MILK QUALITY AWARDS 2019

Team culture key to milk quality, says Tasmanian Milk Quality Award winner

Accurate record keeping, herd testing, improving skill sets and maintaining a high staff retention rate are the keys to improving milk quality, according to Tasmanian dairy farmer Mark Griffin.

The central north dairy farm was announced as a winner of Dairy Australia's 2019 Milk Quality Awards, recognising the farm as being in the top 100 nationwide for milk quality.

The 800-cow three-way crossbred herd is milked through a 50-bale rotary with a spring-based calving pattern, producing an average monthly bulk milk cell count (BMCC) of 70,000 in 2018.

Managing the farm team

Mark has seen milk quality continue to improve in recent years, making continual improvements to the system and attributing the farm's success to the support, effort and attitude of the farm team.

'Establishing common team goals with staff and improving your team culture is very important,' Mark said.

Mark regularly encourages the team to suggest ways to improve their milk quality and take an active role in preventing mastitis.

He believes keeping the cows calm and handling them gently reduces their stress levels and increases the quality of the milk.

The farm has a very high retention rate, which Mark believes plays a major role in business profitability.

'Attention to detail is crucial - it doesn't matter if you milk 1,000 cows or 100 cows. You have to support your staff, lead by example, and provide flexibility of lifestyle.' Mark said.

Encouraging training and upskilling

Recognising the importance of building the skills of people on-farm, the farm team has undertaken Dairy Australia's Cups On Cups Off training, which teaches best practice for mastitis prevention.

After deciding to take the farm's milk quality to the next level and break into the top 100, Mark decided to refresh his knowledge and pursue more training to further improve the dairy herd's performance.

'I always recommend refreshers – even if you only pick up one or two new things at training courses, it makes a big difference to your overall system. You can also create networks and talk to other farmers about what has worked well and what hasn't worked well for them.'

Preventing mastitis

With a strong focus on continual improvement, the team have implemented a number of new processes to improve milk quality and reduce mastitis cases.

They have fitted Ambic in-line mastitis detectors in the dairy, on each set of cups, which are closely monitored by the cups off operator at every milking.

If mastitis is detected during milking, that bale is not used for the rest of the milking to prevent cross-contamination.

'All heifers are teat sealed to reduce the risk of mastitis at calving, with a goal of saving costs in the long-term by reducing the number of mastitis cases and increasing lifetime productivity of those animals,' Mark said.

All staff receive training on-farm before they are tasked with teat sealing, with the farm team recognising that hygiene is crucial to milk quality.

Herd testing is conducted monthly, with the data then used to identify cows which require dry cow treatment.

Higher cell count cows averaging more than 200,000 throughout the lactation will be treated with a broad-spectrum dry cow therapy at the end of their lactation.

Milk cultures are collected at calving time and prior to dry off to ensure the most effective dry cow therapy and mastitis treatments are being administered.

A 'traffic light' system of different coloured paint dots has also been implemented to monitor the herd, with a yellow dot placed in the middle of the udder of cows that are suspected to be at risk of mastitis.

Cow behaviour is actively monitored by all team members, with Mark believing that knowing the herd is crucial to noticing behavioural changes in particular cows.

Believing prevention is better than cure, the farm has switched to a premixed iodine teat spray, having moved away from mixing iodine concentrates themselves. Mark believes this has saved time and achieves a more accurate consistency.

The farm also adds glycerine into the iodine after calving in the wetter months and has found this to be very effective, improving teat condition and cow comfort dramatically.

'All staff in the dairy wear milking gloves, and if mastitis is detected at cups on or cups off, the milking glove that came into contact with mastitis bacteria is thrown in the bin and a new glove put on. Mastitis cows are always milked last to prevent cross contamination.'

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Dairy farmers can access a range of resources to improve milk quality and prevent mastitis from Dairy Australia at: **dairyaustralia.com.au/mastitis**.

More information on Cups On Cups Off courses can be found by contacting Dairy Australia's Regional Development Programs in each dairy region.

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