

The importance of milk recording and the use of your milk recording reports to improve overall herd performance

Don Crowley¹ and Stuart Childs²

¹Teagasc, Clonakilty, Co. Cork; ²Teagasc, Moorepark, Fermoy, Co. Cork

Summary

- Milk recording reports contain significant quantities of information but the usage of this information at farm level is low.
- Better use of milk recording reports combined with ICBF Sire Advice has the potential to assist in improving genetic gain by identifying the best animals from which to breed replacements.
- Improved interpretation along with better mastitis incidence recording will be necessary to make the correct decisions at dry off in a selective dry cow therapy environment in the future.
- Early milk recording i.e. first milk recording carried out within 60 days of calving is crucial to analysis of dry cow therapy during the previous dry cow period.

Introduction

Milk recording in Ireland is low with just 33% of herds and only 48% of cows recorded in 2017 (ICBF). This compares very poorly with other countries such as New Zealand (75% of herds) and Denmark (90%).

Milk recording reports provide a significant volume of information however; lack of interpretation and action upon results limits the potential to improve herd performance.

Rightly or wrongly, somatic cell count (SCC) management is one of the main reasons that people milk record. Failure to deal with high SCC results following a milk recording can have consequences in terms of milk production performance throughout the remainder of the lactation and increase the risk of spread of infection to other non-infected cows. Furthermore, failure to dry off cows correctly on the basis of their SCC performance throughout lactation could potentially carry an udder health problem from one lactation to the next. Many rely on the blanket dry cow therapy approach to solve problems encountered during the lactation at dry off. This is a strategy that will not work into the future as blanket dry cow therapy comes to an end from 2022. High new infection rates i.e. >10% is an indication that practices during the previous dry period were not adequate, thus highlighting the need for dramatic improvement in hygiene if selective dry cow is to be considered. It is important to note these high infection rates occur with the luxury of an antibiotic preparation and sealer. Milk recording is very important for identification of subclinical mastitis. Records of mastitis incidence are also important. Cows may have responded to treatment of mastitis and may not have elevated SCC at milk recording and therefore could be overlooked for antibiotic treatment at dry off. Mastitis incidence records are going to increase in importance due to the ban on blanket dry cow therapy in the future. There are numerous ways to record mastitis cases, text message to ICBF, use of farm software packages or simply a diary. What works best for an individual will be the best system. The most important thing is that mastitis cases are recorded as this could have a significant impact on milk quality into the future. Milk quality issues not only impact from a financial point of view but also can be a significant source of stress on farm and should be avoided if at all possible.

Along with SCC management, improving udder health and reducing the usage of antibiotics, milk recording provides excellent detail on cow performance. Prior to and following quota abolition the objective of getting stock on the ground has surpassed the requirements in terms of the quality of that stock with all cows being bred to dairy. As the expansion begins to slow, more and more are looking to now improve the quality of the stock in the herd to maximise herd performance. Interpretation of milk recording data and the information that it provides will have a critical role to play in the development of breeding plans on farm in the future. This information when combined with the revised Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF) Sire Advice programme launched in 2018 will help to maximise the rate of genetic gain at farm level which is strongly correlated to profitability.

Milk samples collected when recording can also be used to diagnose pregnancy as well as testing for disease such as Johne's at individual cow level.

Conclusions

The number of herds milk recording in Ireland is low relative to our international counterparts and needs to increase significantly. Its importance will become even more critical as blanket dry cow therapy is phased out. Combining milk recording information with ICBF Sire Advice will help accelerate herd genetic gain. Milk sampling at milk recording also allows the options to screening for Johne's and also to diagnose pregnancy.

