New genetic index helps fight bovine TB

A new genetic index to help dairy farmers breed cattle with better resistance to bovine TB is launched in January 2016. The index represents months of research supported by Defra and AHDB Dairy, and the analysis of close to 650,000 cattle records.

The result is the TB Advantage, a genetic index which, typically, runs on a scale from -3 to +3, similar to many genetic indexes farmers are familiar with using. A positive figure indicates that an animal will transmit better than average resistance to bTB on to its offspring.

Marco Winters, head of genetics for AHDB Dairy, says: “Breeding is a long-term and sustainable approach to many health issues and can yield worthwhile rewards which accumulate over the generations.

“However, it is only a small part of a broader strategy for controlling bTB which includes maintaining high levels of biosecurity, protecting cattle against infected wildlife and routinely monitoring cattle for the disease.”

The heritability of bTB resistance is about nine per cent which means that of all the detected variation in bTB resistance, about nine per cent is due to genetics.

“This figure is on a par with some other traits cattle breeders have been improving over a number of years, such as somatic cell count,” continues Mr Winters. “This in itself gives us confidence that by selecting bulls with a positive TB Advantage, farmers will be able to breed better resistance to bTB into their herds.”

However, he says that too much emphasis on any one area can detract from others so farmers should continue to select their service sires on the basis of all of the traits important to their business.

“There are many factors which should influence whether farmers choose to add the TB Advantage to their breeding criteria,” he says. “These are likely to include whether their herd is within or close to a bTB affected area or whether they feel that having progeny by a bull with a better TB Advantage will give them some commercial benefit.

“If all other traits are equal, it would definitely be preferable to use a bull with a positive TB Advantage. Using bulls with an extremely negative TB Advantage is inadvisable as it is likely to increase the susceptibility of a herd to bTB.”

The TB Advantage will be available for Holstein bulls with daughter-proven indexes and young sires with genomic indexes. It will also be available to farmers who choose to genotype their females. Following the launch of the TB Advantage on 19 January 2016, the index will become part of the routine genetic evaluations published by AHDB Dairy three times a year in April, August and December.

Funding the TB Advantage

The initial research into the genetics of bTB was undertaken jointly by the University of Edinburgh, Roslin Institute and Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC), and supported by Defra and the Welsh Government. Their work showed there is genetic variation between animals and it established the degree of heritability of bTB resistance. AHDB Dairy corroborated these findings with its research partners, SRUC and Roslin; funded the implementation of a genetic index; and embedded the TB Advantage into the national genetic evaluation service.

Calf to calving best practice

To have a healthy, productive dairy herd, you need to begin at the beginning. That means giving your calves the best possible start in life in terms of nutrition, health and welfare, says Andy Dodd, technical extension officer for AHDB Dairy.

Figures on calf mortality and incidences of disease suggest much can be done to give youngstock the early boost they need towards a healthy productive life.

To make dairy producers more aware of best practice, AHDB Dairy has developed a new initiative – Calf to Calving which draws from the latest research and input from the AHDB Dairy Technical Extension and R&D teams.

A series of meetings are being held on host farms in 2016 to look at youngstock management to ensure minimal mortality as heifers calve into the dairy herd for the first time at 24 months of age.

Each host farm will track a group of 10 calves from birth to calving and, along the way, closely monitor their health, nutrition and growth.

The first round of meetings will look at two areas – reducing calf mortality through colostrum management and better nutrition, and achieving and monitoring growth rates up to and through weaning.

In addition to updates on the calves, specific subjects will be discussed at each meeting, including: colostrum management, genomic testing of heifers, nutrition at grass, outwintering and housing.

Farmers attending will be encouraged to track a group of 10 calves on their own farm. They will then return their data sheets anonymously to be compared with the host farm and those of other attendees.

To find a meeting near to you, visit dairy.ahdb.org.uk/events or contact Jenna Porch on 024 7647 8690.

Featured Event

Discover Innovate and Grow
AHDB Dairy Research
Seminar 2016
1 & 2 March
Kegworth, Derbyshire

(Find out more on Page 2)
The extension officer team has a collective responsibility to help farmers access the best possible information, up-to-date thinking and R&D, says Jon Parry, head of AHDB Dairy extension.

