

CHANGE TO DRY COW MANAGEMENT REGIME TRANSFORMS TRANSITION COW PERFORMANCE

When Cheshire dairyman Richard Davenport experienced as many as 15 displaced abomasums in some winter calvers two years ago, as well as a glut of retained cleansings and the odd milk fever case, he knew his transition cow management needed looking at.

“Looking back the dry cow mineral nutrition just wasn’t right and blood tests revealed the dry cows were low in both selenium and calcium. At the time we were feeding minerals through a blend, but this clearly wasn’t working,” Richard says.



Richard, who farms in partnership with his mother, father and brother David, runs 400 all-year-round calving Holstein Friesians, plus 275 followers for the family business at Top O’the Town Farm near Nantwich. The family also milk 200 cows on a rented Shropshire unit, as well as managing another farm near Sandbach, giving them 1000 acres to run in total.

Over the years the Davenports have progressively expanded the Top O’the Town herd, as well as pushing average annual yields up to 9,500 litres a cow. Around 10 years ago cow numbers stood at 100, each yielding on average around 8,000 litres, but steady investment since in the farm infrastructure – including latterly a new parlour, installed in November 2011, a new cubicle shed and a fresh borehole, show the family’s commitment to continual business improvement.

“We’ve always sought to invest in unit infrastructure to improve the long term viability and profitability of all our farms, but that philosophy extends to cow breeding, management and nutrition improvements too whenever possible,” Richard says.

The transition cow problems of two years ago provided such an improvement opportunity. “Our representative from Chelford Farm Supplies, Steve Porter, happened to mention how pleased many of his other customers were with

Rumenco's Lifeline Pre-calver product for their dry cows. As the blood tests had revealed mineral deficiencies it made sense to address that specifically and we gave it a go, introducing the bucket-based supplement as soon as the cows were dried off and feeding it through the eight week dry period until calving."

According to Rumenco technical manager David Thornton, Lifeline is a unique supplement because it is formulated for both the cow and her unborn calf.

"As well as supplementing the dry cow diet, Lifeline contains high levels of selenium and vitamin E to ensure the new born calf gets the best possible start too, whilst birthing problems are minimised for the mother. Cows are quick to give birth, with less incidence of retained placentas and body reserves are maximised to promote good conception in early lactation," he explains.

Mr Thornton also points out that Lifeline improves colostrum quality. "Immuno-protein production and antibody levels in the colostrum are increased by incorporating mannan oligosaccharides, which also helps the calf absorb the colostrum after drinking it. This boosts the calf's ability to fight disease and is particularly important for heifers, which generally have poor quality colostrum."

In summer, the Davenports' dry cows are kept on paddocks and fed additional straw with Lifeline until three weeks pre-calving. In winter, transition cows are kept in straw yards on a similar regime. No additional minerals are fed at all.

"Since we introduced Lifeline, the transition cow stage has been transformed. Displaced abomasums, retained cleansings and milk fevers have all but disappeared and I've been very impressed with the health and vigour of the calves – so much so that we've also introduced Lifeline to the heifers. Previously, we had been getting some very lethargic calves out of them and blood tests revealed low selenium levels in these animals too," Richard says.

"It seems Lifeline is one of those products that does exactly what it claims to do and we've been very pleased with the results so far."

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