



Computerised mating program takes guesswork out of dairy breeding

Find your perfect match

Key breeding goals are fine-tuned using the SireMatch computerised mating program, so producers can select the best sires to use on individual cows and heifers. We spoke to a breeding specialist and a producer to find out how it works.

text **Rachael Porter**

The ‘perfect’ herd is something that all producers strive for. But no two dairy herds, systems or businesses are the same. So, what’s perfect for one may not be for another.

CRV’s computer mating service SireMatch is all about creating that perfect herd. It achieves this by using data-backed facts and marrying them with the needs of the particular system or a producer’s own requirements, determined from the breeding goals for the herd.

“This isn’t a ‘one size fits all’ system,” says breeding consultant Alan Mason. “Quite the contrary. SireMatch offers producers a tailored approach to progressing their herd’s breeding plans. And the essential starting point is to determine a herd’s breeding goals.

Four standard breeding goals – components, efficiency, health and milk – are available in SireMatch to help producers with their choice of direction, or they can customise these goals. “This is where I, and my breeding consultant colleagues, come in,” adds Alan. “We will look at the system, determine the producer’s needs and also look at the

current herd of cow, and go from there. We’ll look at these standard goals and we can adapt them in line with our findings, the herd’s data and our discussions.”

SireMatch has proved itself in the field. “We’ve got herds that have taken advantage of the program, combined with our advice and knowledge, to breed high performance, durable and trouble-free cows.”

Uniform herd

Four years into using SireMatch, and father-and-son team Anthony and Ethan Sawrey can already see a difference in their 160-cow pedigree Weint dairy herd. They say that they are certainly closer to milking their ‘perfect’ herd. Based near Ulverston, in Cumbria, the pair, who farm in partnership with Anthony’s parents Tony and Jean, adopted the sire mating program after Ethan visited herds that were using it in The Netherlands.

“I was impressed with what I saw – long lines of good, uniform cows. I compared these with our cows, which were starting to get a little too tall and ‘extreme’. We



Ethan Sawrey: “We set breeding targets for our herd and the program does the rest”

knew we had to correct this and, after my trip to Holland, I decided that the answer may lie in using SireMatch.”

So, working closely with Alan Mason, Ethan and Anthony outlined their breeding goals. “This highlighted five bulls that we matched, using SireMatch, to individual cows,” says Ethan. “Every six months we update the sires we’re using, usually changing two or three. One of our aims is to get away from milking a ‘collection’ of cows and back to milking a ‘herd’ of cows,” he adds.

The herd, which currently averages 9,000 litres at 4.3% butterfat and 3.3% protein with a somatic cell count of 130,000 cells/ml, calves all year round, to produce a level milk supply. The unit is also home to 100 dairy followers and 100 head of beef cattle – a mixture of Fleckvieh and Aberdeen Angus crosses from the dairy herd.

Since the introduction of SireMatch, Ethan and his father have noticed a marked difference in the heifers coming into the herd. With many first-crop



daughters by Kodak, Atlantic and Cricket already milking, it's already starting to look more like the 'uniform' herd. "We're wanting to use sires that will breed stronger and shorter Holsteins. We're reducing the height of the cows and leveling out the herd. I think a herd of uniform cows will be easier to manage and to milk. The herds I saw in The Netherlands comprised cows that looked identical, except for their coat markings, and that's what I want to see here."

Udders, feet and legs and stature are high on their sire wish-list. "We also want to use bulls that are plus on milk, fat and protein yield, as well as fertility, but minus on somatic cell count," says Ethan. "For us it's about producing a balanced cow and avoiding extremes. Dutch bloodlines and SireMatch are helping us achieve this." The performance of second calvers, which include some Rocky and Kodak

daughters, is encouraging. And heifers by Startrek and Apina Norman that are about to calve look promising. "SireMatch has helped us 'correct' our matings and it has helped to take some of the stress and guesswork out of breeding the type of cows that we want to milk. We have a cow – and a herd – in mind, and the program is a vital tool in helping us to best match individual cows to suitable sires in order to breed this herd of cows." |

SireMatch's four standard breeding goals

Components

Many producers are looking for plenty of milk with a high fat and protein yield. They also want to milk cows of average size, with good udders and robust feet and legs. "This guarantees a long, durable life," says breeding consultant Alan Mason. "With good fertility, as well as hoof and udder health, these cows can handle high component production and are easy to manage."

Milk

There's plenty of milk to be had if breeding and management ensure that the cow has everything she needs to enjoy a long and productive herd life. "This goal selects for cows with excellent milk production, as well as average frames and stature, solid udders and robust legs."

Efficiency

This is high on producers' list of priorities. "They want to milk cows that can easily convert feed into milk and offer high lifetime production, including a high yield of milk protein, as well as excellent longevity. Power, body depth and width give cows the capacity for a high feed intake, so they can produce

plenty of milk without compromising body condition. Good locomotion also plays an important role." He adds that average stature is a must if a high proportion of feed intake is to be used for milk production. Good milking speed, fertility and hoof and udder health mean that the cows will produce milk effortlessly and are easy to manage.

Health

This comes hand-in-hand with easy-to-manage cows. "You can't have one without the other," says Alan. "Low somatic cell counts, a lower incidence of mastitis, and fewer lameness issues, such as digital dermatitis, are essential. Fertility is also important – cows need to get in calf easily, and we want few calving issues."

Four standard breeding goals are available

