

New health codes look set to benefit cows, producers, retailers and consumers

New health code 'no bad thing'

Dairy farming codes of practice have come a long way since the early box-ticking exercises. Many are now evolving, with more proactive protocols that encourage action. Tesco has just 'gone live' with its livestock code of practice for its 700-plus dairy suppliers, and there are reasons to be optimistic that it will benefit the cows, the producer and the industry's image.

text **Karen Wright**

Dorset-based dairy producer and chairman of Tesco's producer supplier group Will Hosford has been involved with rolling out the retailer's new code of practice during the past few months. Now in operation, the code is not prescriptive or system specific. It is results driven and encourages producers to measure their performance and develop their own methods for making improvements where required.

Meeting consumer concerns was the initial reasoning behind the new code. Already proactive in areas of herd performance, Tesco identified a number of issues from a recent consumer survey on the ethics of their milk purchases.

Through concentrating on the key areas, the code will highlight any issues and encourage necessary improvements.

"Tesco has tried to keep the code simple, but inevitably it is requiring more recording on farm but nothing too onerous," says Will. "We are being asked for additional information, such as the number of thin cows with a condition score of 1 or less and the number of dirty cows. Industry guidelines have been provided for producers to follow." Antibiotic use of first, second and third generation products is also on

the recording list. All information can be completed on line through a dedicated website or manually.

Back in 2007, Tesco highlighted the need to address lameness issues in the dairy herd and, to some extent, it led the industry in developing a monitoring system. Since that time all Tesco producers have been mobility scoring and now recognise the benefits of carrying this out routinely. "This is good for the cow and the producer, as well as consumers who, from research findings, do care that the cows that produce their milk are sound and fit. If we have the records we can stand by any claims."

More scope

The data, collected bimonthly through the code of practice, is managed on a bespoke database that also pulls in records from the herd's milk recording organisation. Trends and benchmarks will emerge from this data and these will be shared with the group.

This means that the group – and individual herds identified through their own number – can monitor performance. "Producers can see where they 'sit' compared with others and where they could make improvements." Leading on from this, Will can see that the database information will help steer Tesco Sustainable Dairy Group (TSDG) activities. "Workshops and meetings for



Will Hosford: "Data from code of practice will show producers where they 'sit' compared with others"

suppliers can be targeted to specific areas where there's most scope for improvement. It's easy to have a bandwagon for action but it might not be what's needed. With hard evidence from herd monitoring it will be easier to see where most benefit can be gained." Will is also keen that as a group – and as

an industry – more is done to promote home-produced milk and dairy products and that claims can be supported. "For a long time I have wanted to see more done on promoting our milk and its first-class production systems but you need the evidence to back this up. The sort of data that this code will collect, and that the Tesco Sustainable Dairy Group database will hold, should support any claims. I believe this will really strengthen our position."

Back home

So has the introduction of the code made a difference in the 340-cow herd at Bramblecombe, situated on chalky grassland between Blanford and Dorchester.

"Fit healthy cows have always been a priority here," says Will, who runs the herd with his wife Carol, and herd manager Gary. "We dabbled with the big

Holstein cows but they don't suit our grass-based system and our wish to extend the grazing season.

"Instead we have turned to New Zealand Friesian genetics from LIC. These cows are strong, have plenty of capacity for forage and are easier to manage."

The current average yield is 8,000 litres off a TMR in winter, with grazed grass from late February to early November.

"We milk record with NMR, use InterHerd and have joined their John's scheme. But the new code of practice has meant more detailed recording of antibiotics for us and it is making me question their use, particularly the third-generation products."

And looking ahead, Will hopes that he'll have some useful benchmarks from the collective data in 2012. "There will be reasons why we're better in some areas and not so good in others, but at least it will raise questions and identify where

there is scope for improvement – and I'm sure there will be. I can only see the efficiency of our business improving alongside our cow health and welfare."

Thanks to the payment structure, the cost of data gathering and any additional 'third party' monitoring, like John's testing, is paid for through the Tesco price tracker.

"I think the Tesco livestock code of practice is fairly similar to other schemes," adds Will. "Producers, advisers and vets have been involved to make sure the schemes are manageable and effective in improving animal health and welfare."

"There's often less time to spend on individual cow management so there's got to be a system in place that encourages routine checking of the key aspects of herd health, provides results and generate the right actions to improve performance." |



Cows at Bramblecombe: new code of practice means more health recording but all for a good cause and nothing too onerous