

Targeting transition cow management offers benefits in later lactation

# Getting the message

For one Derbyshire-based dairy producer, adjusting dry-cow nutrition during the close-up period has resulted in improved cow and calf performance. We spoke to him to find out how advice offered by three different sources led to significant changes to transition cow feeding and management.

text **Emily Ball**

**H**earing the same advice from three separate sources encouraged one Derbyshire-based dairy producer to look closely at his transition period and what effect it was having on the health of his herd as a whole.

"I was getting the same feedback about how important the transition period was from three places: my vet, The Prince's Countryside Fund Resilience Programme, and ForFarmers," says Mick Dakin, who

milks 120 Holstein Friesian cows, at Masson Farm near Matlock.

The herd calves all year round and cows are housed from the end of September to the beginning of May. The herd's average yield is around 7,500 litres per cow at 4.1% butterfat and 3.3% protein. Most of the unit's 87 hectares of land is away from the buildings, with only 25 hectares accessible to the herd from the milking parlour.



*Mick Dakin: "Feedback about our dry-cow management forced a changed"*

In 2011, Mick began producing ice-cream at the farm and now sells more than 30 flavours under the 'Matlock Meadows' brand. This is sold through the farm's café, as well as wholesale into local restaurants and tourist attractions,

*Tomorrow's milkers: calves get off to a better start and heifer age at first calving should start to fall at Masson Farm*







*Ice-cream maker: Mick processes the milk from his 120-cow herd on farm*

such as Chatsworth Estate Farm Shop. The farm is also open to the public and hosts parties and educational visits.

"We started the ice-cream side of the business because I was keen to break down the barrier between the consumer and farming," explains Mick. "We get positive feedback from our customers and the public when they see the herd and I know we're helping to dispel some of the mis-information about the dairy industry."

### Transition issues

Dry cows are at grass throughout their dry period during the summer, but are moved to a paddock near the farm buildings about three weeks before their due date. During the housed period, transition cows are fed second- or third-cut silage or hay, top-dressed with transition nuts, for three weeks before calving. They are then fed a percentage of the milking cow ration, from four or five days before their estimated calving date, to prepare the rumen for the herd's lactation diet.

"We have some land in a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement that we can only cut for hay, so we feed this to the transition cows in the winter," explains Mick. "I'm aiming to dry the cows off at BCS 3 to 3.5 and to then maintain that throughout the dry period."

"We had a problem with retained cleansings," he continues. "We didn't have a huge issue with milk fever or

difficult calvings, but I knew we could do better. I was keen to reduce incidences because of the time they took to deal with and their subsequent effect on production and fertility."

"Colostrum quality was not as high as we'd have liked, measuring at 20g IgG per litre. We knew this wasn't giving the calves the start in life that they needed. Mick adds that he also wanted to address the issue of heifer age at first calving, which stood at between 28 and 29 months.

"I knew the key to this was growing our calves well. Getting nutrition right in that close-up period has a positive effect on both the calf and the quality of colostrum it will be fed after it's born."

### Complex minerals

Mick spoke to ForFarmers' Kelvin Garrett and young stock specialist Rachael Kennerly about the transition period. They recommended that he added TRANSLAC Advance nuts to the transition diet.

"These supply key transition nutrients and contain a unique premix called prepare+. This combination, when fed with forage, provides a complete transition cow diet that will help to minimise the problems associated with transition and early lactation cows," explains Ms Kennerly.

The complex minerals it contains capture and bind free calcium and cations (sodium and potassium) reducing the risk of milk fever and associated

problems such as retained cleansings. B complex vitamins also help prevent the build-up of fat in the liver, allowing the organ to work more efficiently in early lactation. This means that more energy is available to the cow for milk production.

The feed's glucogenic energy sources improves rumen development, which maximises dry matter intakes and nutrient absorption. And the high levels of quality protein (26%) plus vitamin E and selenium it contains boost colostrum antibody content.

The high levels of vitamin E, Cellguard and bioavailable selenium in the nut increases resistance to infection and disease which is beneficial for mastitis and metritis.

### Healthier calves

Since adding the transition feed, Mick has not had to assist a calving and there have been no retained cleansings. Cows have started their lactation well and the calves seem healthier and daily live weight gains have increased.

"The message I got from all three sources was to get the transition period 'right' to see an improvement in milk production, as well as enhanced health and fertility – for both the cow and the calf," says Mick.

"We have plans to improve dry-cow housing in the near future and I know any investment I make in this crucial period will provide a payback going forward." |