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SOMERSET HERD MAKES GOLD CUP FINAL



When Neil Baker creates a business plan, he sticks to it. Having been a finalist in the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup an impressive three times, it's possible to follow his business progression in close detail. Last year he said he was planning to increase herd size, boost milk yields and improve herd health, mastitis and fertility.

And he has certainly delivered. The family-owned Rushywood Farm at Haselbury Plucknett, Somerset, now extends to 692ha, with the herd size rising by 520 head during the past year, to 1800 cows. With 55% of the herd being heifers, yields are currently running at just over 11,000 litres sold.

“Our business strategy is to broadly follow what our family has been doing for the past four generations,” says Mr Baker. “This is to care for our animals in the very best way so they

produce high yields at low costs, so that we can invest in people, facilities and further expansion.”



All the cows are bedded on deep sand cubicles, and are housed year-round, with the exception of in-calf heifers. “We calve the heifers at 23 months old, and I just can’t get them big enough to serve at 12 months old if they’re grazing,” he says. “Instead, we turn them out when they’re pregnant.”

Mr Baker currently raises around 500 heifers a year, but plans to increase this to 750 a year at the same time as reducing the calving age to 22 months. “Recent investment in our calf unit and restructuring of staffing has helped improve our heifer rearing operations, allowing us to calve our heifers earlier with fewer losses at a lower cost,” he says.

In a bid to improve the herd genetics, Mr Baker only selects bulls with a lifespan score of at least +0.2, with no poor udder traits, +500 milk yield and cell count improver. “I select five or six bulls, which Genus then matches to my cows using their Genetic Mating System.” Everything is inseminated using AI, with 57% in-calf by 100 days and a calving index of 382 days.

“We are constantly trying to improve fertility, so we monitor submission rates (72%) and pregnancy rates (26%), and have a fortnightly vet visit,” he says Mr Baker. He also scores the cows’ transition success to monitor how well they come through the calving phase. “We are averaging around an 80% success rate, which is the percentage of cows that calve without a milk fever, retained placenta, displaced abomasum, metritis score of three or four, or culling incident within 30 days of calving.”

Fortnightly mobility scoring and a rigorous hoof trimming programme have boosted the herd mobility score from 75% to 95% over the past five years. And this year Mr Baker has been focussing on reducing mastitis rates. “We were running at 25.6 cases per 100 cows last year, and have cut that to 20 this year. In February we only had two cases,” he says.

Milking three times a day, staff training and coaching is important. “We carry out full milking prep at every milking, focussing on hygiene and udder stimulation, and over the winter introduced teat sanitising brushes at the point of entry into the parlour.” He also monitors case rates monthly, uses cell count data to identify problem cows and cluster dips after those cows have been milked. “Any cow with two cases in a lactation is culled.”

In recent years, Mr Baker has been working to improve forage quality in a bid to get more milk from forage. “Annually we aim to have around half of our farm for maize silage production, and we use our manure solids ploughed down immediately,” he says. “The rest of our crops consist of Lucerne and grass leys for silage production. Our aim is to use our biggest resource - our soils - to grow the best quality forages at the highest yields, using manures as efficiently as possible.”

In order to improve the efficiency of manure use, Mr Baker is adding a mile of pipeline to aid spreading of liquid manure this year, and is also building an anaerobic digester with a sand separator.

Given the recent steep decline in milk prices, one might question the timing of such investment. But Mr Baker is confident that his herd is here to stay. “The lifting of milk quotas poses the threat of over-supply of milk products, leading to probable further price drops,” he

says. “To combat this, we intend to become amongst the most competitive dairies in Europe, by continuing to increase scale and improve technical performance.”

However, he also sees a bright future for forward-thinking businesses ready to take on the world market. “That is why we joined Arla last year, to take advantage of the future global demand. I strongly believe our industry needs to co-operate more, and Arla’s access to international markets is unique among UK milk buyers.”

Finalists will be judged by RABDF Chairman, former Gold Cup winner and Lancashire-based Jersey producer Ian Macalpine, NMR Board member and Isle of Anglesey-based producer Trevor Lloyd and 2012 Gold Cup winner from Worcestershire, Mike Miller.

The winner of the 2015 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup and the runner-up, who receives the NMR Silver Salver, will be announced at 4pm on the NMR stand at the Livestock Event, NEC Birmingham on July 8.

Unit facts

- 1800 cows, 55% heifers – increase of 520 in herd size in past 12 months
- Calving at 23 months
- Addition of pipeline for liquid manure and addition of anaerobic digester underway
- Milk sold to Arla
- Qualifying production 11,772kg, 3.62% fat, 3.25% protein
- Somatic cell count 125,000/ml, Bactoscan of 30
- Mastitis cases reduced by 20% in past 12 months
- Excellent fertility - 57% in-calf by 100 days. Calving index of 382 days.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

The six 2015 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup finalists are:

- Neil Baker, Kingston Farms, Haselbury Plucknett, Somerset
- Messrs Harvey, Drum Farm, Beeswing, Dumfries
- Brian Yates, East Logan, Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbrightshire
- Fergus McDowall, Rerrick Farm, Dundrennan, Kirkcudbright
- Arthur Palmer, Oulton House Farm Ltd, Norbury, Staffordshire
- Philip Metcalfe, Washfold Farm, Leyburn, North Yorkshire

For more information and photographs contact:

Karen Wright, 07860 504047 karen@karenwrightpr.com