

Have you got what it takes to make the top 25%?

Eyeing up fertility

This year has seen the publication of new fertility data from the University of Reading. Its annual survey of 500 NMR-recorded herds highlights the good, bad and indifferent points and sets management targets based on the top 25%.

text **Karen Wright**

The good news is that there's progress in dairy herd fertility. The median – or midpoint and often deemed a far better gauge than the average – calving interval has improved from 424 days in 2010 to 414 days. The report, which views its main aim as setting realistic targets for UK producers based on the top 25%, sets a new calving interval goal of 402 days. In 2013, 25% of herds achieved this – or better. Three years ago this target was 409 days.

Moving on, the Reading report shows that the best 25% of the NMR sample are serving 63% of their cows by 80 days (4%

up on four years earlier). Heat detection has also improved markedly. This is measured using the percentage of all inter-service intervals that are between 18 and 24 days, indicating the cow is re-served at her next available oestrus. In 2013 the median herd value was 38% of service intervals; a significant increase on the 32% in 2010. The conception rate target is now 39% compared to 32% in 2010. These targets, provided through NMR's InterHerd+ management system, are increasingly seen as valuable benchmarks for discussion between producers and advisers.

One herd that is sitting in this top 25% fertility performance band belongs to Richard Chandler from Long Clawson, near Melton Mowbray. His 300-cow cross-bred herd has a calving interval of 401 days, with 51% of the herd achieving 385 days or less. Calving to first service is 76 days and 68% of cows are served by 80 days post calving. The herd's 100 day in calf rate is 46%, which is 8% above the NMR top 25% target of 38%. And conception rate is 41%, which is 2% above the NMR target.

Sustainable cows

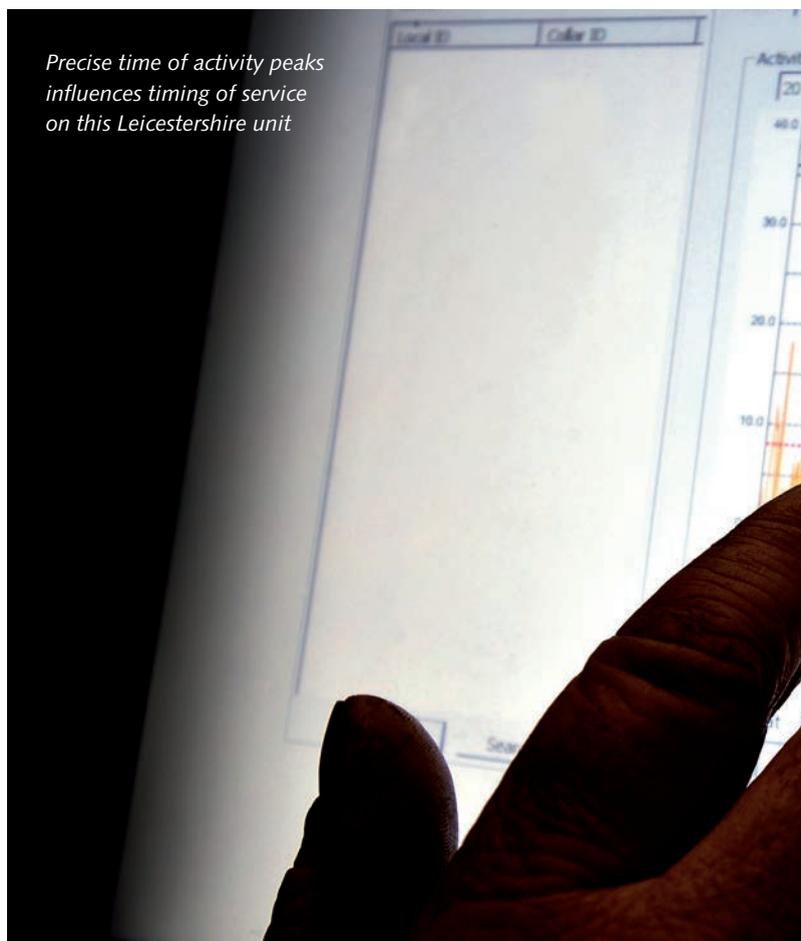
Head herdsman Nick Connor, who has been responsible for the herd for the past 19 years, claims that a combination of breeding and management contributes to the fertility figures. But with a milk contract to supply most milk in mid-summer there's no chance of anyone taking their eye off the ball.

Originally a Holstein herd, a declining milk price and increasing feed costs 10 years ago encouraged Richard and Nick to get off the 'go for milk' treadmill and all its related problems and opt for a more sustainable cow for their system.

"A milk buyer who looked for high constituents and a good grass growing farm made us look towards the cross-bred cow," says Nick. "We've tried a few



All cows wear Silent Herdsman collars – a valuable fertility tool for heat detection and at calving



Precise time of activity peaks influences timing of service on this Leicestershire unit



Nick Connor: "Good fertility takes a good system and interested staff"

crosses, but we're now using the Jersey, Brown Swiss and Holstein in a three-way cross. That's not to say we're dismissing the pure Holsteins as there are still some in the herd that have done well under the system."

Despite a fall in yield from 9,000kg 10 years ago to the current 6,600kg, milk quality has increased to its current 4.8% fat and 3.65% protein and, with lower feed costs, more extensive use of grazing and less vet expenses, herd profitability has increased.

"You can make money from the bills you avoid," says Nick. "Better legs and feet, lower cell counts and fewer fertility issues all save on costs."