"With new people joining the team and with everyone spread across Scotland, England and Wales it’s important to meet, as a group, to exchange good ideas and learn from each other as well as dealing with the everyday stuff."

"There’s a huge capability in the team and we need to harness it to best effect, to play our part in helping our levy payer’s progress and operate sustainable businesses."

"A regular feature of our work with farmers is problem-solving, in one form or another, either in farmer groups or via research conducted by the R&D team. We often find ourselves in discussions with farmers who are considering a change in ways of working or in systems and processes, on-farm. I need to ensure my colleagues have all the skills necessary to facilitate excellent farmer meetings."

"At a recent national extension officer (EO) meeting, we developed a knowledge exchange exercise for the team to work on, together. Knowledge exchange is a bit of jargon in regular use in AHDB when we are describing working with farmers and others. What we really mean is taking an opportunity to look at and challenge, present ways of working and explore the best route to achieve new objectives. In this case, AHDB Dairy ambassador Mary Quick provided the facilities for us to tackle three questions, their business faces. Mary and estate manager Adam Reeves along with the rest of the farm team have poured over plans and proposals for the next developments at Quick’s Farm. For us, this real situation provided an ideal platform for discussion among our EO team and our task focused on three questions which Mary, Adam and others had developed and used our team to sense check the proposals."

How to use what’s in place to create a low cost autumn system
Suggest low cost, low maintenance, efficient ways to store and deal with dirty water
Outwintering – appropriate for the farm or not?

"These questions can be transposed into many farm scenarios and I was pleased with the discussions and the outcomes we came up with. This sort of practical exercise is favourable in so many ways for the continuous development of our people. I’m sure the EOs will take away the learnings and interpret it locally to the benefit of their areas."

Ray Keatinge, Head of R&D at AHDB Dairy, says: “Research and development are crucial to the dairy industry to help us advance and become more competitive on a global level and to make dairy farming more efficient and increasingly sustainable. In 2011, AHDB Dairy established two five-year Research Partnerships – one on Health, Welfare and Nutrition and the second on Soils, Forage and Grassland to provide the scientific evidence needed to underpin progress and raise the profile of GB dairy research. The Research Partnerships combine scientific expertise from 10 leading academic and industry organisations. Practical outcomes from the Research Partnerships along with other projects will be delivered over two days at the DIG seminar.”

To find out more and to register, visit dairy.ahdb.org.uk/dig

Countryside in the classroom

A new AHDB-funded education website called ‘Countryside Classroom’ has been launched to help teachers give all school-age children positive, formative experiences of food, farming and the natural environment. www.countrysideclassroom.org.uk is full of age-appropriate, curriculum-friendly lesson plans, resources and ideas to bring children into the countryside and the countryside into the classroom. By selecting ages, curriculum areas, preferred types of activity and other options, teachers can find educational content tailor-made for their classes.

The website also features a searchable map of the UK to help teachers find local farms, parks and activity centres which are ready to give children enjoyable and memorable experiences of food, farming and the natural environment.

AHDB education chair, Di Symes said: “We cannot overstate the importance of education when it comes to food and farming. AHDB is passionate about ensuring that the next generation of consumers learn more about where their food comes from and how it is produced by our levy payers. The launch of this initiative is a great example of the industry working together to provide teachers with access to a wide range of quality educational resources via Countryside Classroom.”

Discover, innovate and grow


Best practice shared

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Surviving low milk prices case study

With the ‘Share Your Story’ campaign LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming) wants to inspire and encourage more farmers to open their gates for Open Farm Sunday on 5 June 2016. The campaign calls on all farmers to get involved in sharing their story – from how crops are grown, animals cared for, to how they manage our countryside.

The theme for Open Farm Sunday 2016 will be ‘Discover the World of Farming’ – to reflect the huge diversity within our industry and enable a greater variety of farmers to take part. Last year’s Open Farm Sunday saw nearly 400 farms welcome over a quarter of a million visitors and LEAF is aiming to beat this record in 2016.

