Dutch cattle breeding organisation takes on British interest

Breeding – with additional benefits

The UK cattle breeding industry is constantly evolving and this year has already seen a significant development, with Dutch organisation CRV taking over UK-based semen supplier Avoncroft. So what does this mean for UK producers?

text **Rachael Porter**

An extensive genetic portfolio for UK producers, as well as support systems including SireMatch and fertility advice. That's just the start of what the newly formed CRV Avoncroft can offer its UK customers.

"The focus on fertility and other production and longevity traits, aside from milk yield, will also continue apace and, in terms of selection ease, may even surpass what's been available in the UK before," says CRV's Paul Vriesekoop.

He adds that CRV Avoncroft offers sires from two definite categories – Holstein bulls and those bred specifically for grass-based extensive systems. And both groups include naturally polled, sexed semen, as well as genomic sires.

Premium milk, which has high levels of fat and protein, is increasingly being sought after by milk buyers for use in the production of cheese, butter, yogurt and other processed dairy products. "Having high levels of fat and protein in your milk can result in extra milk revenues, on top of the premiums already received for meeting standards for cleanliness or somatic cell count," adds the company's Holstein specialist David Matthews. "We can offer producers genetics that are proven to help produce high component milk."

"With the backing of CRV, we can offer customers a more diverse portfolio that focuses on efficiencies in lifetime production, fertility, health, nutrition and decreased inbreeding.

"CRV is also the only company in the world that has its own genomic reference population, which allows it to innovatively manage and select for specific traits in its testing programme, like hoof health and polled breeding. Polled genetics are becoming more interesting for safety, welfare and economic reasons with genomic selection increasing the number and high level of many young polled bulls," adds Mr Matthews.

Efficient production

The Dutch organisation also recently launched the 'Better Life Health Index' and the 'Better Life Efficiency Index' and this brings a dynamic new set of tools to the market. Developed to support the growing number of producers who are concerned about wanting to breed healthy and long lasting cows, these indices help producers prioritise their breeding goals in terms of efficient production and healthier cows.

Genomics is another area of expertise that the take over will bring a step closer to UK producers. "Genomic data was initially used to help 'scan' larger numbers of young bulls to bring to the market much earlier than the traditional daughter-proven sire testing programmes," explains Mr Ward, the general manager of CRV Avoncroft.

"The reliability of such data is consistently improving, but the risk needs to be balanced by using a team of bulls. The future for genomics looks exciting. As reliability increases and the cost comes down it will become practical to chip female stock at birth. This will not only allow parent verification but targeted breeding decisions and screening for genetic abnormalities.

"Beyond this, there is already talk of nutrigenomics, which enables diets to be formulated to suit specific animals, as well as 'genomic medicines' and even bTB resistance. So watch this space," he says.

"UK – and indeed many global – breeding programmes have focused heavily on production for many decades. But during the past decade best breeding practice has been redefined because producers and breeders alike have recognised that this sole focus came at a price – namely fertility and profit," says CRV Avoncroft's general manager Barry Ward.

"Our national calving index is now up to around 420 days. DairyCo says that every day above 400 days is costing £5 per day in lost production. Ask any producer what their main problems are – apart from the weather and the Government – and fertility will always be near the top."

He adds that estimates are that almost 10% of producers class their production system as 'grass-based' now and that the vast majority of these herds are

Grazing trend: almost 10% of producers class their system as 'grass-based' now

block calving. "So fertility is the key to success for these producers. The more they can calve in the first six weeks of their block, the more profit they will generate."

Cost benefits

"The key to profit is to know your cost of production and the actual cost of your cows' diet," he says, adding that grass costs approximately 5p/kg DM, silage between 10p and 12p/kg DM, and concentrates and blends costs can vary upwards from 20p/kg DM.

"New Zealand and Irish research has shown that profit in grass-based dairy systems is driven by stocking rate – the higher the stocking rate the higher the profit. Some of the top UK grass-based herds are achieving stocking rates of nearly four cows per hectare."

Mr Ward says that there are two important aspects to achieving this: "Firstly, grass needs to be measured consistently – you can't manage what you don't measure. And, secondly, you need the right cow."

Grass based producers with 'white water' contracts have generally used New Zealand Holstein-Friesians, typically producing between 5,000 and 5,500 litres per cow, using between 500kg and 1,000kg of concentrate on a spring block calving system.

An autumn block calving herd will be producing between 6,500 and 7,000 litres per cow, feeding between 1,000kg and 1,500kg of concentrate.

"But with the noticeable shift in the market and milk companies offering more constituent-based contracts, many producers are now finding the cross-bred cow suits their system better," says Mr Ward.

Fertility focus

Focussing on fertility has the potential to increase profits in all UK dairy systems, not just grass-based ones.

Due to the uncertainty of feed costs, and the expected fluctuations in the milk price, more producers are looking to increase milk from forage. "And, with the national average sitting at around 2,500 litres per cow, there is certainly room for improvement and a subsequent increase in profit," says Mr Ward.

The introduction of the CRV Ambreed's products to the UK market, available through CRV Avoncroft means that producers can choose Holstein-type bulls that have the fertility characteristics necessary for a New Zealand-style system – be it grass only or one that involves a high level of added feed. These sires are also capable of transmitting high volumes of milk.

As for breeding indexes, the updating of the £PLI and the new £SCI (spring calving index) are long overdue, according to Mr Ward. "The new £PLI will reduce the emphasis on production by about a third and have higher weightings for fertility, lifespan and udder health.

"Two new traits that will be included are calving ease, which aims to help producers breed a more easy-care cow, and a cost of maintenance, which will reflect the better profitability of the medium-sized cow.

The new £SCI has an increased emphasis on protein (13.8%), fertility (21.8%) and maintenance (16.2%) and will have the advantage, compared to the £PLI, of being an 'across breed' index. So it will enable producers to compare bulls from different breeds.

"The new £PLI and £SCI indexes will perfectly suit the CRV Avoncroft approach to the market," adds Mr Matthews. |