That isn't to say that Richard and Nick don't consider improvements and investments that allow the herd to progress. And anything that helps improvements in fertility management is worth considering. "We can still improve," adds Nick. "Our calving interval could be lower and we still need to chip away at conception rates."

The farm's recent investment in Silent Herdsman is looking like a useful aid in this improvement pathway.

Pick up patterns

"It's a fantastic help," adds Nick. "We calve in April to suit Long Clawson's Stilton production and then we serve cows from the beginning of July and try to keep the calving pattern as tight as possible. We've got to pick up heats and get cows in calf and it takes a good system and interested staff who know what they're doing."

Although Nick ignores the first heat post calving, it will be picked up on Silent Herdsman. "So at least we can see she's cycling and pick up a pattern – or not as the case may be. It's a great troubleshooting tool."

Timing of services also plays a part and this is where Silent Herdsman has allowed Nick to 'sharpen his game'. Cows are grazing 24/7 in the service period so the system reads the cows' collars when they come in for milking and records the time of increased activity.

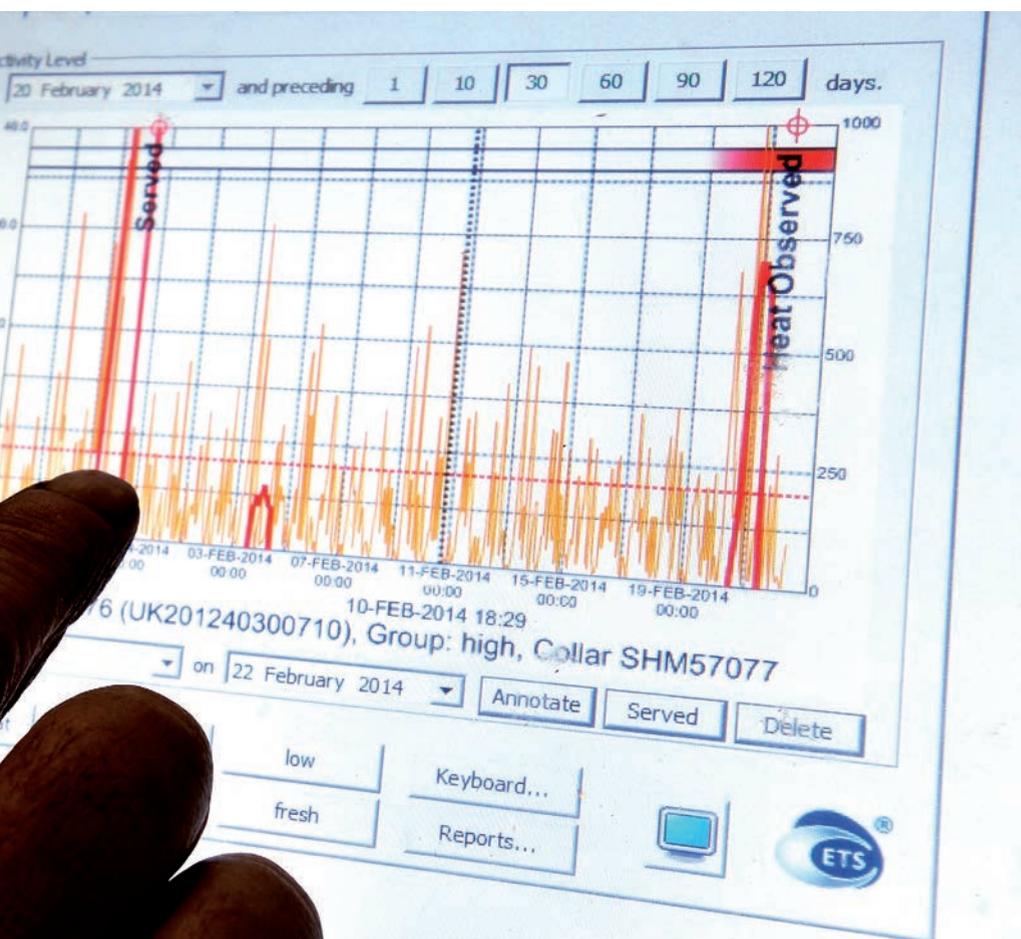
"If there's a peak on the graph at 9pm, we serve her the following morning but if the peak in increased activity is at say 4am we will wait until the following evening. You can't do this with tail paint. Getting the timing right is that much more important too when we're using sexed semen."

Nick is now also using the milk PD test 35 days post service and he is adamant that the combination of the two additions to his fertility 'tool box' has contributed to the improved conception rate. "We're getting 80% in calf at each PD milk test," he says. "It's taken us to a new level in fertility performance."

Detects calving activity

All cows wear a Silent Herdsman collar and Nick is finding this invaluable. "As cows are dried off, we transfer them to a separate group on the Silent Herdsman software. By adjusting the sensitivity of this group, we are able to pick up changes in behaviour which indicate calving. "It's an early warning system, which is invaluable in a large, spring calving herd like ours."

In the short term, Nick would like to see the herd's calving interval fall below 400 days with most calvings in April and May. "It's good to be in the top 25%, but it's equally important to keep improving, set targets for your own herd and then work out how you will achieve them. We've got a system that requires tight fertility management and if we don't achieve this we would probably take a knock with milk price. But there are lots of other more hidden benefits to be gained by improved heat detection and monitoring cow fertility carefully." |



Grants on offer

The Farming and Forestry Improvement Scheme is currently offering grant funding to help improve fertility in dairy herds.

➤ For further information, or to find out if the scheme can help you, visit the RDPE network website, www.rdpenetwork.defra.gov.uk