

Sat nav system is way forward

Keeping the herd on course calls for better route planning

There's always scope to improve the route towards the end goal and some of the management options were featured at an Alta Elite Day held at Newton Stewart. And the host farm – Coopon Carse – was no exception in its efforts to improve its route planning.

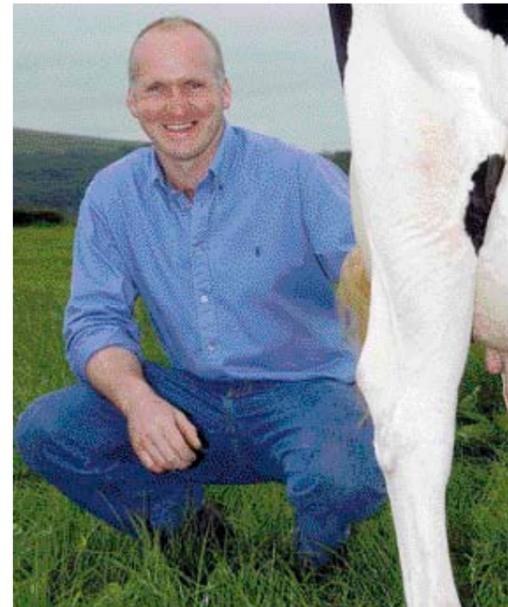
Coopon Carse Holsteins is no ordinary dairy herd. Twenty rose bowls, for cows that have produced more than 100 tonnes of milk, grace the display cabinet in the meeting room. Alex Robertson, who has worked with the herd for 19 of its 24 years and managed it for the past six years, aims to add to the display but in the same breath he emphasises that this unit is not all about production. "The herd is run commercially," says Alex. "We get high yields using Dutch and American bulls – 100% AI – but our fundamental selection tool is type. It has to be, to give us the longevity we need. We've used home-bred heifers to grow from 150 to 500 cows and we're now selling surplus stock so we want cows

with staying power." Add to this the fact that Alex says it takes about 10 years for a cow to reach 100 tonnes so she needs to be mobile and healthy to run this course. And there's no favourites – all cows are treated as equals.

Dairy hectares

The current herd average is 10,600kg on three-times-a-day milking through a 28-point internal rotary parlour. All 268 hectares are dedicated to the milking herd and 450 head of youngstock, providing grass and wholecrop silage to mix with straights, including Loch Lomond draff.

Recorded through NMR, Alex sees his milk records as the gateway to new, value



Alex Robertson: "Our records are a gateway to value-added data"

added information that will be made available through InterHerd. He, along with his four full-time staff, is just getting to grips with the system but he can already see clear benefits.

"We need to step up a gear and the new system will let us do this. Until now it's been like driving without any useful benchmarks. We need specific details that are easy to follow as we progress. This value-added data is going to be very important."

Trend setting

By this Alex particularly means health and fertility data. "We've always followed individual somatic cell counts on our milk records and our current average is just under 200,000cells/ml. But we need to follow trends more closely and establish a profile for each cow."

Fertility is another major area where Alex feels he needs to monitor trends far more closely. "Relying on just the milk records doesn't let us look far enough ahead," he admits. "We need to be able to forecast our production more accurately."



Coopon Carse heifers: bred for longevity

Turning the heat on numbers

NMR group managing director and Elite Day speaker Andy Warne encouraged producers to grab the free information off the internet. "More than 90% of British producers can get their milk test results from the Herd Companion web site, with just a password. Sit down and talk these through with the herdsman, print off action lists, and 'warm up' the cold data to make it work harder.

"And these producers can all use Herd Companion to follow milk quality trends and look at peaks and dips on a graph. Any problems can be picked up – before they affect the milk price. It's all 'bottom line' detail."

Mr Warne pointed to the huge difference in somatic cell count between the top and bottom 25% of



Andy Warne: "97% of producers can get their milk quality results for free"

NMR herds. "The top line shows producers – and milk buyers – what can be achieved. Producers can make sure they use the available individual cow data, which these days is far more comprehensive and presented in a very useable format, to do something about it and avoid problems with price penalties."

Team work for elite producers

Different management is required for larger herds, according to Sussex-based dairy vet and Elite Day speaker Rob Drysdale. "There's less margin for error – if you're a bit out with fertility or health you'll end up a long way off course with serious implications.

"The vet is the lynchpin in large dairy herd management and they should work with the unit staff, nutritionist, adviser – even the bank manager and accountant. To the point where we advocate a pence-per-litre contract as one of the payment options – we're a results based practice.

"Milk production relies on healthy cows and we're prepared to take responsibility for this. If milk yield goes up, we earn more and if we get it wrong and milk yields drop we don't do as well."

There's plenty of scope for improvement on farms too. "Average cell counts of more than 200,000 cells/ml signify financial losses with implications on milk quality. And too many units are



Rob Drysdale: "We're a results based practice"

losing too much money to disease. NMR data shows that nearly 10% of herds – and these would be better than average herds – have a cell count above 400,000cells/ml. Fertility is another drain and lameness is a big one."

One of the essential tools used by the 30 Westpoint vets is InterHerd and Key Performance Indicators. "Benchmarking performance is vital for a wide range of criteria from calving interval to milk sold per cow per year. Managers, herdsman and advisers like to see graphs and charts as it's easy to follow progress and pick up trends."

Karen Wright