

We examine some key performance data and look to the top 25% of UK herd for some pointers and inspiration to help you improve herd performance.

There's quite a gap between the top 25% of dairy herds for somatic cell count compared to the average dairy herd, according to the latest NMR figures (see Figure 1). And while the top herds have seen little fluctuation during the past two years and have remained the right side of the 150,000 cells/ml mark, even during the traditionally tricky summer months, average herds have been less successful at avoiding the June, July and August 'blips'. So what are these top herds doing to keep figures steady and, more importantly, low enough to command the very best price for their milk?

Rachael Porter

In this, the first in our new series on key dairy management benchmarks, we take a look at somatic cell counts or, more specifically, two herds that have a story when it comes to udder health and can offer some tips to those keen to be among the top 25%.

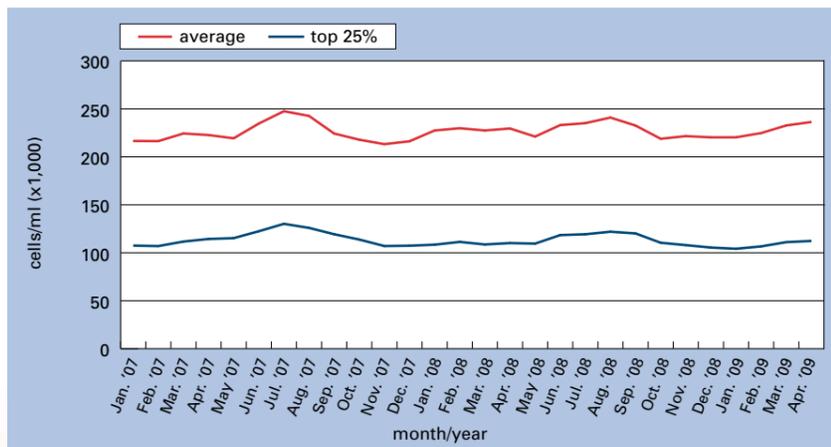


Figure 1 – Top 25% of dairy herds for somatic cell count compared to the average dairy herd (source: NMR)

Thorough routines and a targeted approach are both vital to maintain low SCCs and good udder health

## Martin and Caroline Hurford: 90-cow herd with a SCC of 64,000 cells/ml

"We never lose focus and we're always working hard to keep cell counts low."

That's Devon-based producer Caroline Hurford's answer to the question of how she and husband Martin keep their herd's milk consistently in the top quality band.

"We like it to be below 100,000 cells/ml – it's never been above 200,000 cells/ml – and we do this by never taking our eye off the ball. Just because it's low we don't just assume that it will stay low. We keep working at it.

"And we have a meticulous and strict milking routine – albeit a bit fiddly. But it works for us and the extra effort is worth it when you consider that mastitis cases in our herd are few and far between and we always remain in the top band for our milk," she adds.

The routine in the unit's 6:12 herringbone parlour begins with pre-dipping with a diluted hypochlorite solution and dry wiping. Clusters are then attached and removed by ACRs before the teats are sprayed with an iodine-based teat dip. What makes the biggest difference, particularly when it comes to preventing cow-to-cow transmission of mastitis pathogens, is thoroughly washing the clusters in a bucket of water containing a paracetic acid solution.

"And it's probably one of the most time consuming aspects of our routine, but it's also one of the most important," says Caroline.

"Yes, it does add to the time it takes to milk – it takes us a total of two hours to milk the herd at the moment. But we think it's well worth the effort – the

figures and the herd's udder health speak volumes."

"If we do get a case of mastitis, for example, then we always test to see what's causing it so we can treat the infection accordingly."

She and Martin are considering expanding herd size – possibly even doubling cow numbers. And this would require a larger parlour.

But what about the milking routine – would that change? "Not if we can help it. I think we'd look at mechanising part or parts of the milking routine – may be the cluster flushing," says Caroline.

"But whatever we did we'd still expect it to be done to the same standard – if not better – than that which we achieve when doing it by hand."

## Oliver Surman: 200-cow organic herd with a SCC of 135,000 cells/ml

Controlling cell counts in organic herds presents different challenges but Worcestershire farmer Oliver Surman has managed to reduce bulk cell counts from more than 300,000 cells/ml to around 135,000 cells/ml through a targeted approach.

Oliver runs a 200-cow herd on an organic system, with his father Peter, at Upton on Severn. The young herd averages in excess of 6,000 litres and cell counts had been a problem with the bulk tank figure averaging more than 300,000 cells/ml, despite milk from the worst cell count cows being kept out of the tank. The NMR herd cell count was regularly higher than 400,000 cells/ml.

Working with Promar International consultant Danni Cooke, who visits the farm regularly under the Dairy Excellence Programme, a plan was devised to get cell counts under control

and to avoid discarding so much milk. Before deciding on specific action, bacteriology tests were carried out to try and identify the principal causes of infections. The tests showed that environmental pathogens, mostly Strep uberis and E coli were the main problems and this information helped determine the plan.

The first step was to treat the high cell count cows. Any cow identified by NMR as having a cell count in excess of one million is CMT tested to identify the problem quarter. This allows cows to be treated early and with the most appropriate drug to help prevent repeat cases and reduce treatment usage.

Priority is given to fresh calved cows and those still giving high yields. To help with monitoring these cows a new fresh cow group was set up.

The main herd is housed in sawdust

bedded cubicles and more attention has been paid to cubicle cleanliness to help reduce the impact of environmental pathogens. In addition the cubicles are currently being renovated.

To help with spotting mastitis earlier, extra training was given to the Polish milking staff and Oliver is certain that this has made a big difference.

"By identifying any cases sooner we have been able to reduce the severity of infection and the incidence of repeat cases. Furthermore by treating high cell count cows we have brought the bulk tank reading down, the challenge now is to maintain the current low levels and reduce drug usage to a minimum," he explains. "Credit must go to the guys in the parlour who have really worked hard to achieve the results we see today. And we'll keep working hard to remain in the top 25%."

Reducing and maintaining somatic cell counts – some pointers from two cell count 'high achievers'

# Raising the bar for SCC