


Theo van Zuijlen

Dutch producer Theo van Zuijlen manages his unit, in Abcoude, with help from his wife Tineke and his father Ab. The family carries out all the work on the farm.



The Netherlands

Herd size:	200 cows
Young stock:	110 head
Rolling herd average:	8,300kg of milk, at 4.37% butterfat and 3.47% protein
Land use:	91 hectares of grassland

No plans for expansion – just consolidation

Fertility and efficiency

Theo van Zuijlen has no plans to increase cow numbers. He sees plenty of opportunities to improve efficiency within the existing scale of his Dutch enterprise. Keeping fewer young stock and producing more milk per cow are focus of his plan. And good fertility is key to the successful implementation of this strategy.

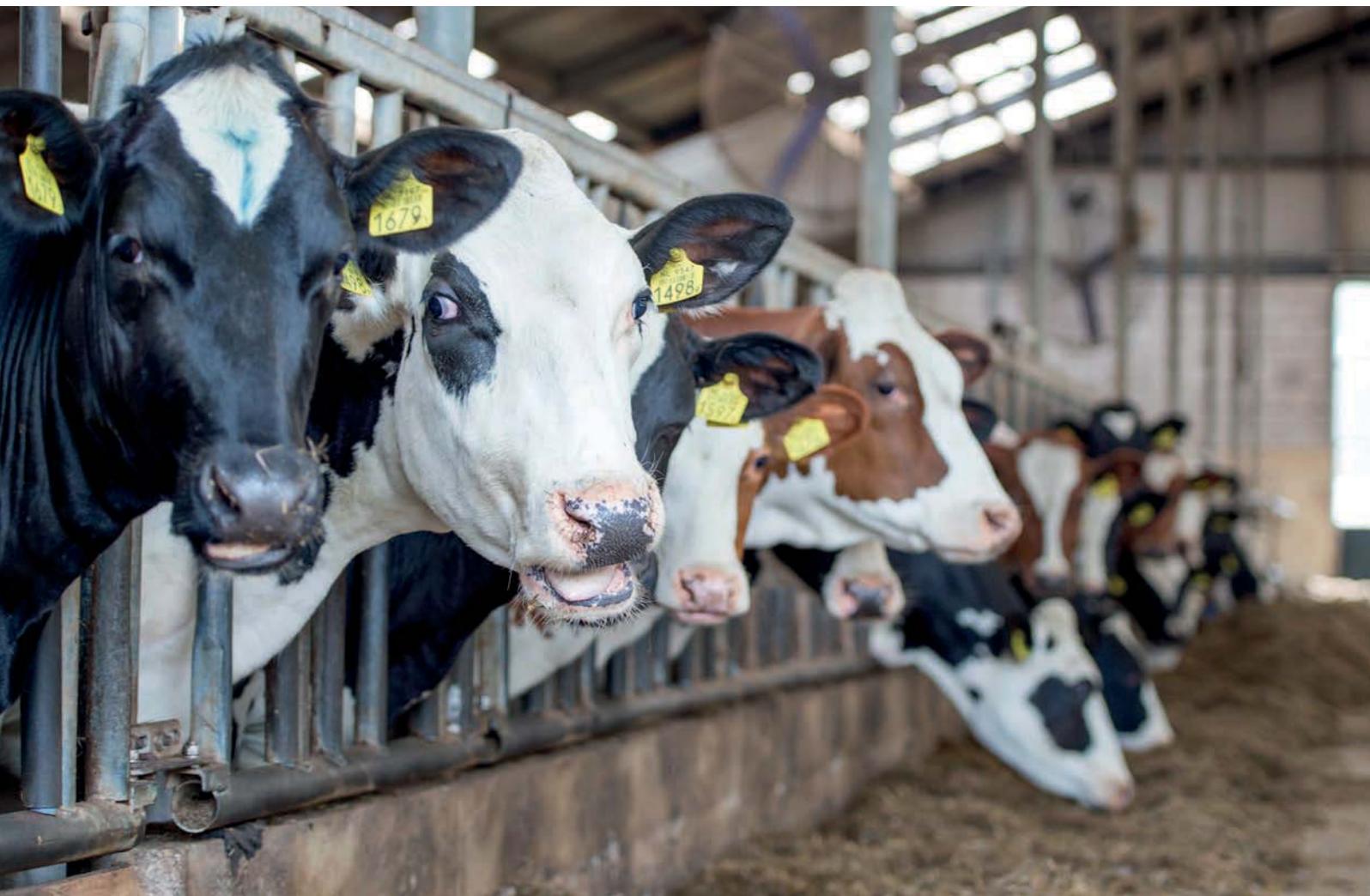
text **Wichert Koopman**

It is a traditional Dutch scene and idyllic, with red-and-white and black-and-white cows, a green meadow and the church towers of Abcoude. Even