Annabel Shackleton, Open Farm Sunday Manager said: “Open Farm Sunday is the industry’s annual open day showcasing all types of farming. Historically, it has focused on the story of food production, but British farmers are responsible for so much more. Whether they are producing nutritious food, fuel, or crops for medicine, clothing and manufacturing, we want to reach out to all farmers to share their story on Open Farm Sunday. The day is a great opportunity to show the public why farming is so important and to help build trust and understanding in agriculture.

Whether farmers choose to hold a simple farm walk or a much bigger event, Open Farm Sunday is their chance to explain to the public what farming is all about and why it matters. We have lots of exciting new activities for Open Farm Sunday 2016 and are looking forward to even more farmers taking part next year!” For more information and to register your Open Farm Sunday event visit, farmsunday.org

With the privilege of being an extension officer comes the reward of meeting dairy farmers in all their different guises, writes Mike Hardcastle of AHDB Dairy.

On a bright November day I met Bryan Rich at Cold Harbour Farm in Binegar, Somerset. We had previously met at an AHDB Dairy open meeting where he spoke about his approach to surviving low milk prices, I now had a chance to get into the detail with him. At over six foot, this father of three steps down from his JCB machine and invites me into the farm house. Within a few minutes, it’s clear this man has a mission and he has found his conversational pace. I try to keep up as we navigate our way through his thoughts and approach to making a living, in good times and bad.

In partnership with his wife and father, Bryan has been farming 108 hectares here for 34 years. With the support of a self-employed herdsman and, at weekends, two of his sons, aged 17 and 20, they milk 130 pedigree Holsteins, calving all year round, and care for 300 youngstock.

“I went to the Royal Agricultural University at Cirencester and it was obvious then I was good with figures and I use that gift, along with attention to every detail, as part of my deliberate approach to being a hands-on farmer,” says Bryan. “I try to simplify everything. I do my own maintenance and spend time talking to the right people and networking at farmer meetings. I’m not a shrinking violet and I’m happy to ask basic questions to make sure I understand the detail, this is how I keep my mind fresh.”

Being a good neighbour and active in the community is high on Bryan’s agenda. “Good relationships all round are important. I’m chair of the village hall, I’m heavily involved helping my son run the scout troop, clear out the pond, when it needs it – whatever. If something needs doing, I’m happy to help. You know what they say – if it needs doing, ask a busy man!”

Bryan gets quotes for every purchase and invests “about half an hour every week on the phone negotiating prices, including vet costs,” and applies a general rule for equipment and other large items; if he can’t afford it outright, he doesn’t have it. He buys direct and has bought feed in Tariffs, before they end and I’m thinking ahead. We are installing more solar panels in the coming months to take advantage of the Feed in Tariffs, before they end and I’m thinking about a new building and in the longer term, a new parlour.”

Bryan encourages his boys to work on other local farms in their holidays “to help them develop and see what’s going on elsewhere. I get them to share stories with me and any good ideas get used here at home.”

Two key partners in this farm are Wyke Cheese – where he sells his milk and Mole Care Veterinary practice.

“There are about 100 of us in the Wyke supply group and I’ve been with them about three years. I get 24ppl on a level profile, with no seasonality penalties. All we have to do is maintain quality and everyone is happy!”

“We don’t have any problems with fertility which I think is a lot to do with keeping things calm around here, but we are in a bTB hot spot and so I have every faith in our vet and the decisions he helps me make to maintain good herd health.

“I keep it simple as life is complicated enough, I manage feed costs, I try to make sure mine are never higher than half my pence per litre milk price – I’m not always successful – and I actively watch every penny I pay to the suppliers. If that message helps any fellow farmers, I will be delighted.”

Facts and Figures

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The benefits of calving heifers sooner

Research by the Canadian Dairy Network has shown that decreasing Age at First Calving (AFC) can improve a cow’s lifetime profitability. The research looked at different breeds, with results for Holsteins showing the most profitable AFC was 22 months, compared to a national average AFC of 26 months. The results suggest that calving a typical Holstein at 22 months compared to 26 months, increases lifetime profit per cow by approximately £440. This improvement in performance is attributed to a reduction in rearing costs and these animals producing more milk over their lifetime.

