

This month's contributors

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BECOMING AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE



Fiona Mcghee

Fiona Mcghee, Promar Regional Manager in the North, believes attractive employers get the best staff and good results follow on behind.

It is increasing difficult to find and retain staff on dairy farms. Nationally, at 3.8%, unemployment is at the lowest level since late in 1974 and the UK's appeal to European workers has declined as we prepare to leave the EU. These points emphasise the importance of standing out as an employer.

Setting out to be an attractive employer is the right way to think about getting the best people to work on your farm and for them to commit to continually working to achieve the best results.

What makes an employer attractive?

There is no easy answer to this as every employee is likely to be after something different and this is likely to change as their career progresses. It is important to recognise that your and their goals may well be very different. Farming has always been a way of life to many and the prospect of someone working on your farm with the same diligence and passion as yourself is extremely unlikely. We have to accept times have changed and that the work life balance today is different to a generation ago. There are also legal obligations with regard to how many hours we can expect people to work and in what conditions. Young people may have a different perspective and skill set to you. They have grown up and are naturally comfortable with information technology that older workers can find difficult.

Use these people to push your business forward and make it more efficient.

It is important to reward people financially and in other ways such as training and increased responsibility, and ensuring awareness of their valued contribution. Show them career progression, something which is especially important for young people coming into the industry.

Developing new skills

Increasingly our consultants are involved in helping farmers develop the management skills necessary and put in place progressive people practices to make them stand out in the labour market for the right reasons.

Some of the areas we commonly support are:

- Developing effective contracts with appealing terms and conditions. Too many workers have standard boilerplate contracts that don't reflect their needs.
- Holding effective, regular meetings to drive performance, address concerns and celebrate success. We also like to ensure that consideration is given to off site meetings.
- Assessing the training and development needs of staff in a way that matches their aspirations with the needs of the business.

- Building a team culture where two way feedback is encouraged and supported.
- Helping to build and communicate a vision that translates into worthwhile and appealing messages for staff. It is easy to forget that your grand vision of the future may have limited appeal if it is perceived only to offer more work and stress.
- Evaluating working conditions. Is it safe? Do staff have somewhere warm and clean to get changed and have breaks?
- Appraising the benefits package. Reward in the mind of the employee encompasses not just pay but also, working hours, time off, housing, pension, bonuses, training and development and much more.

It's time to stop thinking about standard packages and ways of working and build an approach to managing people that matches the needs of the business with the needs of the individuals employed. In this way you will be more successful at attracting and retaining the best people for your business.



CARBON CONFUSION



Sarah Jones

If you've read or watched the news recently, you will have seen many stories criticising livestock production for its apparent negative impact on the environment. Promar's Sarah Jones looks behind the headlines.

The message seems to be simple: livestock, particularly cattle, are the bad guys in the fight against climate change and if we want to make a positive difference, we should stop eating meat and dairy products.

There's no doubt that livestock farms and the whole agricultural industry have a role to play in tackling climate volatility. However, the current focus on meat and milk production oversimplifies what is a very complicated subject.

At the recent Sustainable Food Trust conference, sustainable agriculture expert Professor Michael Lee from Bristol University discussed the need to consider all the data connected to farming before making any conclusions about food's sustainability.

Much of the argument around livestock farming focuses on the global warming potential (GWP) of meat and dairy thanks to animals' greenhouse gas production.

Using GWP mass-based assessments, forage-fed beef cattle create almost 2kg of carbon dioxide equivalent (known as CO₂e, the standard unit for measuring carbon footprints) per 100g of meat produced, while upland sheep produce 3kg CO₂e per 100g of meat.

Pitted against intensively-reared chicken, which produces less than 0.5kg CO₂e per 100g, cattle appear to be much less environmentally-friendly.

What this simple measure fails to grasp is what it really means to be sustainable. Professor Lee believes

CO₂e was not meant to be used for these purposes because it doesn't take into account meat's nutritional value. What's more, it tells us nothing about which farming systems are the most effective at producing food with the lowest emissions profile.

Professor Lee has created a new way to measure GHGs in meat production by incorporating Recommended Dietary Intakes (RDIs) into the emissions metric.

By using RDIs, the metric recognises beef's high nutritional value and concentration of vital vitamins and minerals, compared to foods which, on the surface, have a lower carbon footprint.