producer Theo van Zuijlen takes time to enjoy the sight of his grazing herd. But, that said, he still looks at his grazing herd primarily from a business point of

view. “Perhaps keeping cows inside all year round is easier, but I can make more money by turning them out onto pasture,” he says, with sober certainty.

Good nutrition: balanced feeding allows Theo van Zuijlen to tap into his herd's genetic potential





Building investment: cow housing has been expanded to accommodate the growing herd

“I am convinced that using as much fresh grass as possible through grazing is the cheapest way to produce milk.”

By preference, Theo lets the cows graze, but he also has machinery at hand for ‘cut and carry’ if it’s needed. “It is sometimes pretty difficult to put 180-cow herd out to graze. If it is too wet, I simply keep them in for a few days and bring the grass to the cows. I have a front mounted mower and a forage trailer with eight wide wheels.” In very early spring and late autumn, Theo also uses his machinery to extend the grazing season for as long as possible.

Scale accomplished

He says that efficiency improvement is an important focal point when making management choices and he wants to use his labour and capital as effectively as possible. He strives for efficient conversion of forage into milk. With modern equipment on his unit, he can implement tasks quickly, and he has made a conscious choice to grow only grass. His land is best suited to it and it means that he can utilise his machinery to the maximum. He has arranged agreements for buying in grain, as well as manure disposal.

The cubicle shed layout reveals that it has been extended during the past few years, in stages. The most recent (and largest) expansion was in 2008, when the old herringbone milking parlour was also replaced with a 24-unit rotary. As a result of strategic considerations – the number of cows in the past could simply determine the unit’s future scale – Theo chose to expand his herd as quickly as possible with home-bred

replacements. To avoid leasing milk quota, or paying a super levy, he stopped expansion during recent years.

Theo believes that his herd size, of about 200 milking and in-calf cows, is the optimum for his unit for the time being. Business developments during the next few years will be concentrated on buying land, to make the farm less intensive once again.

More milk

Theo sees plenty of opportunities to improve efficiency within the current farm scale. He is striving to increase average yields up to 9,500kg per year. “The cows certainly have the genetic potential for that,” he says. “By working in a more production focused way, it should be possible to push up yields.”

Theo also thinks that he can realise a significant production increase through fine tuning herd management.

An important step that he wants to take in the short term is to reduce the number of young stock he is rearing. “Until now, I have always kept plenty of young stock, to allow room for expansion,” he says. He always kept at least 130 young stock on his unit, but now that number is already down to 110 and he wants to reduce it further to a maximum of 100.

“Then, with a replacement percentage of 25% and calving age at 24 months, I will have enough livestock to maintain my herd and stick closely to my culling policy,” he says.

To force himself to keep fewer heifer calves, Theo has drastically overhauled his AI policy. All the yearlings are inseminated with sexed semen, as are

the cows that according to SireMatch – CRV’s mating program – are best suited for the breeding goals on a grass-based unit.

“The remaining cows – up to 80% of the herd – are crossed with semen from a Belgian Blue. The higher price for the resulting calves earns us more than enough to cover the higher cost of the sexed semen,” he adds. “And in this way we achieve quicker genetic improvement, because we only use our best animals for breeding.”

Fertility figures

Good fertility is an important precondition for realising his goal of higher production per cow. “Until recently, I had to cull a lot of cows because they failed to get back in calf. If I can reduce that loss, the average age of the herd will increase along with average milk production. And shortening the calving interval will lead directly to increased production per cow per day.”

Theo uses the Ovalert activity measurements system. As well as detecting heat expression, the system is able to automatically pick up signals that tells him about each animal’s health and welfare. With the Ovalert SireMatch integration, the system can give mating advice when a cow has to be inseminated.

The fertility figures have improved significantly during recent months. The expected calving interval has shortened from 450 to 425. “I am striving to achieve a calving interval of fewer than 400 days, within a year,” says Theo. “If we continue like this, we will certainly succeed.” |