

‘Records-driven’ dairy

Good grass-based dairy units are managed to the blade of grass. But when it comes to individual cow management, things can be a bit ‘slack’. Not so on one Anglesey-based dairy unit, which started milk recording in spring 2019.

TEXT KAREN WRIGHT

Gethin Roberts is a partner in owner Richard Rogers’ dairy businesses. Two herds – totalling 610 New Zealand crossbred cows – are run independently but follow the same model. Forage production and young stock rearing takes place on a third unit. All are within 1.5 miles of each other. Both milking units, Tre Ifan and Bodrida, were beef and sheep units and converted to grass-based dairy units during the past five years – starting with the 90-hectare unit at Tre Ifan in 2015. Milk-from-grass targets are high with cows grazing for nine months of the year, depending on the weather. “We have reseeded about 65% of the land,” says Gethin, who wants to build on the current two thirds of milk that’s produced from home-grown forage. Cows calve in a 10-week period, starting on February 7, and, if

conditions are good, they are then turned out to graze. “But we have a fairly flexible system when it comes to grazing. A few wet days can lead to poaching and affect grass growth for months, so we bring cows into cubicles and yards, and keep them off the leys.”

Dry matter target

With an average of 990mm of rain a year and a good mix of soils, they can achieve between four and 4.6 cows per hectare at Tre Ifan and at Bodrida. “And we’re targeting 16 tonnes of dry matter per hectare as we reseed more of the grassland.”

The average is currently between 14 and 15 tonnes of dry matter per hectare, but they are reseeding about 15% of the leys a year with high sugar Aber varieties. The management of the grassland and performance of



cows earned them the title of BGS Grassland Farmer of the Year in 2018.

Monitoring grass growth weekly and recording the details on AgriNet means that grassland is managed very precisely and Gethin is confident that this helps them reap the potential of the grazing. It's a data-led system and one that he's 'copying' in managing his cows as individuals rather than a herd, thanks to the recently introduced milk recording service.

They use NMR four times a year: mid-April, early June, the end of August, and mid-November.

Efficient cows

"We started milk recording so we could pick out the best cows to breed from," says Gethin, who admits that he's ultimately looking for the most efficient cows. "These might not be the highest production cows, but those that produce the milk volume and solids we need, are healthy and fertile, and convert forage into plenty of milk. There are many factors to consider."

Eventually he'd like to link body weight to his milk records. "For example, a smaller cow at 450kg body weight and producing the same milk as one weighing 550kg is likely to be more efficient and more profitable for us."

But he's happy with his first sets of milk records, which have enabled him and his team of three staff to set breeding criteria based on accurate data.

The business supplies South Caernarvon Creamery from one herd and Yew Tree from the other. "Both buyers want milk solids, but we also need the litres to carry those solids. So I'm looking at each cow's yield, as well as weight of fat and protein."

Breeding benchmarks

If cows are averaging 25kg a day, he sets a 20% lower benchmark and doesn't breed any cow to a dairy sire yielding below 21kg a day, or below 1.6kg of fat and protein. "I also don't breed lame cows or any with cell counts above 200,000 cells/ml to a dairy sire."

Gethin also admits that the disease testing options through NMR were a key attraction, particularly Johne's screening. "Our buyers will want evidence of our disease



Cow cubicles – some indoors and some outdoors

status and the control measures in place. We're now testing cows quarterly for Johne's disease."

Although, to date, they've only had three sets of milk records and disease test results, the data has added a new dimension to dairy management on these units.

"It's a far more planned approach. I am more confident that I have dairy calves in the right cows this year," he says, having used sexed semen on heifers and on his better cows, and dairy sires on those cows making the cut. "Based on our NMR records, we pulled out 20% of our cows and put them to beef bulls."

"All herds have good and bad cows. We need to know which ones are good and breed from them and take out the bottom end. You can't do this just by looking at or knowing the daily milk production – there's far more to it than that."



Gethin Roberts:
**"Milk records add
a new dimension to
our herd management"**

Making grass-based cows accountable

Breed from the best and implement selection intensity. That's the message from LIC's Timothy Bunnett. "Producers who consider themselves good grassland producers must turn their meticulous grassland monitoring and management skills to individual cow management if they are to maximise the potential of their genetics," he says. "And milk records enable them to do this."

Demonstrating the benefit of milk records for selecting cows for breeding, he quotes a typical difference of between 12 and 14 litres per kilogramme of milk solids when herds start milk recording – which amounts to between 2,200 and 2,600 litres per cow per

year. "This range will narrow, and producers will start to raise the bar once they start using their records to select the cows to breed from, and are able to look back at the records for dams of heifers. This is particularly relevant in cross-bred herds," he says.

And, as breeding advisers, he adds that his team at LIC can make far more of a difference in herds where there are accurate milk records. "We can see the starting point and make sure our advice enables the herd to progress quickly and become more efficient and profitable."

LIC's Pasture to Profit conference 'Mind the Profit Gap' is on October 16, 2019 at

Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire. Sessions will look at finding the extra 10% and at the tools required to turn grass into profit. This will include monitoring and measuring herd performance.

For more details and to book tickets visit www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/pasture-to-profit-conference-mind-the-profit-gap-tickets-59824043324

