



LATEST INSIGHTS INTO DAIRY COW MOBILITY



FROM THE 2024
STRIDE SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

PRODUCERS DRIVE COLLABORATIVE STRIDE INITIATIVE

Any herd is only as good as its hooves. Poor mobility impacts feed intake, milk production and fertility, and reduces dairy business efficiency, profitability and sustainability. Optimal foot health is integral to herd performance.

So, with this in mind, a new industry initiative has been created to build a comprehensive picture of hoof health across the UK dairy herd in order to identify areas that require improvement, and set out clear strategies to support producers as they strive to maintain and improve cow mobility.

This supplement shares some key findings of the initiative, as well as thoughts and ideas on how to improve mobility, and some of the practical solutions and steps that producers could take to begin their herd's journey towards better hoof health.

The partners in the Stride initiative represent a broad range of companies involved in helping producers to improve foot health and mobility. CowManagement magazine, as media partner, is also playing a key role in raising awareness of the aims of Stride.

Stride's objective, based around a national survey, is to identify current producers' views on lameness, its impact on herd health and welfare, and on their businesses' bottom line.

This information will be used to inform the wider industry of the key issues affecting hoof health, identifying clear

actions that will help producers take steps to mitigate lameness, and reduce the costs and consequences of poor mobility.

The survey has highlighted that it's producers, rather than cows, that should be the focus when seeking to maintain and improve herd mobility. They are key to implementing change and are the ones who, ultimately, work day-to-day to keep their herd's mobility top of their agenda.

The initiative is producer led and focuses on guidance rather than prescriptive advice. And, although producers are in the driving seat, this is very much a collaborative approach – they are not alone and have the full support of industry partners behind them.

Building a national picture of UK herd mobility is a great start – in fact it's the only place to start if hoof health in the UK herd is to be maintained and improved. It also signifies the start of a collaborative approach where producers support each other and have access to a wealth of help, advice, ideas, tech and expertise from the wider industry and allied sectors. Working together will make progress less onerous and more effective.

The entire dairy chain benefits from good hoof health – not just herds and producers. Allied professions, processors, retailers and consumers can all reap the rewards of improved mobility. So it's only right that it should take a whole-industry approach to support producers as they continue to strive to keep a spring in their cows' – and dairy businesses' – step.

RESULTS

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS OPPORTUNITIES

The Stride mobility survey has provided the most comprehensive picture of foot health and mobility in the UK, with more than 350 respondents representing a broad cross-section of herd size and systems, and providing an in-depth view of foot health within their business.

What becomes clear is that some producers are achieving low levels of compromised mobility by making full use of the knowledge and support available. However, the survey also shows that for other producers there are still opportunities to improve management and reduce the consequences for their herd.

Herds are still affected by all the common causes of poor mobility and compromised foot health – digital dermatitis, white line disease, solar ulcers and bruising, and overgrown claws – and this is impacting profitability.

AHDB put the average cost of a case of lameness at £330, a figure that includes lost production, treatment costs, labour and increased involuntary culling. The actual cost per case varies depending on the specific problem. While the average cost of a case of digital dermatitis is £75, white line disease will cost £300 per case with a sole ulcer at £520.

More recently, poor mobility has been identified as a contributor to raised emissions per kilogramme of milk produced, due to the impact of reduced production and the effect of poor mobility and foot health on replacement rates and heifer numbers.

It is likely that most herds underestimate both the incidence of lameness and the cost per case, meaning the consequences of poor hoof-health are understated. Furthermore, faced with other issues and challenges, it is possible that lameness has fallen down the priority list on many units.

So, what does the survey reveal about the opportunities to reduce the costs and consequences of poor mobility?

It isn't a simple problem – there isn't a simple answer

A wide range of conditions fall under the umbrella of lameness or compromised foot health. Some of these conditions, such as digital dermatitis, are infectious, and others, such as solar bruising are not. And a considerable number of factors contribute to herd foot health including the preventive strategies put in place, breeding policies, buildings and facilities, transition-cow management, herd nutrition, staff training, and many more.

It is important to understand that improving foot health and mobility is a complex issue and requires a structured approach to manage it. Producers should start by understanding the true levels of compromised foot health in their herd and the principal causes to help structure their approach to making improvements.



RESULTS

The survey showed that many herds were employing a range of tactics to improve mobility and foot health. They were also taking advice from a number of external specialists including vets, nutritionists. The effective use of all the tools available to improve foot health needs a planned, integrated and managed approach to deliver the best results, and this can bring its own challenges.

Plenty of people involved – but who is in charge?

When respondents were asked who is responsible for managing foot health, the survey exposed a wide range of answers including external advisers as well as members of dairy management teams. It was not unusual for more than one person to be 'in charge'. But how can this be an effective way to manage a complex issue? Equally, how can an external specialist in one field be expected to manage such a complex condition?

To improve progress, it is worth considering whether there is clearly allocated responsibility for foot health and whether it has been allocated to the correct person?

Producers should ask what the main motivators for their team to improve foot health are, as the answers may be surprising. It could be small practical things, like less time spent trimming feet or sorting cows for the foot trimmer. It could be saved time getting cows in for

milking either from grazing, the cubicles or the straw yard for lame cows. It may be pride in managing a herd of cows that are sound on their feet.

