

'A Learning Journey' to Hillhead of Covington

Hillend
Climate Change Focus Farm

Notes from trip to Hillhead of
Covington near Carnwath 4th
October 2015

This was the fourth meeting of the Hillend climate change focus farm discussion group, looking at practical ideas to improve farm efficiency and profitability.

Hillhead of Covington

Willie Baillie currently milks 237 Holstein cows with all milk going to Grahams dairies.

The business has recently purchased 100 Jersey heifers from Denmark; currently 17 of these have calved with their milk being included with the herd. Once a large enough lactating group has been established, the Jersey milk will be supplied to Grahams on a separate contract.

The fulltime staff at Hillhead consists of Willie and his brother plus 2 additional staff. Most of the large machinery jobs eg. (silage, whole-cropping slurry handling) are carried out by Willie's brother's contracting firm.

The Hillend group heard about Willie's daily post calving protocols in his fresh calved cows, calf rearing and herd health. The group heard how daily temperature monitoring along with measuring feed intakes for three weeks prior to introduction to the main milking herd allowed identification of any problem cows before they were put back in calf. The group heard in detail about different aspects of the business; overleaf are some of the key points highlighted by Willie.



Cattle housing

The cattle are housed in a modern cubicle shed; Willie takes a critical approach to ventilation with an open top ridge through the shed and open sides during good weather, curtained at other times. The feed rail has locking head yokes, used daily when the cattle are first feeding, helping to see which animals are 'hanging back' on feed intake and also allowing Willie to temperature check each animal in the group. This check is done daily for the 10 days post calving, with records kept for each individual. On day 10 the cow receives a vet check. After 21 days the cows receive a final vet check before being transferred to the main milking herd.

All cattle are housed in cubicles, bedded with sand, apart from the calving pens which are straw bedded. Willie feels strongly that sand is the 'gold standard' of bedding in terms of cow comfort and hygiene. Willie believes the reduction in mastitis cases at Hillhead (down to 20 cases in 100 cows) is partly due to sand bedding as well as other factors including parlour hygiene and a strict culling rate.

Parlour hygiene

One machine washable cloth per cow is used for teat cleaning. The milking staff work on their own ensuring that other staff don't enter the parlour to help, minimising the risk of cross contamination. Willie uses cluster liners made with a softer rubber than most other liners on the market - this choice of liners ensures that teat health is kept at optimum levels. Although these are replaced more often he feels that the benefits to teat health and the reduction of mastitis is well worth the investment.

Lastly cows are dried of for 50 days and teat sealed with conventional dry cow tubes and Orbeseal. Cows with a somatic cell count higher than 180 are treated with antibiotics to cure any subclinical mastitis infection. Cows are culled if they have more than 3 cases of mastitis.

Tackling lameness

Willie regularly locomotion scores cows and treats stock in a footbath. Stock are put through three times a week for milking cows and once a week for heifers. The foot bath has a 3m section filled with water to clean and remove dirt and debris from the animals feet before they enter a 4m long section with Formalin. The length of this bath is critical; at 4m long it ensures that the animal places each hoof twice into the bath while walking through. Cows with poor locomotion are culled after 3 instances.

Calving cows

Cows are moved to straw bedded pens for calving with the calves taken off their mothers as soon as they are dry. Calves receive five litres of colostrum within the first 12 hours and a further three litres within the next 12 hours. Colostrum is tested ensuring that for the next ten days the calf receives good quality colostrum. After this the calves are fed on whole milk. Calves are jacketed and kept in individual hutches for 6-8 weeks before being moved into group hutches (consisting of five calves) for 3 weeks. In the group hutches they are given a course mix and hay. Willie vaccinates calves against pneumonia and is pleased with how they perform in this system. Good management means calf mortality is low; only 3 calves have been lost in the last year.

Insemination Policy

Pedometers are used in the heifer group to monitor for oestrus and the heifers are AI-ed with sexed semen. The milking cows are visually monitored after 21 days for signs of oestrus using chalk on their tail heads. Cows are aimed to be served at 50 days and are given until 70 days to get into calf before a vet assesses them. Cows with a suspected *Corpeus Lutem* are treated with Oestromate and fix time AI-ed. They are then preg-tested at 5-6 weeks post service and any cow still empty is treated with a final dose of Oestromate and served again.

Hillend Climate Change Focus Farm meetings are free to attend - all farmers are welcome. Contact farm facilitator James Buchanan on 01738 636 611 or email at james.buchanan@sac.co.uk for more information.

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