Research carried out by AHDB Dairy estimated that the cost of rearing heifers increases by £2.87 per day, for each day increase in AFC. This research found that the average cost of rearing heifers was £1,820 and that reducing the AFC by two months to 24 months could decrease the total costs of rearing heifers by almost 16%.

AHDB Dairy bull proofs

£PLI
There’s a new number one Holstein heading the AHDB Dairy bull proofs published in December which has edged his way to the top following many months as a feature of the top 10. Kings-Ransom Erdman is one of the best daughter-proven bulls of the breed for transmitting longer lifespans (Lifespan Index +0.7) and also excels for daughter fertility (Fertility Index +12.4), and reduces cell counts (SCC Index -18).

Transmitting smaller than average stature to his daughters, this Planet son out of a Ramos dam also scores well for reducing the costs of maintenance (Maintenance Index -19), all of which earns him a Profitable Lifetime Index of £603.

Young sire rankings
Since the Profitable Lifetime Index (£PLI) was reformulated over a year ago, this emphasis on fat and protein percentage has reflected both domestic and international market signals, and these young sires fulfil the expectations of modern breeding for milk solids and across a broad spectrum of other traits.

The bull which does this better than any other is Sandy-Valley Penmanship [pictured] (Enforcer x Numero Uno), who retains his number one position with a PLI of £724. With high protein production (+26.2kg) among his number one position with a PLI of £724. With high protein production (+26.2kg) among his many virtues, he remains the only sire to break the £700 barrier.

£SCI
Farmers breeding for a predominantly grass-based spring calving system and using the Spring Calving Index (£SCI) will see little change in the ranking, published this week by AHDB Dairy. This list continues to be dominated by the Jersey sire, VJ Tester which transmits just a moderate volume of milk, but offers extreme milk quality. He combines this with a high Lifespan Index and a good (low) Maintenance Index. His SCI is £442.

Marco Winters, head of genetics for AHDB Dairy, says: “I hope this gives every dairy farmer confidence that, when they choose their daughter-proven bulls, they have a reliable prediction of the transmitting potential these bulls can be expected to deliver on their own farms.”

Professionalism is a state of work

At the DairyLeaders Forum in November a group of dairy farmers interested in strategy and leadership development discussed various topics including problem solving, highly functional teams, emotional and social intelligence as routes to profitability and business wellbeing. Andrew Brewer, Alex Robertson and Joe Delves share below the principals which underpin their approaches to business.

Andrew farms in Cornwall alongside his wife Claire, running 650 mainly spring block calving cows on an extended grazing system. He says:

• Farming is unique in that it’s an industry where knowledge is shared freely. Take advantage of that
• Making the best of the comparative advantage we have is what gets me out of bed every morning
• Farming is about managing people. Learn to love people and watch them develop
• I don’t run the farm thinking about the next five years; I run it as if it had to be here for the next 1,000 years. That’s how long term and sustainable our decisions are
• We don’t strive to be in the top 10% of farmers; we just strive to be the best we can be.

Joe and his wife Becky farm 220 cows in East Sussex on an extended grazing system, and are also in an equity partnership in another 330-cow dairy unit in West Sussex. He says:

• Aim to sell each cow’s body weight in milk solids each year
• Use your own resources where you can – don’t fit a round peg in a square hole
• Try and get off the farm at least two days per month to see what others are doing and get some perspective
• A positive attitude just makes things work – attitude determines altitude
• People are the absolute foundation of the business. Invest in them, take an interest and learn to love seeing them develop and – if necessary – move on.

Alex is a farm manager in Wigtownshire running 520 cows on a year-round housed system. He says:

• Regard the weather as your biggest variable and do all you can within financial reason to mitigate its impacts
• Treat people with respect and as you would like to be treated
• Stop for coffee every day with your team. Laugh at the good things, resolve the things that have gone wrong. That is your most precious time to manage the business
• Measure everything – we know our margin per cow per day, every day
• Look for improvement in every detail – from feeding to bedding to intake. Everything can be improved by even a fraction of a penny.
Amanda comments on the past year

Many dairy farming businesses will look back on 2015 as being a tough year. We all faced the continuing pressures and consequences of the so called ‘perfect storm’ which has resulted in the supply and demand imbalance.

