

NMR milk samples successfully pinpoint cows with fertility problems

Milk PD test proves its worth

Twelve months ago NMR launched the first of its kind – a milk PD testing service. Interest was immediate among producers who were keen to use the new cost-effective tool to confirm pregnancies and, just as importantly, pinpoint any problems for the vet. Results have been impressive with more than 1,000 producers now using it as part of routine fertility management.

text **Karen Wright**

Worcestershire-based producer Sue Troughton and farm manager of 20 years Bob Sanderson have incorporated the milk PD test as part of their drive to boost fertility in their 200-cow pedigree Friesian herd, following some challenging herd health issues.

In three of the past four years this herd has collected the Worcestershire Happy

Herd award, judged on herd 'well-being', performance and management. But the past 18 months have presented them with more than their fair share of challenges.

"TB took out a number of cow families, some going back to the original stock that my father bred after moving to Holdfast Hall in 1935," says Susan. "Then we've had problems with Neospora

and Schmallenberg and both have hit productivity and fertility.

"TB still presents a threat, but hopefully we're through the worst with the other diseases and we're aiming to get back on track. I have to look at these issues – along with the milk price – as challenges that we will tackle as well as we can."

High targets

To this end, a number of improvements have been made to help them achieve the high targets they have set for the all-year round calving herd, which supplies local family-run processor Cotteswold Dairies.

Working closely with their vet, Droitwich-based MacArthur, Barstow and Gibbs, the team at Holdfast Hall monitor cows carefully and flag up any problems as early as possible. They milk record religiously – not just for pedigree purposes but to help breeding plans and herd health management. The herd is vaccinated for IBR and they screen

Holdfast cows: as on many units, milk PD tests are helping fertility management





Bob Sanderson and Susan Troughton



Tom Jenkins (left) and Steven Black

routinely for Johne's disease using NMR's Herdwise service.

"We breed for yield so we want our cows in full working order," adds Bob. "Fertility is paramount. Our aim is to get cows in calf and to try to achieve a 385-day calving interval.

"We aim to serve cows around 50 days post calving as long as they are in the right condition and healthy. And for the past 12 months we've taken advantage of the NMR milk pregnancy test service at 90 days post service. This has been highly reliable and it's a great management aid in pinpointing problem cows and confirming those that are in calf. Our vet can see great advantages with this service as it leaves him to focus on any problems. "Once fertility is back on track we will

use this test to PD at 60 days but already, during the past six months, we've seen the 100-day in calf rate improve by 30%. This is partly due to the milk PD test and having our finger on the pulse."

NMR's milk pregnancy testing service uses milk samples collected for recording purposes so there's no additional on farm sampling and a minimal charge of approximately £3.50 per sample. "It's proving very cost-effective," says Bob. "And it brings other major advantages in that there's no need to hold back cows for PD tests, which is better for the cow and it saves time for both us and the vet."

Cows are fed for yield with a buffer throughout the summer and a partial TMR during the winter, topped up according to yield with a parlour cake. This supports the herd average of 7,400kg at 4.00% fat and 3.33% protein.

"Unfortunately yields dropped due to poor fertility resulting from disease, but they are recovering now and our target is 8,000kg while maintaining milk quality and low cell counts," says Bob.

Double-whammy

Stirling-based producer Steven Black says that the milk PD test is a 'double-whammy' on his 100-cow unit. He looks for a calving interval of 380 days and 35% in-calf-by-100-days rate in his Holstein Friesian and Montbelliarde all-year round calving herd. He uses the milk PD test for recently served cows at each recording and also at 90 days after service, or thereabouts, to check the cow is still in calf and there are no re-absorption problems.

"In 2012 we had a terrible summer weather-wise," says Steven, who runs the 182-ha family arable and dairy unit at Thornhill, eight miles north west of Stirling. "Feed quality was awful and cows were in and out throughout the season. This really wreaked havoc with fertility." To get fertility back on track Steven involved his vet, Tom Jenkins from Forth Valley Vets, and also started using the

milk PD tests. "This worked well. The PD milk test shows up problem cows for the vet to look at on his fortnightly visit. Conception rates had slipped causing the calving interval to increase to 450 days, but it's now back to the target 380 days thanks to our tighter testing procedures. It has allowed us to get on top of any problems."

Committed to the dairy industry and with son Gregor keen to keep the dairy herd, Steven is looking to increasing production from the current average 7,500kg achieved from a grazing and winter-housed TMR system with cows fed to yield in the parlour. "We have a liquid contract so we want more litres but with good quality and low cell counts. Our current rolling average is 4.1% fat and 3.56% protein and a cell count of 120,000cells/ml. We are also looking at installing two robotic milking machines so we can free up time for other jobs."

Value added sample

The foundation for their success will be a herd of healthy and fertile cows. "We take increasing advantage of our milk records – and the sample – for Johne's screening as well as PD testing," adds Steven. "We work closely with the vet and follow a vaccination programme for Leptospirosis and BVD. This should put us in good shape to move the herd forward."

Equally committed to the industry, Susan Troughton will maintain the fertility management programme in the Holdfast herd as she increases herd size to 250 cows with home-bred replacements.

"We're now using sexed semen on heifers and breeding everything to dairy bulls, except the problem breeders that are put to the Hereford bull," she says. "But, above all, our target is to run a herd of healthy and productive cows – the Happy Herd title is one we are very proud of!"

