

Wash away mastitis woes

An 'add on' that helps to save time and improve udder health

Flushing clusters after milking each cow is one way to avoid spreading mastitis from cow to cow. But it takes time – too much time for some herds – despite the benefits to udder health and somatic cell counts. So why not consider automation?

Struggling to control somatic cells counts? Or maybe it's time to tackle that niggling – and costly – mastitis problem head on? Many vets and udder hygiene specialist would recommend flushing clusters clean after each cow is milked as a step in the right direction, particularly when trying to control mastitis that's being passed from cow to cow.

But with that, particularly for larger herds, comes a larger labour requirement and considerably more time spent in the pit. And for some the cost of that – both financially and physically – is just too much to bear.

The good news is that this part of the milking routine can be automated – whatever your parlour and set up. And it's an 'add on' that requires a modest investment and one where most herds will very quickly see a return.

Kilmarnoch-based producer Alan Kerr has certainly seen a swift and welcome return on the £8,500 investment he made in an automatic cluster flushing system. It's just five months since he installed the Greenoak Airwash system in his 20:20 herringbone parlour, in a bid to get on top of a growing – and costly – somatic cell count problem. He says he's seeing huge benefits.

"I'd go as far as to say that I think that the system will have paid for itself within a year. And I'd certainly recommend automatic cluster flushing to anyone who has a problem with mastitis and SCCs," he says.

Easy installation

He set up his 200-cow herd – an amalgamation of two pedigree herds

on a newly built unit at Hurlford – in September 2008. "And at that time SCC was running at between 280,000 cells/ml and 300,000 cells/ml. Not good, but not too bad considering the stress that the cows were under due to being moved and mixed together," he says.

But the alarm bells began to sound when, instead of settling down, the count continued to rise and by December it was well above 500,000 cells/ml.

"It was just going up and up before my eyes and, despite my best efforts, I just couldn't seem to get a handle on it. And we were dealing with 10 cases of mastitis or more at any one time.

Milk cheque

"Udder health aside, it was starting to impact on the milk cheque too. We supply milk to the Caledonian Cheese Company and the penalties for failing to make the top band on milk hygiene were starting to hurt," says Alan.

He thought that washing each cluster after each cow would help considerably, but he also knew that it wouldn't be practical to add it to the already stretched milking routine. So he was excited when he saw the Airwash system in action at AgriScot 2008. "And even more so when I discovered that it was affordable and I could also add it to my parlour."

The manufacturer says that the system is compatible with all parlours, even those without ACRs. It took about a day and a half to fit the system to Alan's parlour – with two men working between milkings. And he says that not only is it relatively maintenance free but it's also inexpensive to run.



Time saver: the ADF system automatically dips cows' teats before flushing the cluster clean

"I've only used 15 litres of paracetic acid since it was installed. The dose rate is extremely low, but it does the job."

Today's figures say it all. His herd's somatic cell count stands at 220,000 cells/

ml and it's still falling. "And we only get the odd case of mastitis now – it's certainly not the norm anymore," he adds.

Staffordshire-based producer Stephen

Tomkinson installed a flushing system in his parlour, but with the added bonus of automatic teat dipping. He'd already had considerable success in getting on top of a mastitis and SCC problem in his 420-

cow pedigree herd – the latter was running at between 120,000 cell/ml and 150,000 cells/ml thanks to what he describes as a 'top of the range' acid based teat dip.

"But I knew we couldn't use that for ever. It wasn't the best thing for teat condition and it was also costing us an arm and a leg. So I began to look around for an alternative."

He looked at the ADF system, which automatically dips the teats before detaching and flushing the cluster clean, and admits he had concerns.

"I wasn't convinced that anything could control the mastitis causing pathogens at our unit like the premium priced dip was doing. And this came with an iodine based dip – I just wasn't sure and didn't want to see SCCs rise after all our hard work.

"But ADF's James Duke convinced me to give it a go and, so confident was he in the teat dip that his system used, that he insisted I try the dip on its own before I installed the system."

Cost saving

So try it he did and Stephen hasn't looked back since. "The teat dip worked and I decided to give the whole system a go. And SCCs and udder health haven't wavered."

He says he's saving £800 a month on teat dip costs and the system, which cost £26,000 to install in 30:60 swing-over parlour, is paying for itself with teat dip cost savings alone.

"And there are other benefits. It certainly saves time in the parlour – we're shaving about 20 minutes off each milking – and teat dipping is now done thoroughly and immediately after milking, we get exceptional teat coverage. That's not always possible when it's done by hand, particularly when you're milking as many cows as we are."

Rachael Porter