Against this difficult backdrop, I have met lots of you at meetings and events, with many affected by the milk price issue in one way or another. What struck me most is the determination of farmers to reach the other side. Having been out at our public facing events in the summer, the support we have from ‘ordinary’ people is clear and is also reflected through our consumer research.

In response to these challenges, many dairy farmers faced in the last 12 months or so, AHDB Dairy offered support to help levy payers with their businesses under the banner ‘Surviving low milk prices’. A series of AHDB Dairy events hosted by extension officers, took place across the country, focusing on the practical aspects of low milk prices. This initiative continues to be supported by a wealth of information and tools which you are encouraged to access. Please get in touch with us if you are unsure of what is available to you.

Not to be overlooked, is our core technical delivery which has been communicated in a variety of ways in the last twelve months, not least in this, the fourth edition of All Things Dairy. It is through this publication we aim to keep you informed of the potential financial benefits of levy-funded programmes, as well as updating you on how we work and interact with important organisations such as The Dairy Council, Dairy UK, the farming unions and the media.

My colleagues and I in AHDB remain committed to supporting you all as you try to operate in such a competitive market. Those of you that have worked most closely with us have said this is of value to you.

Reflecting on a few, and by way of just one example, in August 2014 we launched our Spring Calving Index, otherwise known by the acronym, £SCI. Having revised the UK’s Profitable Lifetime Index (EJLI) to reflect changing industry needs, £SCI is a new genetic index providing GB dairy farmers operating a spring block calving herd with an across-breed evaluation to highlight bulls suitable for their system. Both indexes have been developed to provide an initial screening tool to ensure bulls used on farm meet specific criteria.

The AHDB is going through a substantial change process and, as part of that staff and Board members have been out meeting and listening to our levy payers in Scotland, England and Wales getting valuable contributions to our Activity Review. The views we receive will be used to inform our long-term activities and priorities.

In addition to this exercise, we have been consulting on the shorter term business plans for AHDB Dairy next year, to help shape our future to ensure we are focussed on the matters which are most relevant to you, our levy paying community. We will update you in the next edition on the feedback we’ve received and any subsequent future plans.

Amanda Ball
Strategy director

What’s happening with school milk?

School food standards have been amended so that schools which provide food and drink on the premises have to ensure that milk is made available to children aged 5-16yrs for drinking at least once a day during school hours. All children under the age of 5 in England and Scotland can still receive free milk and children in Wales can receive free milk up to the age of 7yrs. EU subsidy is still once a day during school hours. All children under the age of 5 in England and Scotland can still available for 5 - 16 yrs old (England/Wales) and for 7-16yrs old (Wales).

There is no ‘one main promoter’ and AHDB are not working with any organisation to promote milk in schools however, we did play a key part in all the consultations for changes to school food policy to ensure milk was one of the drinks options that had to be provided and for the changes to the curriculum to include provenance/food production going forward. We have further detailed information about milk in schools on the AHDB Dairy website.

Outlook Conference 2016

EU membership and the livestock sector’s competitiveness will come under the spotlight at the 2016 AHDB Outlook Conference. Hosted by the three livestock sectors of the AHDB, representing beef and lamb, pork and dairy, with AHDB Market Intelligence (MI), the conference will take place at One Great George Street, Westminster, London, on Tuesday, 9 February 2016. The opening address is due to be given by AHDB chairman Peter Kendall, followed by keynote presentations on the referendum on UK membership of the EU and the relative competitiveness of UK and global livestock sectors.

Delegates will also have the chance to discuss market opportunities and issues during a question and answer session with industry experts. Separate breakout sessions will follow, providing an overview of the market outlook specific to each sector.

