The Hillend Climate Change Focus Farm discussion group met at the Forth Valley Campus in Stirling to discuss both lameness and antibiotic use in the dairy herd. Under performance of livestock will affect both farm profitability and the farm carbon footprint, as the same emissions will be produced, but for less saleable output.

Are thin cows lame or are lame cows thin?

SAC Vet Manager Colin Mason talked through findings from a study looking at the performance of cows within the SRUC Crichton herd in Dumfries.

In the study which used the SRUC Crichton cows, the feet of culled cows were sent for an MRI scan to identify the level of scarring on the fat pad within the foot. It was evident that there was a huge variation in the amount of scarring that had occurred on the feet of the culled cows.

The cows which were culled because they were too thin had significantly more scarring than the cows culled for other reasons (e.g. bad udders, poor fertility). The scans showed that cows culled for reasons other than lameness has much less scarring within the foot fat pad.

The conclusion was that if a cow’s body condition score had been too low at any time in her lifetime, the fat pad on the feet would have been reduced. This would lead to damage and scarring, and increase the risk of lameness.

The study found that maintaining the cows in the correct body condition score was the most important measure in reducing lameness and therefore reducing the subsequent amount of culling as a result of lameness.
Use of antibiotics

During the meeting, Colin also discussed the current best practice measures when it came to reducing antibiotic use when drying off the milking cow.

Reducing antibiotic use in the dairy herd is a hot topic area right now, with many milk buyers and end users encouraging farming to look at ways of minimising antibiotic use within the herd. With properly planned selective dry cow therapy, it is possible to reduce the amount of antibiotics used in the dry cow period if the correct steps are followed.

The group discussed how there have been a number of occasions where farmers have set out to try and achieve this and have not had the results expected, leading to increased costs and reduced performance from the cows in the next lactation. This can make it difficult to convince the farm business manager that this is indeed an area which they should look to change from their normal procedure, which on many farms has proved to be a successful practice for a number of years. However it is worth discussing use of antibiotics with your own vet.

Reducing lameness in the dairy herd

Cows have evolved to hide lameness to reduce the risk of attracting predators, however this makes feet issues harder for us to spot. Its therefore important to look at our cows and pick up on any early signs of foot issues. Colin went on to describe how routine preventative foot trimming, in conjunction with locomotion scoring, is the best means of reducing the level of herd lameness. Colin covered when and how foot trimming should be carried out in the dairy herd.

Lameness control should be addressed in the herds veterinary herd health plan, the essential components of a lameness control programme should include:

- Monitoring lameness incidence and causes
- A planned foot trimming programme
- Strategic, regular foot bathing
- Prompt treatment of lame cows
- Specific management of fist lactation cattle
- Clean and comfortable walking surfaces for the cows.

You can read more in the SAC Technical Note number TN 599 Preventing Lameness in Dairy Cows.

Meetings are free to attend and all farmers are welcome.

For Hillend, contact farm facilitator James Buchanan on 01738 636 611 or via email at james.buchanan@sac.co.uk for more information.

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