

Trouble shooting highlighted 'quick wins' with short and long-term gains

Quick on the draw

Small changes can make a huge difference to dairy herd performance – and the bottom line. And the benefits can continue for the longer term. We spoke to two Cumbria-based producers and their consultant to find out more.

text **Phil Eades**

Just over a year ago Adam and Bernard Pickthall decided they needed, by their own admission, to 'freshen up' the performance of their 140-cow herd. And, by focussing on 'quick wins', the result has been a significant increase in herd financial performance.

The Pickthalls manage 158 hectares at Bradley Farm, based at Hincaster near Milnthorpe in south Cumbria. The unit is predominantly grass, but eight hectares of maize and another eight hectares of spring barley for wholecrop are also grown. The farm was carrying 140 all-year-round calving Friesian Holsteins and followers, 250 breeding ewes and some beef. All calves were reared as replacements or for beef.

Adam and Bernard joined the Promar

Dairy Consultancy Programme, which they knew would give them plenty of food for thought and ideas to improve their business. "We had used consultants before, but we felt it was time to get someone in to challenge what we were doing and see where any opportunities might lie, particularly in relation to forage use," says Adam.

Forage review

When Promar's senior consultant James Webster first visited the unit he set about reviewing forage production and utilisation. He was concerned that the farm should be able to produce sufficient forage for the cows, yet around 30 tonnes of pressed pulp were being bought in every month.



James Webster and Bernard and Adam Pickthall

"It soon became clear that silage was being fed to the beef cattle that could – and should – have been fed to the cows," James explains. "Costing out the beef enterprise, including the impact it was having on dairy costs, made it clear that it was not contributing to profit so the decision was taken to wind up the finishing unit. All beef cattle are now sold as stores. "This would save £1,500 per month in dairy feed costs by releasing silage to replace the pressed pulp." The next challenge was to improve forage production and yields from forage to increase dairy profitability. A programme of soil testing was carried out and

Access issues: a new track will improve transit to the herd's grazing block of six paddocks



revealed that while phosphorus and potassium levels were fine, pH was an issue. As a result, 24 hectares were limed. A programme of sward regeneration has also been put in place and in the first year four hectares were overseeded with more scheduled for this year.

The cows had been set-stock grazing a 24-hectare block and, while this worked well in early season, the block tended to run out of steam as the summer progressed. The decision was taken to split this into six paddocks, using electric fencing, to increase grazing intensity and to reduce wastage. The block was top-dressed with salt to improve palatability and grazing availability was checked throughout the season using a plate meter.

“Cows were turned out in late April on a 17-day rotation,” explains Bernard. “Using the plate meter readings meant that we were able to graze tighter, which increased grazing output and improved grazing quality.

“We were surprised at how tightly the cows could be persuaded to graze and this meant we were staying on paddocks longer than we had expected with less damage despite the dreadful season.

Buffer feeding

“We had usually buffer fed the cows but in 2012, due to better grazing, we were able to stop buffer feeding for a month. This saved feed costs, time, fuel and meant we kept 60 extra tonnes of silage in the clamp.

“That proved invaluable this winter. Cutting out the buffer also encouraged the cows to get out and start grazing and we have consistently produced more milk from grazing throughout the season.”

Better grazing performance has also had a big knock-on effect on silage production. The plan is to go early and to make a quality first cut. This year, as usual, 49 hectares were taken for first cut but, due to the improved grazing output, fewer acres of aftermath had to be added to the grazing block. This meant that an



Cow comfort: rubber mats have been installed in the milking parlour

additional eight hectares were taken for second cut and an additional 12 hectares were taken for third cut. “In total we were able to cut 20 additional hectares for silage, which was a huge benefit given the difficult grazing season.”

The extra silage meant the cost of the winter diet could be lowered. Average forage intake has increased by 1kgDM/day, pressed pulp use has reduced and the amount of blend fed to high yielders has also been cut. The diet comprises silage, blend and Vitagold and the increased forage means that cows can be fed one diet whereas in the previous year there were separate high and low yielder rations. This change means that fuel costs and time have been saved as well as feed costs. Concentrate is still fed to yield in the parlour.

There has also been an increased focus on herd health, particularly lameness and fertility, although the new diet has helped improve rumen health. A new footbath has been installed, rubber mats have been laid in the parlour and feet are routinely trimmed. Cows are certainly better on their feet.

NMR Silent Herdsman has also been installed to aid heat detection. Although

fertility has not been a problem, the Pickthalls are keen to keep on top of it. “The impact of all these changes on margins has been significant,” says James Webster.

“Although yields have fallen back a little, we have increased margin per cow and significantly pushed up margin per litre.” Table 1 shows that yield from forage has increased and purchased feed use has been cut by more than the equivalent of a tonne of concentrate per cow, partly due to reducing pressed pulp use.

“Focussing on quick wins has really paid off with an immediate boost in performance. But the changes made will continue to deliver benefits, particularly if we see something approaching a normal grazing season in 2013.”

Heifer management

The Pickthall’s drive to improve performance will continue. This year a cow track will be laid across the grazing block to improve access and further reduce grazing wastage. The plan is also to review heifer rearing.

Although heifers are entering the herd at close to two years old, the aim is to improve growth rates by splitting calves and moving animals into the building previously used for the finishing beef.

“We can improve heifer management without much investment,” says Adam. “The great thing about the changes we have made is that they have all been achieved with a manageable level of capital investment.

“We haven’t had to spend large sums but have managed to move the herd forward with a series of quick wins.” |

Table 1: Improvements in performance at Bradley Farm

	December 2011	December 2012	difference
cows in herd	114	120	+6
yield per cow (l)	8,884	8,036	-848
yield from forage per cow (l)	668	2,051	+1,383
concentrate use per cow (kg)	2,612	2,220	-392
total feed costs per cow (£)	758	600	-158
MOPF per litre (p)	17.14	19.57	+2.43
MOPF per cow (£)	1,523	1,573	+50