The AHDB Outlook Conference is an established event in the industry calendar, providing the ideal forum for supply chain planners and experts to hear about market prospects for the coming year and to discuss key issues. For the full programme and to book your tickets, visit ahdb.org.uk

Maximise grass growth

With an estimated 85-90% of grassland fields trafficked every year, machinery can have a significant impact on soil structure and potentially crop yields. Controlled traffic farming is now commonplace in arable farming, being implemented to maintain good soil structure and minimise any potential crop losses associated with soil compaction from machinery traffic. In contrast, research undertaken at Harper Adams University has shown that in a single grass silage operation, over 60% of the area of the field is covered by tractor wheelings.

In the short film ‘Controlled traffic farming in grassland’, Dr Debbie McConnell, R&D manager for AHDB Dairy explains more about the AHDB Dairy-BGS demonstration farm at Crathorne which has implemented a controlled traffic system on a proportion of the grass silage platform.

Visit youtube.com/user/DairyCoAHDB to watch the film, or visit dairy.ahdb.org.uk for more information about grassland management.

Reduce mastitis to reduce antibiotic use

On dairy farms, the vast majority of antibiotics are used for the prevention and treatment of mastitis.

"An important, but often overlooked, problem which is caused by the use of antibiotics, is the increased potential for antimicrobial resistance (AMR)”, says vet Pete Down. “AMR has implications for the health of both animals and human beings and is rapidly climbing the political agenda at a European and global level.”

While it has to be established what the true extent of animal influenced AMR in humans is, there clearly is a need for dairy farmers to reflect on the types and quantity of antibiotics used on-farm and to identify opportunities to reduce the requirement for their use through preventive strategies. This can lead to improved animal health, save money, and reduce the risk of stricter regulations being introduced around the availability of antimicrobial agents.

The updated dairy cow welfare strategy from the Cattle Health and Welfare Group (CHAWG) recognises the effective collaborative approach by the industry for the welfare benefit of the dairy cow as well as the aspiration for responsible use of medicines. AHDB Dairy is a member of CHAWG, and the strategy notes four actions:

Understanding the importance of appropriate antimicrobial use via the promotion of the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture (RUMA) guidance:

- Adopting a consistent approach to responsible antimicrobial use
- AHDB to lead industry initiative in constructing a platform to collate and share health data across the industry
- Support RUMA in establishing how best to quantify and demonstrate responsible use.
**New Dairy Roadmap**

Huge efforts by the British dairy industry to further reduce its environmental impact have been revealed in a new report. The updated and refreshed Dairy Roadmap highlights some of the key achievements by dairy farmers, processors and retailers since its launch in 2008. Key achievements:

- 77% of dairy holdings are now implementing nutrient management plans. In addition to this, 69% of these farmers are updating their management plan every year.
- Of the 43 large processing sites (those processing over 50 tonnes of milk a day) currently reporting into the Roadmap, 39 (91%) have an Environmental Management System in place.
- Dairy farmers have met their 2015 target of 15% renewable energy uptake.
- Currently, only 4% of ex-factory waste from large Dairy Roadmap sites is sent to landfill; this is compared to 32% in 2008. Fourteen large sites reported zero waste to landfill in 2014, a vast improvement from 2008 when no sites were doing this.
- 78% of dairy farmers are currently taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on their farm, this is the highest percentage across all farming sectors.

Forage for Knowledge in 2016

Forage for Knowledge (FKK), AHDB Dairy’s electronic newsletter, brings cutting edge research and technical information to help improve forage production and utilisation on GB dairy farms. This year the publication received a new look. Alongside technical material, the newsletter will contain regular updates from dairy farmers across GB as they aim to improve forage utilisation and production from forage. It will also feature an ‘Ask an expert’ area where readers can ask questions of UK and International experts working in soils, forage and grassland. FKK has proved very popular in recent years and 2016 will see 12 full editions. The newsletter will also be supported by weekly grass growth and fortnightly grass quality data from 12 farms located across GB, alongside a range of online videos, resources and submissions from leading figures in the forage industry.

Subscribe to the Forage for Knowledge newsletter on the website at dairy.ahdb.org.uk/subscribe