A more targeted approach to antibiotic use has helped Andrew Brewer save thousands of pounds a year on his 300ha dairy farm in Cornwall

Andrew’s 700 crossbred cows are managed under a low-input, pasture-based system at Ennis Barton Farm, near St Columb.

The cows yield about 4,000 litres on once-a-day milking and milk is sold to Arla.

The farm had been treating all milkers with antibiotics at drying off to control mastitis.

“The change in antibiotic use came after our milk buyer asked us to consider selective dry cow therapy,” says Andrew.

“But we are not individually milk recorded so we didn’t have each cow’s cell count data to base a selective approach on,” he adds.

However, Andrew had previously bought a Draminski mastitis tester to get to the bottom of a number of cases some years earlier.

“We had the tester in the tool box so we used that to test and monitor each cow’s cell counts,” he says.

The cell count tests are carried out during lactation and again just before drying off. Any cows which produce a high cell count are marked with tail tape, monitored carefully for signs of mastitis and only treated if necessary.

At drying off, cell counts are tested again.
Antibiotic treatment is only used on cows which produce a second, high reading. For animals which have a consistently low cell count, or where monitoring shows counts have dropped by the second test, antibiotics are no longer used.

It means that the farm has cut routine antibiotic treatment from 100% of cows to just 50%.

To minimise the risk of mastitis infection all animals have teat seal applied and are bedded on a recycled paper product through winter housing.

Andrew has noted that the cows which received teat seal only, had fewer cases of mastitis than the ones which received the preventative antibiotic.

“It shows that over the years we have unnecessarily treated cows to prevent mastitis.

“At £6 a head, cutting treatment costs on 50% of the 700 cows, means we are now saving thousands of pounds a year.

“With milk prices as they have been it is a vital step in a low-input system like ours,” he adds.

But cost wasn’t the only reason Andrew cut down on antibiotic use.

The debate over antibiotic resistance and pressure on policy makers to withdraw products is a huge concern to him.

“It is important that we don’t overuse antibiotics and demonstrate that we can use them responsibly.

“We need to safeguard their use for the future so that they are still available when we really do need them to protect the health and welfare of our animals.”