Lower emissions

In practice, scientists using this metric have revealed that emissions from beef cattle reared on concentrates are actually less than 0.05kg CO₂e per 1% RDI. That's a mere fraction of the 2kg CO₂e per 100g calculated in the standard GWP measurement, and 1.5 times lower than beef cattle raised on forage.

Even more startling, factoring in nutritious value showed that emissions from those same cows were 2.25-times lower than free-range chicken.

A Danish study confirmed that it could be difficult to fulfill the recommended daily intake of nutrients, in particular calcium, if dairy products are excluded from our diet. In the study, Cheese has the highest nutrient density value compared to other food items. When

considering the nutrient density and climate impact, cheese is just as good/bad as common staple foods; cod, pork, chicken, brown rice, pasta and potatoes, that aren't getting a lot of attention or scrutiny.

For a sector facing increasing criticism, being able to demonstrate the nutrient value of what we produce as part of a farm's wider environmental footprint is becoming an increasingly important tool.

Major opportunities

The recently published IPCC report itself commented 'animal-sourced food produced in resilient, sustainable and low-GHG emission systems, present major opportunities for adaptation while generating significant co-benefits in terms of human health'. Livestock can play a critical role not only in feeding the world's growing population, but also in helping to improve soils, sequester carbon, and provide long-term environmental benefits which can't be achieved any other way.

Being able to understand and demonstrate a product's environmental footprint will not only help farmers counter some of the negative press but can also help increase efficiencies across farms and add value to meat and dairy products.

Promar has its own fully-accredited carbon accounting tool which can help measure farm emissions and help businesses establish and plan for improvements.

For more information contact Sarah Jones (07772 227974).



LIGHT UP YOUR COWS' LIFE



Rob Morrison

It is less than eight weeks until the clocks change so now is a good time to assess the lighting in your dairy housing advises Milking Systems Business Manager, Rob Morrison.

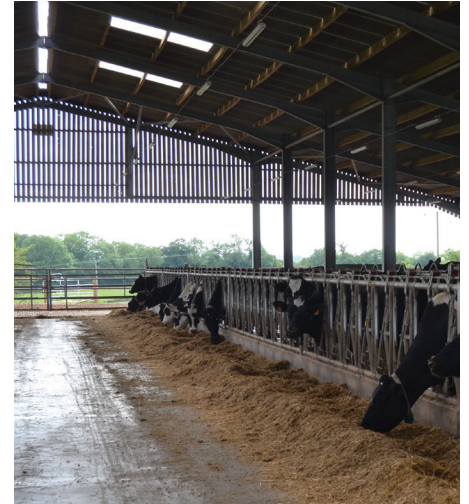
Light is one of the biggest things that can change our mood. Everyone has experienced the glowing feeling they get from a bright sunny day, after several weeks of cloudy dull days. This is down to the hormones that are produced naturally when you are exposed to increased levels of light. Dairy cows produces similar hormones

that alter their behaviour as the days get longer or shorter. This change can easily be seen in the amount of milk produced when light levels are increased. Research has demonstrated, cows being exposed to a light level of 150-200 lux for 16-18 hours per day will produce two more litres of milk per day compared with cows exposed to normal daylight levels. So there is a big payback from getting lighting right.

It is very important that cows also have a period of darkness in each 24-hour period to allow them to rest. However, this period should not be total darkness and a level of 30 lux should always be maintained in the cow area to avoid stress.

Light coming from above the cows is best to prevent shadows. This is particularly important if you have any type of moving machinery around the cows, where moving shadows will cause panic in the herd. Clear roof panels can provide good natural light, but the amount of light you get in any area is changeable depending on the time of the year.

Don't forget that walkways and collecting areas also need sufficient light to keep cow safe and to minimise stress. Genus Milking Systems Parlour Consultants can analyse the light levels in any area of the farm to check they meet the required standards. They will also help you interpret the results to see if any areas would benefit from extra lighting adding and advise on possible solutions. This test is very quick, with results usually given on the same day.



POLITICAL MAELSTROME: TIME TO ASSESS RISK



Neil Adams

With the current political upheaval, it would be foolhardy to try and predict milk prices, but as Promar managing director Neil Adams explains, it is essential to consider current political uncertainty and how this could disrupt your business.

