

What are the pros and cons of

Once-a-day co

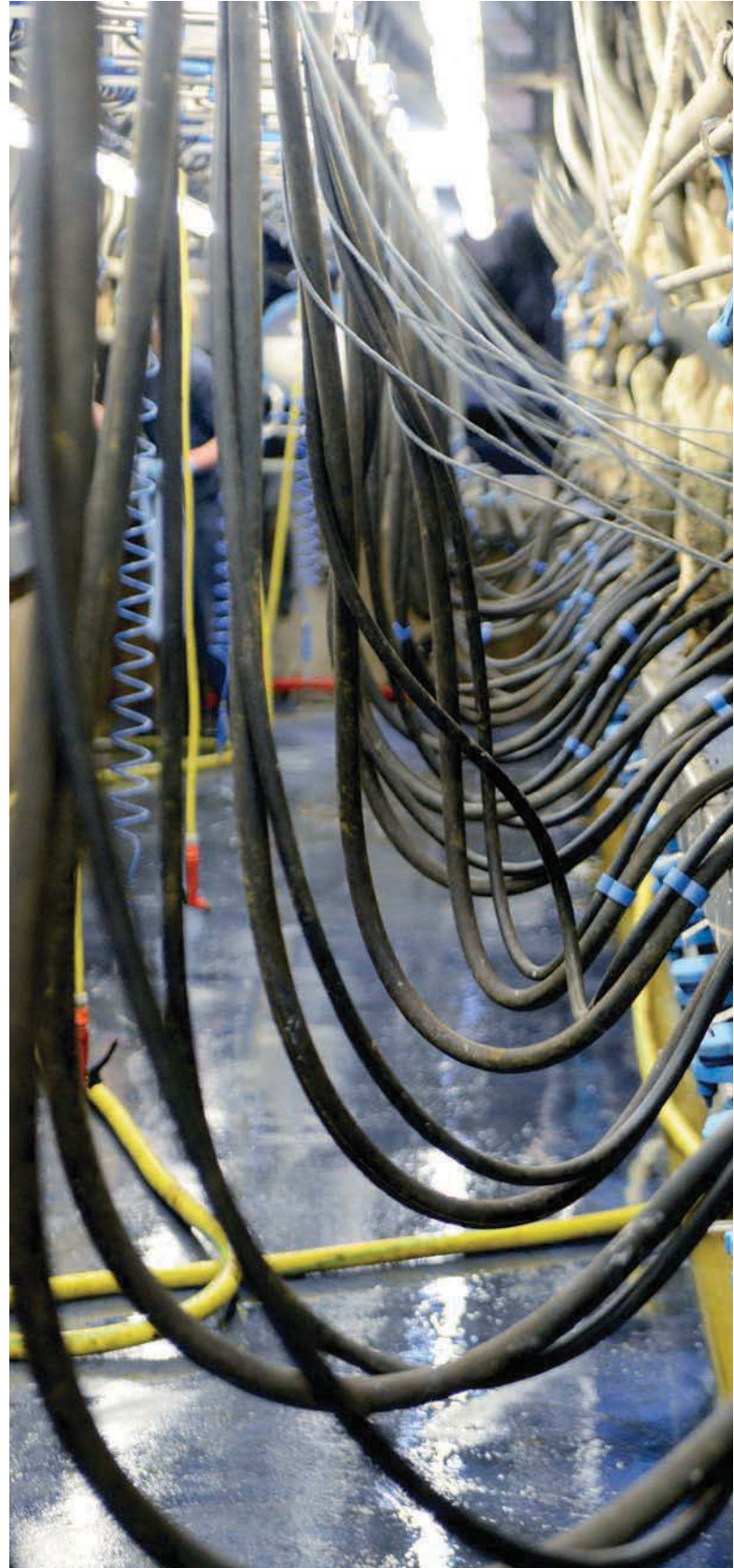
More and more producers are switching to once-a-day milking in a bid to drive down production costs. But could it be an option for your herd and set up? We spoke to two producers and a nutritionist to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

The switch to once-a-day milking was a no brainer for Staffordshire-based producer Giles Bristol. That's not to say that he made the change without crunching a lot of numbers and doing his homework. Far from it. But his system, his cows and his milk contract – supplying cheese producer Joseph Heller with a bonus for solids and unseasonal production – all meant that once-a-day milking was a cost-saving option that he couldn't afford to ignore.

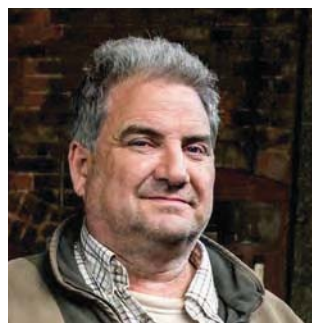
Giles, and his wife Emily, run a 100-cow Jersey New Zealand Friesian-cross herd on a 24-hectare tenancy. The herd is block calved late in the summer – calving starts on August 1 for nine weeks. “So we're making the most of the late summer flush of grass,” says Giles. “Cows are then housed in November, after peak yields have been reached and concentrate feeding is kept to a minimum throughout the winter. It's a system that's working well with the current low milk price, but we can also feed more concentrate and milk twice a day when the price is better.” The herd's twice-a-day rolling average yield is 5,100 litres at 4.6% butterfat and 3.6% protein. This year, Giles began

Mary-Jane Robinson: “SCC must be well under control before considering a switch”



milking cows just once each day?

ould be the way



Ian Sharman: "It works for our cows, our system and our set up"



Giles Bristol: "Flexibility is key to maximising our bottom line"

milking once a day on April 1 – a little earlier than he did last time he made the switch in 2014, which was on May 1. "We had a cold spring this year, so grass growth was slow at the beginning of the season and, due to the low milk price, it was hard to justify extra concentrate feeding. So we made the strategic decisions to drop to once-a-day milking a little earlier than planned," he says, adding that that's what's so good about his set up – it's flexible.

