

Cumbria: Dairy Monitor Farm

Hesket Farm, Dacre, Nr Penrith - farmed by Matt and Sue Bland

Hesket Farm Update - Spring 2011



RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme
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Matt Bland is Cumbria's

Dairy Monitor Farmer



Sue and Matt Bland with their daughter Lucy and SAC dairy and nutrition specialist Jimmy Goldie

Matt and Sue Bland farm in partnership with Matt's parents, John and Margaret (who are planning to retire). They have a 160-cow Holstein dairy herd, with a yield average of 8,100 litres per year. Their plan is to move up to 300 cows by the end of 2011.

Replacement heifers used to be reared on other farms over the winter period, but due to changes at the host farm and decisions to expand the herd more quickly, youngstock have been sold and extra new-calving heifers are being bought in.

They farm 400 acres (161ha) of mixed soil type grassland, ranging from 660 to 1,200ft; 62 acres is used for wholecrop - (winter and spring cereals, beans). Soil type near to the buildings is mainly heavy clay and this means that although there is usually plenty of grass, it cannot always be utilized for dairy cow grazing. Mobility Scoring has recently been used to identify the extent of the farms lameness problem.

“We benefit from the group meetings because they look in detail at the main things we need to concentrate on, such as increasing the use of grazing, improving cow mobility and other things that come up as we expand the herd. Most farmers are interested in making improvements in these areas, so hopefully we will all learn together and from each other” - **Matt Bland**

WHAT IS A MONITOR FARM?

A monitor farm is a focal point for a group of interested farmers and industry experts to work together and share their knowledge and expertise for mutual benefit. The farmers in the 'monitor farm business group' look at the impact of changes made to the farming practice following plans developed by themselves, the host farmer and expertise from the industry.

The three dairy monitor farms in the North West have been selected by farmers; they are all commercial farms, typical of their local area, run by farmers dedicated to improving profit and performance. The aim is to increase the levels of performance for the host farms, and to monitor it, until March 2013.

See the Livestock Northwest website for details and progress of all the monitor farms and other events being organised through the RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme:

www.livestocknw.co.uk



Turn over for more

Meetings in 2011 will address core issues

In September 2010, Matt and Sue tested out their business plan for expansion as part of a DairyCo Planning for Profit course, with Jimmy Goldie, senior dairy consultant for the SAC. In January and February 2011, Jimmy facilitated two meetings on-farm, with a 'business group' of over 30 farmers, to determine what would be the best way to:

1) Make better use of the grass silage and wholecrop grown on the farm, bearing in mind the quality and quantity of feeds and the housing and feeding facilities available.

The farmers who attended the meeting were given the chance to condition score the cows and help Matt and Sue answer some strategic questions about their farm business over lunch.

Action points from the meeting

- Top up the energy content of the diet for the dry cows in the last 2 weeks before calving.
- There is scope for increasing the proportion of forage in the diet. Calculated approximately 53% of the total ration (including blend fed in the parlour) is forage. Milk yield is moderate at 25.5litres, milk quality is very good at 4.28 and 3.38 indicating rumen function and energy balance is good.
- Next year Matt and Sue will need to make excellent 2nd cut silage for the extra cows.
- Cows are eating approx 18kg DM. This could be increased to nearer 20kg. The energy of the diet is good at 12.2ME.

(Target over 12.0MJ/kg DM). Crude protein levels around 16.5% in total diet depending on contribution from bean wholecrop. This could be increased to 17.5% by increasing the blend but cow performance should be monitored in way of yield, milk quality, dung consistency and fertility.

- Need extra space in transfer passages (take 4 cubicles out?).
- The last two may be achieved when the new shed is in operation.
- Condition scores of the different groups were generally felt to be about right.
- Need more water troughs.



The lean cows were usually lame ones. Recommend mobility scoring and treating immediately. The herd had not been through the footbath for weeks due to ice and this had allowed lameness to build up.

2) Make better use of grazed grass for 300 cows in the coming season, bearing in mind the grazing limitations (wet ground, sward quality, fences, tracks and water troughs).

Action Points

The farmers attending assessed the groups of cows and walked the farm to help Matt and Sue make a decision about whether to use grazed grass to reduce feed costs. Jimmy Goldie from SAC and Keenan Nutrition were there to help:

- The high yielding cows (approx 180 cows) would be housed day and night for the summer period
- The low yielding cows (approx 80 cows) would be grazed day and night
- All the grazing fields would be harrowed with a spring tine harrow
- Two new water troughs would be installed to ensure adequate water supply for the grazing season
- The four fields at the back of the steading would be used for grazing and each field would be split in two.



Key action points for 2011 monitor farm business group meetings are to:

- Review the lameness/ mobility improvement strategy
- Review labour requirements for the additional cows
- Set up and monitor the grazing plan for 2011
- Formulate and monitor the crop and stock plan for 2011
- Develop and monitor the health plan for additional and existing cows

Further meetings planned for 2011:

Fri May 6th	>	Lameness and Mobility Improvement, on-farm meeting
June 16th	>	Visit to the SAC Crichton Royal Farm, Dumfries
August 30th	>	Reviewing whether the grazing plan has worked and planning winter feeding
Sept 22nd	>	Sizing Up the Future: A one day conference to help Dairy Farmers who are looking to dramatically increase herd size or would like to discuss aspects of herd expansion.
Oct 11th	>	Open Day including update on cow mobility and DairyCo 'Healthy Feet' programme.
Nov 15th	>	Milkbench comparison and business management

“ Jimmy Goldie, Senior Dairy and Nutrition Consultant, SAC “It is helpful to have local input and to discuss topical issues for all dairy farmers. Planning expansion can be quite daunting and being able to discuss this openly with a group of farmers always yields good ideas. Monitoring progress during an expansion plan is crucial to keep the income and expenditure in line.”

“ Kevin Beaty, Chairman of the monitor farm business group (steering group) “It is a refreshing way to be involved in a farm meeting. Rather than just watch a speaker, the farmers get a chance to air their views and we manage to come to a consensus to inform Matt and Sue. I would encourage any dairy farmer to come along and see some of the new ideas and the farming business tools being used. By coming back to the farm regularly, we can see the results of the decisions Matt and Sue make, based on what they learn.”