Brexit uncertainty has led to a fall in the value of sterling. This will make the price of exports more attractive and the UK more competitive in export markets which could be a positive force for milk prices. At the same time the deepening trade war between China and the US could lead to China looking to source

dairy products from elsewhere, with Europe being such a sizeable producer the UK can currently benefit from this dynamic.

If the UK crashes out of the EU with no deal and defaults to World Trade Organisation rules, prices will almost certainly rise as dairy products, along with meat, attract high tariffs. This might be welcomed by producers but the effects on demand could be very significant.

For processors reliant on exports, they face the highest level of uncertainty in the run up to October, when Britain could leave the EU without a trade agreement. Their current customers will want to have certainty of supply and may look to secure an alternative processor outside the UK to meet their needs irrespective of whether or not trade disruption occurs at ports.

Longer term concerns about the global impact on the environment from cattle farming is building a head of steam and the anti-dairy sentiment is building. It is hard to predict how this will influence government policy. However, the more one-sided the debate becomes the



harder it will be for politicians to resist the clamour to do something. While these may be an influence in the longer term, it is unlikely to influence prices short term. As we have argued on the previous page more balance is needed in this debate.

Cool heads, contingency planning, communication and collaboration is needed more than ever to cope with these challenges. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to demand frequent open communication with your milk purchaser now more than ever.

CLINICAL MILK FEVER - THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG



Cally Groves

While clinical milk fever is generally easy to identify and can be treated it is very much the tip of the iceberg as significant losses arise from the sub-clinical form.

At the tip of the iceberg it is estimated that 5-7% of cows are affected by clinical milk fever, below the water, a far higher proportion are likely to be suffering sub-clinical milk fever which is more difficult to identify and economically more damaging.

Milk fever is caused by the increased demand for calcium at calving resulting from the onset of milk production. The result can be a rapid decline in blood calcium levels. If levels cannot be maintained, either from the diet or the mobilisation of calcium stored in the bone, milk fever results.

Typically up to 50% of third lactation + cows will have a degree of clinical or sub-clinical hypocalcaemia. Incidence rate of clinical cases will vary from 1% to up to 80%. This is an expensive disease if production loss, increased culling, delayed conception and other disease factors are taken into account. Our own studies indicate a cost of £450 for a clinical case of Milk fever and £74 per subclinical case. Clinical cases may result in the loss of the animal in extreme situations or complete recovery in mild cases.

At a 20% incidence rate a typical 200 cow UK herd could be losing around £18,000 per year alone from milk fever, so effective prevention strategies should be a priority.

Prevention starts with good basic management and reducing stress in dry cows. Avoiding overcrowding, reducing unnecessary changes in groupings and ensuring sufficient trough space will all help.

Avoid high calcium feeds

The diet is key. Get this right and the incidence of both clinical and sub-clinical milk fever can be reduced. Feed only good quality forages free of moulds and mycotoxins and avoid high calcium feeds like grass silage, beet pulp and lucerne, especially in the last three weeks before calving. Ration guidelines to help reduce the incidence of milk fever include:

- 12-14kgDM intake.
- 50% NDF.
- 125MJ fed (adjusted for breed / weight of cow) three weeks pre calving – if one dry group target 120MJ through the whole dry period.
- Feed high quality protein sources to deliver 1200g of Metabolisable Protein.

Milk fever is largely preventable with good controls in place, but there is

also a wide range of solutions available to 'solve' the problem of calcium metabolism.

These include approaches such as oral drenching with easily absorbed calcium immediately post calving. Then there are full and partial DCAB diets as well as specific low potassium and low calcium diets which all influences the metabolic balance in the cow. Some are easy and quick to implement, others less so.

Best solution

With such an enormous range of commercial products designed to help it is very easy to get confused when choosing a solution. Independent advice will steer you towards the optimal solution by assessing the incidence and history of milk fever together with proper analysis of the environment and feedstuffs can the best solution be determined.

Our consultants are well-placed to provide an impartial assessment of the most effective way to reduce the losses from clinical and sub-clinical milk fever in your herd.



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Published by: Promar International, Alpha Building, London Road, Stapeley, Nantwich, Cheshire, CW5 7JW.
Tel 01270 616800 • www.promar-international.com