Flexible system

"In a good year, such as 2015, when milk price was better but falling, we decided to keep milking twice a day to make the best of the price. When prices are lower, we can cut right back and save on concentrate and milking costs without comprising cow health, fertility or our bottom line. Our cows and management system allow us to do that." Before this year's switch to milking just once at 6.30am each morning, the herd's milk solids were 4.8% butterfat and 3.6% protein. In May, these figures were up to 5.2% butterfat and 4.0% protein. "And that's with no concentrates fed. We dropped from 0.12kg per litre to zero," says Giles.

Yes, there is a drop in yield. Daily yields fell from 13.5 litres to an average of 11 litres: "But with solids up by between 9.5% and 10%, the milk cheque is pretty static."

Giles says that the only downside has been an increase in the herd's average somatic cell count. "In 2014, when we made the switch to once a day, SCC spiked and then dropped back to its previous level. This time it's spiked and remained at around 300,000 cells/ml, rather than the more typical 180,000 cells/ml. Some of this will be to do with the cows'



stage of lactation and we have dried off some of the worst offenders a little earlier than usual. Mastitis cases have remained static, so it's not all bad. And we're just riding it out." Despite this blip, Giles is confident that once-a-day milking is the way to go for his herd. "I like the flexibility it gives to our system. We can pull back when we need to and push when milk price is better. We're more able to weather any volatility." Giles and Emily are in the process of moving their herd to another tenanted unit in Stoke on Trent. "It's a longer-term tenancy and a slightly larger unit. We're looking to push cow numbers up a little, but everything else will stay the same. The system we've adopted is working well here and it will work well there too. In times of pressure, it's all about keeping fixed costs as low as possible. And I think we're managing to do that pretty well. I'm certainly confident about our future in the industry."

Organic conversion

Ian Sharman, who runs his 360-cow Montbeliarde herd near Southwell in Nottinghamshire, is another once-a-day convert. "It was my son Tom's idea. We talked about it for a while before we actually took the plunge," he says. "It's vital to do your homework and make sure it'll benefit your business, rather than cause problems." The falling milk price meant that the business, which he manages in partnership with his wife Steph and son Tom, was struggling to cover the high cost of labour. The herd is also in the process of converting to organic, so the price of non-GM feeds and other 'organic' inputs was also putting some financial strain on the herd – particularly as it is not yet realising an organic premium for its milk.

Again, the type of cow being milked and the solids contract that the business has with Arla were pivotal to the decision to take the once-a-day route – and its success.

"We cut back on concentrate feeding – cows are fed just 200kg of concentrates per year, rather than 1.75 tonnes. And average yields fell from 7,200 litres to 4,200 litres," says Ian, who began once-a-day milking six months ago. "But butterfat is up from 3.7% to 4.2% and protein from 3.4% to 3.7%, so what we lose in milk yield we gain in solids.

"And our breed means that the cows don't milk off their back – if we don't feed them, they produce less milk. So there's been no compromise in terms of health or fertility," adds Ian. "We're happy with our results. It's not about milk yield – we're looking at total profit and what's left at the bottom of the balance sheet. And that's certainly looking a lot better now." And this is despite

a spike in somatic cell count, as also experienced by the Bristol's herd. "That's been the only issue so far – SCC has gone up to around 300,000 cells/ml. So that's something we're working on at improving at the moment."

The switch has freed up some time to tackle that issue – as well as other areas of management. "That's another benefit of moving to once a day. We milk at 5.30am each day and the rest of the day is clear to focus on cow management – be that health, fertility or any other issues." And with organic conversion set to be complete on January 1, 2017, there is plenty that Ian and Tom need to be focusing on. "Reducing our costs and freeing up time for herd management means that we can see some light at the end of the tunnel," adds Ian.

Thompsons' nutritionist Mary-Jane Robinson says that although once-a-day milking is advantageous on some low-yielding dairy units, she advises caution before making the switch.

Cow type

"For some units, once a day is the way to go, but the type of cow being milked and the management system – plus the milk-buyer contract – have to suit this approach," she stresses.

"With a move to once-a-day milking reducing yield per cow by between 15% and 20%, the decision must be based on a thorough cost-benefit basis."

Mary-Jane works with, predominantly, high yielding herds: "And they're managed on intensive systems, some housed all year round and milked with robotic systems. So clearly once-a-day just doesn't come into it. "Those high-yielding herds that are milked conventionally would be unwise to switch to once a day, particularly those comprising high genetic merit Holstein cows, which have a strong will to milk even when concentrate feed rates are lowered. That would pave the way to a myriad of production diseases and fertility issues."

She adds that milk leakage can also be a problem in high yielding cows. "Udder conformation can be compromised by the weight of the milk – the udder could, potentially, collapse. So genetics, suited to more flexible milking routines, are important," she says.

Another 'side effect' often seen in once-a-day milked herds is an increase in SCC and mastitis. "The longer interval between milkings can allow infection to become established and levels of inflammation may increase. So herds really do need to have SCC well under control before considering a move to once-a-day milking," she says. |