Standardising mobility monitoring across herds brings progress at coal face

Organic group step ahead with mobility work

In a quest to ensure quality milk from cows managed with the highest standards of health and welfare, milk buyer Coombe Farm has implemented a standardised mobility scoring protocol across its organic milk pool producers. Coombe Farm supplies organic milk to Waitrose, sourced from dedicated farms in Somerset, Devon and Dorset.

text **Karen Wright**

Andy King (left) and Dave Frecknall (right)

"We're constantly evolving initiatives that will benefit the cow, producer, milk buyer and the consumer," says Coombe Farm milk pool manager Andy King. "Mobility features strongly on farm because of its knock on effects to the cows' general health, fertility and production.

"Our whole scheme is about transparency, identifying any weaknesses specific to the herd, taking action and following animal progress."

But Andy wasn't prepared to just introduce another box-ticking scheme. "We wanted to access mobility on our farms, set benchmarks and demonstrate improvements on all our herds."

To this end he employed the services of foot trimmer Dave Frecknall through Kingfisher Vet Group, based in Crewkerne, to score all the herds at regular times throughout the year.

Scoring system

The Mobility Monitor recording and analysis scheme, part of NMR's web-based Herd Companion, is an important part of Coombe's initiative. "It's a straight-forward scoring system with sound cows scoring 0 and severely lame cows scoring 3," explains Dave. "It monitors progress for each cow and within the herd. It can also be used to set benchmarks across producer groups."

The aim at Coombe is to reduce cases of lameness and improve mobility. First results showed that 14% of cows scored 2 or 3 and there was a wide range among herds. Andy would like to see this drop to 5% with no 3s and the range in scores to close significantly."

"Mobility Monitor shows the proportion of cows in each band and the weak areas," says Dave.

"This has generated a lot of action and enthusiasm. We have producers who have introduced more routine foot trimming, sent staff on foot trimming courses, added foot baths and purchase equipment to allow them to handle cows better when foot trimming.

'Fantastic results' with Mobility Monitor

Stephen Raymond runs 220 Holstein Friesian cows at Childhay Manor, near Crewkerne, in a share farming agreement. The cows are currently a bit more 'Holstein' than he would like and he hopes to breed more durable cows. That said, he and his herdsman work hard to maintain cow health and to keep on top of any lameness problems.

"But it was getting harder as cow numbers increased and we had some niggling problems," says Stephen. "The Coombe Farm mobility scoring initiative has been a real advantage to us."

An extra pair of highly experienced eyes and great presentation of results

through Mobility Monitor have struck a chord with Stephen.

"Dave scored a number of our cows – more than we would like – as '2' on his first visit. They weren't lame but had the first signs of problems. We investigated further and found early signs of digital dermatitis – a problem we knew we had but were not picking up until it was more obvious.

"The dermatitis incidence was about one in eight cows with a mobility problem and this should be much less."

Wasting no time, Stephen increased the frequency of footbathing from one to

three times a week and added copper sulphate to the formalin mix once a week. "And the results have been fantastic. By the time we had the second mobility score the number of cows showing any sign of digital dermatitis had halved and we expect this to keep falling. We're continuing with all the other preventative measures too."

Stephen keeps all his records on InterHerd and the information is used in the Mobility Monitor. "It was great to see the latest pie chart that shows the proportion of cows in each mobility score. We had a noticeable shift from 2s to 1s and an increase in the 0s."

Eye opener: mobility monitoring can highlight the true level of lameness within a dairy herd.

"The actions haven't necessarily been expensive – there's just been some fine-tuning needed. But the results have been significant in many cases with obvious drops in the proportion of cows scoring 2 or 3.

And even those producers who were sceptical to start with are now fully on board."

Treating cows before problems occur

Mike Tizzard has 1,100 Friesian cows split into four herds, based near Sherborne. Managed on a grass-based system, the cows spend just four months indoors, from mid-November, on sand-bedded cubicles. Average milk yield across the herds is 6,650kg.

"The mobility monitoring has opened our eyes to the real situation on our farm and the levels of lameness that we should consider acceptable," says Mike.

"We didn't have any real problems, but then we didn't know if we were on par with other farms or could improve.

"For example, was it OK to have 10 cows straggling at the back that were not lame but slightly hobbling? The first set of Mobility Monitor results highlighted some cows that needed preventative treatments and we're now using the scoring to treat cows before major problems occur."

Mike now employs the services of a professional foot trimmer to make routine visits in addition to his herdsmen, who have all been on foot trimming courses.

"We're now picking up cows that need attention before problems arise. And we saw an improvement in results at the second mobility scoring," says Mike.

"We'll be able to quantify the knock-on effects on fertility and yield when we have more results. But I have no doubt that improved mobility will improve the whole well-being of our herds.

"While I can't deny that I dragged my feet when Coombe Farms started talking about mobility scoring, I can now see the benefits of this more controlled management.

"It's initiatives like this that, in my mind, put Coombe Farms and Waitrose suppliers ahead of the game in demonstrating to our customers the standards in cow health and welfare that we're achieving," he adds.