farmer discussion groups can often fail. Can be due to a lack of commitment. You want to come home from a meeting buzzing and stimulated to make changes, not leaving feeling frustrated that other people are not making simple changes. To be involved in a discussion group you need to have the willingness to contribute information. Trust issue is quite often important you need to be honest with other farmers for it to work but you don't want to appear the worst. It's not helpful to listen to mouthy people. Quiet people often have more knowledge to offer. Trying to get everyone to talk and contribute information is important.

Ranking sources of information

1st – Consultant (e.g. in meetings) / discussion groups (however, you can learn a lot of rubbish from farmers, you are better off travelling to a good group than staying local and going to a bad one) / vet (pretty happy with vets in terms of value for money. Vets are not always 1st port of call though. They are not good business people and not good value for money. Vets should be involved in milk production costs so they know how much we pay etc. Vets often suggest expensive treatments that are just not practical. They always suggest the best options from a maximum health point of view but not always best value for money or practicality)

Value for money (out of 5)

Vet - 4/5

Consultant (e.g. nutritionists, Kingshay) – depends on the experience between 3-5/5

Discussion groups (depends on the individual and whether they'll get anything out of it)-
4/5

General discussion on discussion groups...

Most farmers do respect vets and more farmers may go to discussion groups if vets attend them. Disseminating information seems to be most successful through vets. Food is a big incentive for meetings. People are more likely to turn up promptly if food is served at the beginning of meetings.

How do you reach all dairy farmers with information?

- Kingshay do monthly mailings
- Dairy Co produce a lot of research information etc.
- Information doesn't seem to be getting out there. Maybe farmers don't want it
- Some farmers go to meetings but only those who have time and are keen
- If you can't get people off their farmers maybe get their attention through the farmers weekly
- Rather that schemes were voluntary e.g. mobility scoring but if necessary could make things part of farm assurance schemes to make farmers take notice (Dairy Co could provide a consultant to come out and do the assessment
- Vet meetings e.g. at Shepton vets encourage farmers to come. A large proportion of dairy farmers in that area attend.
- Meetings funded by drugs companies are good but someone will usually stand up and plug a particular company

What is it about sources of information that makes you want to change?

- 'How's my herd' by Kingshay is a good scheme
 - They take measurements
 - Observe the herd
 - Make minimal investment suggestions e.g. take a piece of Yorkshire boarding out
 - We are the customers so we have to pick and chose a bit about what we want
 - Need someone to come in and do things (bit dictatorially but we don't like too much of that!)
 - It's voluntary
- Discussion Groups
 - Peer pressure
 - Wyvern – New Year's resolution scheme is good as you need to keep up with what you say you'll do to improve
 - You have to be honest and make changes
 - Seeing things in action and the results 1st hand on other peoples farms helps

- We are all practical people, need to see it to believe it to reduce lameness for example
- Media (e.g. Farmers Weekly)
 - Some things in farmers weekly are a bit vague
 - Dairy farmer is better and more detailed
 - When you open up a magazine it's better not to have all the leaflets
 - British Dairy is also useful
 - Hoards
 - Need to be as an article rather than a marketing advertisement. If you can run a magazine without marketing it would be better and more people would read it

If you get problems sorted out before they start you can save a lot of time and things run that much better. All problems and time are inter-linked when you start making progress things are easier but you need to find out information first in order to prevent problems.

Training

- A requirement of farm assurance
- Sets standard and impacts directly on health and welfare
- Its about managing the team spotting problems and reacting
- E.g. Foot trimming and simple things like knife sharpening are useful
- Good to get herdsman together on farm for motivation
- Good to get staff off the farm for a day
- Basic stuff needs to be revisited to solve simple problems and reinforce
- Better to do this in practice rather than reading instruction manuals
- Needs to be local training
- E.g. fertility management as a course
- If there was an accreditation scheme where-by people had to have a points system for training it would encourage people to do it
- A locomotion scoring course would benefit staff

Where could the money be spent?

- To improve mastitis, lameness and fertility to decrease culling
- Increased information from different angles (all angles) to minimise impact on different businesses
- Vets involved in discussion groups
- Having a series of speakers at discussion groups
- Central access point to find out information from- a liaison
- A liaison to make farmers aware of what's available
- Promotion of the value of training by looking at outcomes, economic benefits. Needs to be industry led, not dictated by retail

- Communication with farmers needs to improve. Young farmers are motivated and need to be good communicators. Excel vets are good communicators, explain real life problems
- Need the ability to get quality consultancy on a specialist subject e.g. prevention of disease

All the information is out there already but farmers need access it in their own time. Short of making it a legal requirement I don't think farmers will.

The average age of the dairy farmer also makes a difference to their willingness to access information. Older dairy farmers are less likely to go on courses and make changes to the way they farm. Younger people are keen for information (e.g. through young farmers). Sons of farmers can sometimes pass on information to their fathers from meetings. Older farmers often do not consider the costs of on-going problems like lameness.

Phone call after the meeting with David Helliar

He had attempted to start herdsman training for his herdsman, along similar lines to the discussion groups he had been involved with. The problem was his herdsman resented losing his free time in the middle of the day when he had been up since 4.30am and wouldn't finish until 6pm. Therefore, as an added incentive, he felt he could arrange relief for the herdsman to have the afternoon off (2-5pm). 6 meetings a year (every other month), 2 on nutrition, 4 on health and welfare. A group of 15 could be called upon so that 10-12 consistently attend. All within 45-60 minute journey. His problem was the funding (paperwork was the barrier) and finding enough people.