

Just how do the UK's most fertile herds maintain reproductive performance?

# Fertility tips from the top

Fertility was a hot topic at the Large Herds Seminar held in Gloucestershire in July. The UK's top herds, in terms of fertility performance, were there and CowManagement looks at two top performers to uncover practices and priorities.

text Ann Hardy

*Fertility factors: spotting heats, timely AI and regular vet checks are just some of the ingredients for reproductive success*

Jay Greenwood, who farms with his brother and nephews at Boseley Mill Farm in Westbury-on-Severn in Gloucestershire, says that good fertility is at the heart of his herd's profitability and is essential for achieving his milk buyer's high seasonality payment.

The family's 300-cow herd must hit peak production between September and December.

They rear heifers to calve by at least two years of age and calve 70% of the herd in July and August.

A cross-section of good fertility figures is attributed in part to routine checks from farm vet, Roger Blowey, and his ability to inspire 'both practically and mentally'.

"That enthusiasm can take you on to greater things," says Jay, whose Boseley herd of Holsteins is one of the top fertility performers in the UK, ranked across several parameters.

Practical vet interventions include: post-calving checks to address issues such as metritis; inspection of any cow not served by 70 days post calving; and pregnancy diagnosis, each fortnight, on anything that's 42 days post service.

"This will pick up any cow that's had an early foetal loss or anything anoestrus," says Jay. "Some cows may have cystic ovaries and some just seem to get stuck in their cycle for no apparent reason.

"These may need a hormonal boost to get them moving again, but the important thing is that they are picked up routinely, every two weeks."

## Well-grown heifers

Achieving an age at first calving of 12 days short of two years is attributed to a combination of good heifer rearing and a 13- to 15-month start to service (depending on birth date), with all heifers said to be well grown for their age.

Milk powder for 'longer than the norm', good grass and 'no period without any growth' are all contributory factors.

"We have less trouble with heifers calving at 22 months than those calving at 27 months, and they also do better during their first lactation, when they will still continue to grow," says Jay.

"It may seem obvious, but the secret is always to serve them," he adds. "We buy some £5 semen straws and are happy to use them liberally if we're not sure if an animal is in heat.

"We will also AI all first-calved heifers and inseminate any cow seen bulling,

even when they are running with the beef bull. I don't think that's widely practised."

Heat detection is mainly by eye (and the use of Kamars on maiden heifers), and a key to success is an interest in the job, according to Jay.

"If you know your job and you are interested you will see them on heat without specifically allocated times," he says.

"Of course, it helps that we are all family labour as owning the business is a big incentive."

## Early identification

With herd production exceeding 10,000 litres, the Greenwood family's herd provides clear evidence that production and fertility are not mutually exclusive. And a culmination of the herd's good fertility, as well as its tight overall management, is a Lifetime Daily Yield of 15.42 litres – one of the best in the business.

Herd manager, Simon Waldron says that the early identification of cows not in calf is a cornerstone of good fertility performance.

And since the 315-strong Iron Pear Tree herd of Holsteins, which he manages for Adrian White at Townsend Farm near Devizes in Wiltshire, has one of the shortest calving intervals (408 days) among the top fertility herds, his policy is evidently paying off.

"We PD from day 31, which I know is really early, but it gives us a head start in looking for negatives," says Simon.

"We can then go on to treat cows with any problems, potentially getting an earlier heat cycle than if we had waited until, say, day 45."

After calving, a voluntary waiting period (VWP) of 42 days is also shorter than many herds, with any cow not seen cycling by this day checked by the vet.

Although the herd calves all year round and produces milk to a level profile, Simon still believes that a long calving interval adds costs and says that maintaining VWP at 42 days gives plenty of time to sort problems out.

Like every top fertility performer identified for the seminar, this one offers a total mixed ration and pays close attention to its milking herd's nutrition.

"But transition cow management is also critical," says Simon. "These cows are on a high-straw diet, but we introduce a portion of the milking cow ration 21 days before calving.

## Tips from the top

Key facts from top fertility herds identified at large herds seminar:

- All top herds were feeding a TMR or grazing plus a TMR
- Pregnancy rate is said to indicate the true fertility of a farm
- Lowering age at first calving was described as a 'money spinner'
- A high lifetime daily yield often went hand in glove with good fertility
- There is no silver bullet!

"This helps to prepare the rumen, maintains appetite, and is also geared towards an easy calving."

Every cow also receives bottled calcium at soon as she has calved and is offered the milking ration on an ad-lib basis from that time.

## Pregnancy rate

Both heat detection and AI have been contracted out, which is more a reflection of tight staff numbers than any underlying problem.

"There's little difference between the herd's performance for fertility before and since we contracted this out, but we began this at the same time as we introduced three-times-a-day milking, which could potentially have pulled our pregnancy rate down," he says.

Pregnancy rate (the percentage of non-pregnant cows that become pregnant during each 21-day period) is considered by Simon to be the single most important parameter by which to judge the herd's fertility and his target of 22% is close to being achieved.

Getting heifers into the herd at the earliest practical age is another key target, just as it is in each of the top fertility performers, with this herd's age at first calving currently averaging 25 months.

With freedom from infectious diseases also considered paramount, testing and vaccination programmes are in place for IBR, leptospirosis and blue tongue, while any John's disease carrier is removed from the herd.

This herd once again demonstrates that production and fertility can go hand in hand, with annual performance of around 11,000 litres and a lifetime daily yield of 15.86 litres. |