

Assess the basics on your unit to maximise productivity and profitability

# Key data aids planning



With low milk prices looking set to stay well into 2016, now is the time for producers to plan their strategy for the winter months and to ensure that they maximise herd performance. We spoke to a dairy nutritionist and producer to find out more.

text **Lauren Chambers**

**T**his autumn, feed manufacturer ForFarmers launched an assessment scheme for producers that looks at basic finances, feed costs, utilisation and forage availability on a dairy unit.

The assessment, known as the Dairy Triple F Assessment Scheme, allows producers to work alongside the feed supplier to look at performance, to identify any limiting factors that may

reduce productivity and profitability, and to agree objectives for the winter months.

## **Milk quality**

The assessment gathers information in a simple paper-based system and provides data on feed rate, feed costs and feed costs as a percentage of milk income. This data is used to help producers to make more informed feeding decisions and it is also used to benchmark the unit against businesses of a similar size to allow producers to see how they are performing and identify any areas that can be corrected before the winter feed

regime is set. The scheme is now well underway and producers up and down the country are benefiting from taking part.

One business that has found the assessment useful is a father-and-son partnership run by Harry and Harry Gregory. The Gregorys manage Normanton Farm, near Telford in Shropshire, and the unit has been steadily expanding herd numbers since the family first bought the farm eight years ago.

Despite the challenging milk price, the unit is doing well and still expanding. With new cubicle housing being used for the first time this winter, more space has been created to enable further growth of the herd between now and February 2016. The unit's 180-cow herd is averaging 9,200 litres. As suppliers to cheese maker Belton quality is important and butterfat averages 4.16% and protein is 3.44%.

### Feed costs

"Harry and Harry run an efficient unit," explains their ForFarmers nutritionist Roger Marley, who has been working with the family since they came to the area. "They already pay close attention to dairy costings and we review these together regularly. But as all producers know, every year is different on a dairy unit. So it's important to understand performance while you can still make a difference to decisions for the winter, when feed costs typically rise. The assessment provides a good opportunity to do just this."

The unit comprises of 125 hectares of owned land, plus a further 50 hectares



Harry and Harry Gregory: "We're splitting the herd into two groups"



Roger Marley: "It's vital to know exactly how your dairy herd is performing"

of rented ground. The Gregorys grow cereals (winter barley and winter wheat), maize and fodder beet, all of which is used on farm.

The unit rears its own heifers and some have also been bought in to help speed up herd expansion. Calving takes place for nine months of the year, with a break between March and May.

This system helps to manage milk production through the 'spring flush' and helps the unit maintain a level production profile. It does mean that some heifers are slightly later getting into calf than the unit's 24-month target – having to be held back to 27 months to fit in with the calving pattern. "This is an area we are looking to focus on," explains Harry junior. "Our calving index of 410 days looks high due our calving pattern and we want to reduce it."

### Herd assessment

The unit took part in a Dairy Triple F Assessment in mid October (see Table 1). For feed costs and feed costs as a percentage of milk income, the Gregorys are in the top 25% of herds producing

more than 9,000 litres. "We try to grow as much feed as we can to help keep bought-in feed costs as low as possible," says Harry senior.

This strategy is working well with the unit's concentrate feed costs just 6.75ppl, which is well below the 7.56ppl average. The assessment suggests that the unit's feed rate is on the high side for a 9,000-litre herd, and this is an area where savings could potentially be made.

While there is plenty of housing to meet the Gregorys' plans to expand the herd to 200 milkers, the bottleneck will be the unit's collecting yard. After analysing the assessment results with Roger, the pair are considering splitting the herd into two groups according to yield – a group of 100 'highs' and a group of 60 'lows'. "This will help to manage the pressure on the collecting yard and groups will remain largely the same throughout their lactation so there will be limited movement of cows between the groups.

"This system also means that the yield of the high group can be increased by balancing the ration using the unit's out-of-parlour feeders, and savings can be made by not overfeeding the lows," adds Roger.

### Protein balance

The high yielders' diet comprises: 25kg grass silage, 15kg maize silage, 0.75kg straw, 10kg fodder beet, 3kg wheat, 3kg rape/soya, 1.5kg SBP/soya hulls, and 0.1kg urea. Concentrate is fed to yield, via out-of-parlour feeders, to maintain the required protein balance.

"The Triple F assessment was a good opportunity to perform an MOT on the unit," concludes Harry senior. "We had a good idea of where we were from the regular costings that we do, but seeing where we are compared to other units is a good exercise and it's always good to get a different viewpoint on what we can do to improve." |

Table 1: Normanton Farm assessment results (October 2015)

measure	Normanton Farm assessment results	benchmark figures (for 9,000 litre + herds)
feed rate (kg/litre)	0.38	0.34 (average)
feed costs (ppl)	6.75	7.56 (top 25%)
feed costs as % of milk income	28	27 (top 25%)
calving interval (days)	410	
<b>forage stocks</b>		
tonnes grass silage	1,881	
tonnes maize silage	810	
tonnes fodder beet	390	
ration review	good energy density available, important to balance protein	
key unit objectives	increase milk yield to 9,600 maintain good milk quality increase herd size to 200 by February 2016	