

We visited a 65-cow dairy herd with impressive yields and equally impressive performance figures to find out how it earns its place among the top 20% of dairy herds based on costings. Attention to detail and sound feeding management are both key to success.



Trevor Rowbotham: "I'm still looking for improvements"

He may be managing his dairy business in land-locked Leicestershire, but Trevor Rowbotham runs a very tight ship at his unit in Eastwell, near Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire, according to Promar International consultant Charles Skelton. Small but perfectly formed is exactly how he describes Trevor's business, which supplies milk to the local Stilton cheese-making cooperative Long Clawson. "His attention to detail is second to none. You can take anything that Trevor does on his unit and apply it to a larger unit – he's definitely got a thing or two to teach larger producers about getting cows back in calf and herd nutrition," he says. Trevor's 65-cow commercial Holstein Friesian herd, run on 53 hectares with part-time help from his wife Joanne and his father William, may be small by UK standards, but his yields are large, with cows averaging an impressive 9,242 litres at 4.14% butterfat and 3.21% protein – considerably more than many larger herds.

Feed efficiency

"For me it's all about efficiency and getting as much out of the resources that I have – the cows, the land, the facilities, and feed. Feed efficiency is key to keeping the herd and the business on track and making sure that the unit remains profitable," explains Trevor. His feed costs per litre were 5.5p in his most recent set of costings – tighter than it has been due to the recent increase in feed prices, but still very respectable. Feed efficiency – or feed use per litre – was 0.36 which compares well with the 0.35 average for the top 20% of producers using the same costings service. "I'm very happy with this figure – it's one of the first things I check. And during the past 12 months it has been below 0.30," says Trevor. Margin over purchased feed per cow and

per litre are also useful benchmarks. His are £1,425 and 15.24p respectively, compared to £1,320 and 15.51p averages for the top 20% for the year ending November 2007. His figures are all the more impressive when you factor in that many producers saw a milk price increase in October and Trevor is still waiting for his to take effect.

He's a modest man, down playing his achievements and putting much of his success down to the fact that, because it's a smaller herd, the cows are less stressed.

Husbandry skills

But less stress doesn't explain the phenomenal yields from his traditional grass-based system or the precise feeding and fertility management, not to mention his parlour hygiene routine. That's down to Trevor's tip-top husbandry skills and sheer hard work.

"I am living on top of the job, so to speak," he says. "It's hard not to be on the ball when I spend so much time with the cows. With help from the costings, my Promar consultant and NMR milk recording, I try to keep up to speed on everything and I can honestly say that my system is working at full capacity now – I'm getting as much as I possibly can out of what I have at the moment." But he's still looking for improvements. Herd health and fertility have been playing on Trevor's mind. It's vital that the herd calves in the spring/summer, and no later than July 1, to ensure that he maximises the price paid by his buyer. And this is the main reason he started using some Norwegian Red semen on about a third of the herd in 2007. "I chose this breed as it doesn't detract from yield, but it does offer improved health and fertility."

Grass silage forms the basis of the herd's ration

He's now got 10 cross-bred heifers on the ground and is eager to see how they perform when they calve in early 2009. "They look similar to the Holstein Friesian heifers, but seem to be 'tougher'. The calves were much more eager to feed straight after birth." He expects the resulting heifers and cows to be slightly smaller than the Holstein Friesians and most, if not all, will have black feet. These will be harder, making the cows less prone to lameness "And some are also naturally polled, so that's one less job for me to do," he adds. Trevor is not breeding exclusively for yield, as he was 20 years ago. Today it's more about type, as well as butterfat and protein. "The genetics for high yields are there, I guess, but it's feeding that's the key to achieving them. "I'm focussing more on improving cow longevity, and butterfat and protein."

Little and often

Grass silage forms the basis of the herd's ration, with concentrates fed to yield in the parlour and through out-of-parlour feeders.



Big business isn't always best – being smaller can have its benefits

Small, but perfectly formed



From left to right: cows gather close to the out-of-parlour feeders; good quality grass silage is essential; and a Norwegian Red cross heifer calf

"We feed concentrates little and often to avoid digestive upsets and maximise yields." It's a simple system and Trevor's not reliant on a mixer wagon – his right-hand man is a Kramer telehandler. "I've just got my loader and tractor – there's no worrying about a mixer wagon breaking down." Trevor is, not surprisingly, reluctant to change anything that may upset that balance. The eight-abreast parlour, feed storage space and housing, as well as slurry storage capacity are all 'maxed out'. The unit simply couldn't cope with any expansion in cow numbers without considerable investment. "As it is, I may have to double the size of my slurry storage if the new NVZ regulations are introduced. And I'm going to invest in some more cow tracks – that will be money well spent. "But that's the only investment in facilities that I'm likely to be making in the near future. Everything else seems to be running like clockwork."

Rachael Porter