

Selective dry cow therapy reduces antibiotic use long term, says Derbyshire dairy farmer



Selective dry cow therapy has seen a consistent, long-term reduction in antibiotics used to combat mastitis on Derbyshire dairy farmer Robert Thornhill's unit.

Just 10% of Robert's 260 spring calving Friesian cross New Zealand Jersey cows are treated against the disease on his Standhill Farm, Great Longstone, near Bakewell.

He switched from a high-yielding 130-cow Holstein pedigree herd to a low input, pasture-based system about 17 years ago.

Average yields of 5,000-litre/cow/year are achieved on very little concentrate with the NZ Jersey genetics producing the high milk solids for his contract with Arla.

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The buyer has introduced a clause in contracts which stipulates that its suppliers should reduce dry cow therapy antibiotic use by 10%.

But Robert has already gone way beyond that requirement.

“I had been brought up to blanket treat cows with antibiotics when they were dried off, but the move to a lower-yielding set up, all those years ago, got me thinking about the need for every input,” Robert says.

“I started to think that it was illogical to routinely treat cows when low cell counts indicated there wasn’t an infection,” he explains.

The selective dry cow therapy began about nine years ago and antibiotic use has come down year-on-year ever since.

By 2015, 30% of the cows were syringed at drying off but last year this had reduced to one in ten.

Currently cell counts are used to guide which animals are treated for mastitis.

Cows with cell count levels above 250,000, or those showing a sharp increase, receive antibiotics in the infected quarter along with teat sealant.

The rest of the herd have sealant alone after a rigorous hygiene procedure to clean teats.

“Without antibiotics it is essential to produce aseptic conditions on the teat before sealant is used,” warns Robert.