

Genetic benchmarks at your fingertips

NMR and AHDB Dairy have forged a link to give producers easier access to their Herd Genetic Report through NMR's Herd Companion. Will bringing milk records and genetic status closer together help you reap some of the estimated improvement in earnings of £15,000 through better breeding?

TEXT KAREN WRIGHT



Herd Genetic Reports (HGRs) have been available online from AHDB for the past 10 years, but only a third of producers take advantage of this valuable and current information on their herd's genetic merit and its ranking for key traits. In a joint collaboration, NMR and AHDB Dairy have developed a secure link from NMR's Herd Companion and the HGR on AHDB's website. Herd Companion is the dairy management system

Marco Winters:

"This valuable link makes the Herd Genetic Report more accessible for recorded herds"



available free to all NMR customers and where most access and manage their herd's data.

AHDB Dairy's head of genetics Marco Winters was particularly keen to work with NMR in developing a link that enables NMR recorded herds to access their Herd Genetic Report seamlessly from Herd Companion.

Available free of charge, producers have previously accessed their HGR by registering with AHDB and signing in as users each time. "This is still available, but I think that those who can get the report through Herd Companion, simply by clicking a tab, can get more benefit," he says. "It's a secure link, and it does away with passwords and user names, making it easier for producers to review their Herd Genetic Report as a routine."

"It's a really valuable link," adds Mr Winters. "It's bringing herd performance and breeding data under one roof and making the Herd Genetic Report much more accessible for all recorded herds, irrespective of calving pattern and breed."

He hopes the move will see the continued uptake of the HGR among UK producers. "We've definitely seen a surge in producers signing up for the reports during the past few years. This is possibly because producers are increasingly realising the value of benchmarking breeding traits in their herds and the longer-term gains from better breeding choices."

Financial gains

Mr Winters estimates that the value of identifying and then breeding from the best females in a 150-cow herd can add between £10,000 and £15,000 to the bottom line. Genetic merit is one of the six strategic key performance indicators in AHDB's optimal dairy system. "It's the starting point in any herd. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses is a vital first stage in taking breeding and other management decisions," he adds.

And it's the access to these breeding tools, at trait and index level, for spring and autumn block calvers,

Herd Genetic Reports highlights

- **Herd summary:** a snapshot by lactation. We would expect to see the £P/L increase with each new generation, and the genetic merit for selected traits to improve in the younger cattle if the breeding plans are working. It can highlight areas for improvement and raise some questions too.
- **Milking herd benchmarks:** ranking your herd alongside other recorded herds with more than 100 cows shows up your herd's strengths and weaknesses. Split by decile, you can see where your herd ranks for PLI, milk quality traits, lifespan, mastitis, somatic cell count, fertility, maintenance and inbreeding.
- **Cow comparisons:** each cow can be ranked by trait. This is a crucial breeding tool. Ranges and benchmarks can be set for each parameter so that breeding from cows falling below this level can be avoided. While not every measurable trait is listed, the key factors are, which makes it a valuable selection mechanism.
- **Compare the sires:** access to a bull fact sheet for each sire used in the herd (and those you might be thinking about using). This is one of the simplest bull fact sheets available and a highlight on the HGR because, regardless of supplier and country of origin, the information is consistent and provides a good overview on each sire.
- **Youngstock report:** a dedicated youngstock listing with the same functions as the milk herd report so young stock can be ranked by trait. Producers are encouraged to breed from the best, so it's essential they have a tool to compare young stock. While new heifers 'should' have higher genetic merit than older generations, this might not always be the case, especially when data gets more

precise and genomic evaluations are being used. Getting that optimal blend of the best young animals along with those great proven performers is the key to progress.

- **Inbreeding checker:** the HGR's inbreeding data goes back in time through all the recorded generations, as opposed to many

other programs that only look at three generations. It's important to delve down when it comes to inbreeding, particularly with the rapid turnover seen in male breeding lines. This tool makes it possible to review inbreeding but also to highlight potential risks.

as well as all year-round calving herds, that NMR's genetic manager Richard Miller is particularly enthusiastic about.

"Until now, we have not really had any direct way of helping producers to use the spring and autumn calving indexes in making breeding choices for their block-calving herds. But now, irrespective of breed and system, producers can get breeding benchmarks directly from Herd Companion."

Championing NMR's genetic services, and particularly its genomic testing service GeneTracker, Mr Miller is promoting the HGR to producers through online workshops and the NMR field teams.

"Reports are based on milk recording results and driven by AHDB data that is updated at each evaluation. And it's independent." He also likes the thoroughness of the report when it comes to young stock and inbreeding reporting, which have a strong

focus on the key breeding criteria combined with simple-to-apply selection bands that will quickly identify target groups.

"My ambition is to see producers take advantage of these tools as a routine. As the breeding options increase and more producers look to genomically test their stock, the easy access to accurate genetic data will improve breeding choices and reap some of the financial gains at stake," concludes Mr Miller. |



Richard Miller:

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