

## **2020 President's Medal Award**

**"In light of the changes facing the UK dairy industry what steps should be taken at farm level to adapt to these changes and boldly go forward?"**

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### **Introduction**

The world has changed dramatically over the last quarter of a century and the dairy industry has certainly not been immune to change. Since 1994 producer numbers have dropped by over 60%, with the UK dairy herd falling to around 1.9 million cows, herd sizes have doubled. To see which steps are to be taken, I feel it is important to look at what the top-performing UK farmers are doing to thrive in this ever-changing landscape. How is it that two neighbouring, similar sized farms with fundamentally the same soil and the same system differ so much in their success? According to the AHDB, the top 25 per cent of farms perform 1.8 times better than the bottom 25 per cent. In this era, the difference in resulting profits, or lack of them, can make the difference in staying in business. There are obvious common traits among these top producers such as having clear aims, effective cost management, readiness to embrace new technology and ideas and care for the environment around them. The whole industry needs to adopt similar attitudes to these top-tier producers to enable the UK dairy industry to be strong in the face of these adverse changes.

### **Breeding**

The rapid improvement of Holstein genetics is something that I feel will be instrumental in our ability to progress in the future. Genetics influence the potential of the animal in terms of type, production, and health, which in turn can influence key areas which effect on the profitability and sustainability of a farm. Since its introduction in 2008, genomics has changed the way that dairy farmers make their breeding decisions. Initially, the major focus of genomic testing was in identifying high quality young bulls early. However, genomic testing is becoming increasingly popular for female stock, supplying another powerful tool to aid farmers mating decisions. Genomic breeding has enabled access to new traits, improving health and welfare. With concepts such as Semex's Immunity Plus and Cogent's EcoFeed paving the way in the market, I truly believe that the world is our oyster when it comes to the genetic gain of the UK herd.

Whilst I truly believe that genomics will be paramount for genetic improvement, I also feel it should be balanced with the regard for functional type. The importance of breeding cows with good conformation is still important, the modern type cow has the traits that are essential to excel in a modern dairy. I am a great believer that a cow close to the true type model produces milk with more ease and lasts longer. It is still important to look at a linear in a bull proof, as correct leg set, desirable foot angle and a strong udder attachment, for example, are paramount to the production potential of the cow regardless of the system.

### **Technology**

One of the major changes facing the UK dairy industry as a result of the UK leaving the European Union is the supply of labour. There is currently major uncertainty surrounding the movement of people post Brexit, with 56% of dairy farms employing staff from outside the UK, the future of the UK dairy farm workforce is unknown and will therefore pose a significant challenge to dairy farmers moving forward. Sourcing labour from within the UK will be important going forward, however few adults in this country consider dairying as a career option which is likely to lead to a void in the national labour force.

There are many advancements in technology within the dairy sector that are available to UK farmers to help to reduce the reliance on outside labour. There are a number of heat detection and rumination collars on the market today that can provide a farmer with constant 24 hour data on an individual cow's oestrus activity or eating and rumination habits. Not only do these systems alleviate the need for staff to be walking cows looking for heats and sick cows, but they can also optimise the timing of insemination and detect cows with suppressed rumination giving an earlier indication of health or dietary issues. These systems also offer a reduction in staff

requirements and allow for farmers to tighten up on herd management by reducing calving intervals, semen usage and veterinary and medicine costs

### **Bovine TB**

Bovine TB poses a great threat to almost all dairy farms in the UK. The disease is constantly becoming more widespread across the country having detrimental effects on the health and profitability of dairy farms. Having experienced a severe TB breakdown on the family farm at home, I have first-hand experience of the disastrous effect the disease can have. With current eradication methods proving futile in the combat of the disease other measures need to be considered.

The TB Advantage index published by the AHDB is a method of controlling TB that should not be discounted by farmers, although it will never be a quick fix it can play a part in a wider eradication strategy.

### **Antibiotic Use**

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of antibiotic use in farming. With improvements in data recording and Red Tractor standards, dairy farmers are already doing their part to decrease antibiotic use. However, the UK dairy industry is behind compared to the pig industry who have an 'electronic medicines handbook' where antibiotic use is centrally recorded for more comprehensive tracking. Taking steps like these would further demonstrate the UK dairy industry's commitment to responsible antibiotic use.

Whilst animal husbandry, dry cow management and health plans contribute to reducing antibiotics use, breeding healthier cows must also be considered as a solution. It has been reported that within the dairy herd worldwide, disease frequency has seen an annual increase since 1996. As previously mentioned, Semex's Immunity+ offers sires proven to provide superior immunity for viral and bacterial diseases. The heritability of Immunity+ is significantly higher than breeding against individual disease. In addition to this, colostrum from Immunity+ sired animals is of better quality than others. This along with less prevalence of disease leads to less dependence on antibiotic use on farm.

### **Consumer Perception**

The presence of dairy activists is becoming more and more apparent, and we now have biased journalism, sensationalising the dairy industry in mainstream media from day to day. This only adds to the lack of understanding from the British public about where their food comes from. I feel it's essential, now more so than ever that we are transparent about the realities of the dairy industry and gain the trust of the consumer. This needs to be done sooner rather than later as we are almost certain to compete with cheap imports as the UK start their journey into free trade.

Dairy alternatives also bring their own challenges, often being branded the 'sustainable and healthy' choice. Health is a huge contributor to the rise of these drinks. In the past, cow's milk was considered healthy, however, now a common misconception is that animal fats are damaging to health. It is hard to avoid content broadcasting the negative impact of dairy in your diets on social media and the web; it is essential that breeders use their own social media platforms to highlight milk as the superfood it is. When we see social media feeds filled with feelgood stories about dairy and dairy farming, this is when we can ensure the general public see our industry in a positive light. The UK is a world leader in terms of welfare standards and as an industry we really are not vocal enough about this.

### **Environmental concerns**

Almost 50% of 16–24-year-olds in the UK are concerned how their diets effect the global climate, with many converting to a vegan diet due to these concerns. The industry is already addressing these concerns with initiatives such as The Dairy Roadmap which sets out environmental targets for the UK dairy industry. Action has already been taken with greenhouse emissions from UK milk production decreasing by nearly a quarter

since 1990, it is encouraging that a staggering 43% of dairy farmers already utilize renewable energy on their holdings.

The impact of climate change is also going to cause practical issues for British dairy farmers. Changes have already been proven with wetter summers, longer and warmer autumns and localised flooding. As far back as 2015, a NFU survey revealed two-thirds of farmers had noticed an increase in extreme weather patterns. To be able to operate with this extreme weather, farmers may have to take measures such as breeding for heat tolerance and changing cropping patterns and management. Maintaining the environment around us will continue to be a crucial part of farm management, with it being likely that future farm support payments will be aligned with environmental schemes. This likelihood along with the supermarkets' growing demands on farms reducing their carbon footprint means that farmers will need to farm for the future in an environmentally friendly way.

### **Conclusion**

While no one knows what the next few months let alone the next few years will bring for the industry, the take home message is that British dairy farmers can compete on an international stage. It is exciting advancements in technology, genetics and the sustainability of dairy farming that will help the industry adapt. Whilst I appreciate the dairy industry will face challenges and threats going forward, I believe that by using the appropriate tools and a positive attitude, we as an industry can boldly go forward together.