Dairy-4-Future farmers review breeding and heifer rearing policies

Dairy-4-Future pilot farmers recently had the opportunity to discuss breeding selection and heifer rearing policy on the farm of Edward Agnew. Edward farms near Annalong, County Down, where he milks a herd of Holstein Friesian cows in an autumn calving pattern, seeking to maximise the efficient use of the available resources.

Robert Patterson, CAFRE Dairy Technologist, explained that “Edward Agnew showed how actively selecting for sires to improve butterfat percentage and fertility index was already showing improvements in herd performance. Edward also presented details from his herd genetic report, which was used to select a list of bulls which would improve his herd based on PLI, Butterfat % and Protein %”.

The group of pilot farmers discussed and developed a set of sire selection criteria they felt would best meet their needs. This included Predicted Transmitting Ability (PTA) for Milk ≥ + 400 kg, Butterfat % ≥ +0.10 %, Protein % ≥ + 0.10 % and Fertility Index ≥ + 5 days.

Edward outlined his calf and heifer rearing policy to the group and provided current performance figures for the heifers. At an average age of 12 months, the heifers weighed 331kg. Daily live weight gain (LWG) from birth to turnout was 0.86 kg LW/day and from turnout (1st May) to present, was 0.76 kg LW/day. This gave the heifers an overall lifetime LWG of 0.80 kg LW/day.

Edward Agnew standing alongside one year old heifers at grass

The group discussed performance targets including service weight, age at first calving and weight at calving. They concluded that animals were on target to meet service weight targets (360 kg approaching 15 months age) and would allow Edward to maintain an average age at first calving of 24 months.

Robert continued that results on environmental Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) including Carbon Footprint, Ammonia, Nitrogen efficiency and Phosphorus efficiency were disseminated to the farmers, which had been generated from the analysis of their physical farm performance data collected as part of the project

The group agreed to meet again later in the winter. CAFRE would like to express our appreciation to all the Dairy-4-Future pilot farmers for their continued co-operation and support with the project.

Dairy-4-Future is a €3.8 million Atlantic Interreg funded project, which aims to improve the sustainability of dairy farming in the Atlantic region of Europe. Through a consortium of eleven partners, from Scotland to the Azores, the Dairy-4-Future project aims to increase the competitiveness, sustainability and resilience of dairy farms in these Atlantic regions, through the development of innovative and efficient dairy systems.

Some of the farmers attending Dairy-4-Future farm visit at Edward Agnew's.