

My Agenda for Dairy Farming

“Adopt, Adapt, Improve”, an old moto that I find very appropriate in today’s dairy farming industry. It has become very obvious that farmers have very mixed needs. Have we ever seen a market as varied as the one we are in now? Milk prices have caused farmers to look at their business needs very differently.

Agenda

- Marketing
- Milk Components
- Restrictions on dairy farms
- Milk Pricing
- Forage
- Breeding

Marketing

Driving around in 4x4s and wearing tweed jackets is a stereotypical image often associated with farming. Although this may sometimes be true, the public are not always aware of the hours, working conditions, hard graft and financial strain which dairy farmers go through on a daily basis.

The public’s perception of dairy farming and the industry’s relationship with consumers is a topic high on my agenda. In an era where retailers are battling for custom, not only through price but by meeting the demands of their shoppers, the dairy industry has a fantastic opportunity to raise the profile of milk. In general, the industry should do more to promote it.

There is great scope for developing a unique selling point (USP) for milk as we have seen with individual milk brands, such as Cravendale. Their recent ‘Cats with Thumbs’ advert was so popular it has over 8.3million views on YouTube alone.

Changing the perception of whole milk is also important. The public see the words ‘full fat milk’ and are scared by it. They do not realise whole milk only contains less than 4% fat and has so many health benefits. As a growing market we must do more to explore the sporting sector. New research shows milk consumed as a post-exercise recovery and rehydration drink is just as effective, if not more so, than commercially-available sports drinks. In recent months, there have been sports stars such as Welsh international rugby players, Dan Lydiate and Mike Phillips, advertising the health benefits of milk, and Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson has also starred in a ‘Got Milk?’ campaign with the message ‘protein to start your day.’ I would like to see milk being advertised to young people as a healthy alternative to sports drinks. These added value products will generate more profit and widen the market.

Milk Components

As processors shift their pricing mechanism, putting greater value on milk constituents, I believe farmers must make it more of a priority to use Holstein bulls which are positive for butterfat and protein percentages. For the last two years, I have used Holstein bulls which are positive for the butterfat and protein components, and this is where genomic bulls can be used to our advantage. Their DNA can tell us what components they transmit to their offspring. It is a much quicker and efficient way than waiting for a bull to become proven to find out how their daughters perform.

Restrictions

I would like to see more restrictions on larger dairies to stop them expanding as they are flooding the market place with milk. This allows the retailer to keep the milk price down and therefore forces smaller family-run farms out of business. On my agenda, the government could allow farms that have X amount of acres to milk X amount of cows, e.g. a farm with 100 acres can be limited to milking 100 cows. This would allow the farmer to produce enough forage to feed his herd and also would have enough area to get rid of the slurry. This would stop land from being over polluted with slurry.

Milk Pricing

In order to keep things fair between the larger and smaller dairy herds, I would want there to be a base price rather than having the vast variation in price that we see today. Milk prices are currently ranging from anything as low as 15p per litre (ppl) to 30ppl. It seems so absurd that farmers are getting paid different rates for exactly the same product. As of September 2015, Müller Wiseman Booths are paying their suppliers 35ppl whereas First Milk producers are receiving 16.62ppl.

Forage

Farmers are going to need to focus on being more economical and producing home-grown forages of greater quality to save having to buy in so many concentrates. This can be achieved by regularly reseeding pastures and cutting smaller grass yields more frequently throughout the summer. We can learn from other countries who utilise forage by taking more regular cuts. In Holland, a country with a similar climate to the UK, the grass is younger and the digestibility of dry matter (D value) is high. The average D value of silage in Holland is 10% higher than the UK, at 77% compared to about 68%.

Breeding

To be cost effective on the farm, dairy farmers need manageable, long lasting cows that do not need a lot of attention and care and do not cost a lot to produce milk. Breeding this type of cow can be achieved by using high £PLI bulls. The UK's main breeding index was revised in September 2014 to include a maintenance figure. "The £PLI, has an increased emphasis on health and fitness traits at around 68% of the total index (previously it was 55%), and a reduced emphasis on production at 32%. Within this shift there's more emphasis on female fertility; both direct and maternal calving ease have been introduced; and a new figure has been added to reflect the costs of maintaining the cow." [Dairy Co]. Higher £PLI animals are not only more manageable but they are also more profitable and cost-effective to a dairy farmer.

In conclusion, my agenda is about the promotion of the dairy industry's products and their corresponding health benefits. There is no better time to be endorsing milk as a protein fuelled recovery drink than today, in the current health and fitness craze. However, in order to keep dairy farms in business, the farmers need to look at areas that can be improved on farm so that a healthy herd and profitable income can be achieved. My agenda includes a fair and level playing field for all dairy farmers, big or small. It also comprises of observing other countries that have a more profitable dairy industry. "Dutch dairy farms are getting 1,600 – 1,700 litres/cow more milk from forage than their UK counterparts" [Dairy Co]. In order for dairy farmers to be the best they can be, we all must "Adopt, Adapt, Improve."