By allocating responsibility for improving foot health to someone who will benefit directly, it is more likely they will commit to the task because they have a vested interest in it. And with agreed targets for improvement, it will be clear to the person responsible what they are expected to achieve.

Provide the tools

Delegation of responsibility is only the start. The person charged with improving foot health must have the resources to deliver the improvements. This will likely be a combination of equipment and expertise.

Does the unit have the facilities to allow effective prevention of mobility issues and are the facilities the best for the job? Is the footbath sited correctly and is it used frequently enough? What about the crush? Do you have a dedicated crush for foot trimming and is it a modern powered crush? The easier it is to examine feet the more likely, and effectively, it will be done. Facilities must be a convenience and not a hindrance to improvement.

The survey confirmed that most herds use a range of external services either in place of or alongside farm staff. These include, among others, foot trimmers, nutritionists, vets and mobility scorers. Does involving so many people ensure progress is made or does it cause confusion and allow things to slip? How often do producers hear: 'I won't trim her feet as the foot trimmer is coming next week'. Do producers know that the herd's ration is correctly balanced for zinc and biotin, or is this just assumed?

RESULTS



Having a comprehensive plan with clear and achievable targets, which are discussed at regular team meetings, is one way to maintain focus on foot health and mobility. This will be helped by the whole industry agreeing benchmarks that allow progress to be measured and monitored, backed by agreed industry protocols for the prevention and treatment of mobility issues.

Producers should then consider how this is communicated with the entire dairy team. Wipeboards are a great way to identify cows that require closer attention within the herd and ensure that everyone can see this. Technology, like WhatsApp, will allow communication across the internal and external teams to share progress and data, and more widespread use of monitoring technologies will allow producers to share data with a number of advisers. There is no reason that everyone involved cannot be kept up to date.

Finding time

A common theme in the comments from the survey was the issue of time. Time is a precious commodity on farm. Making foot health a priority and allocating time to carry out routine activities could be crucial in improving foot health. How often does time pressure affect mobility issues, because producers and dairy staff just don't have the time to get things done?

There is no doubt that time invested in prevention is better than time spent on treatment and will deliver a better return and reduce stress on the team. Would

the team rather spend time on tasks to reduce foot problems than treat a cow with a problem? If prevention strategies are more effective then less time will be spent treating cows, which will release time and have a positive impact on staff motivation and wellbeing.

All herds and dairy units are different so it is important to evaluate how to make time to manage foot health. It may start with something as simple as diarising when the footbath is replenished, or scheduling foot trims for a set stage of lactation and on a set day of the week.

It could be making time for regular team meetings with the dairy team and external advisers to look at the data to review progress and set targets. Consider how external specialists can best complement the farm team to make the best use of time.

And remember training. Making time for regular and refresher courses is a crucial component in improving foot health, as well as an investment in, and motivator for, the team.

Finally, consider if any investment will help save time. It may be an automated footbath, it could be a powered crush to make foot trimming quicker, safer and more efficient, or perhaps the investment in automated mobility scoring systems. Ask the dairy-management team what investment would help them most.

While the survey highlighted that there are opportunities to improve foot health and realise numerous efficiency benefits, the good news is that there is considerable expertise available to help develop effective programmes to reduce the incidence of poor foot health. Equally, there is a range of proven techniques and a considerable degree of knowledge and innovation to help develop new approaches to further improve mobility.

The survey also indicated areas where herds may see benefits from reviewing their approach to foot health management and the priority given to it, as producers seek to drive production efficiencies, work more closely with their customers and move towards lower emissions.

A copy of the full survey report can be downloaded at: www.stridemobility.co.uk/survey.



By Huw McConochie

LAMENESS AS A TRANSITION DISEASE

The transition period is a critical stage in the dairy production cycle and has been an area where considerable advances have been made, allowing cows to move smoothly into lactation, be more productive, get back in calf more quickly, and ultimately be more profitable.

Transition is a high-risk period for hoof health and cows that transition poorly are at greater risk of developing hoof lesions later in lactation.

Why is lameness an issue during transition?

If cows are going to transition well, producers should adopt a zero-tolerance approach to lame cows in the transition period. Once cows begin to go even slightly lame, there can be a substantial cascade into problems that are predominantly linked to their dry matter intakes (DMIs).

Lame cows have reduced DMI during the dry and transition periods. Any cows that are lame during transition will tend to lose excessive weight during early lactation. Reduced DMI is a key characteristic of cows that will go on to have an increased incidence of transition diseases.

Keeping cows sound on their feet will result in them eating more, adopting normal resting behaviour, producing more milk and having better reproductive success. The return on investment can be considerable.

Reducing lameness during the transition period

Prevention is central to any strategy to reduce lameness issues in transitioning cows. The primary goal is to ensure all cows are sound on their feet by the time they are dried off. This can only be achieved by focusing on identifying cows with a locomotion score of 3 and 4 at least one month before drying off. These cows should be given intensive treatment therapy. All cows should be given a routine functional foot trim at the point of drying off.

Heifers' feet should only be trimmed before calving in herds where lameness problems in the early part of the first lactation have been seen previously. First-calving heifers should be foot-trimmed between six and eight weeks before calving.

Transition-cow housing should also be adequate. Dry-cow facilities only need to be 15% of the size of the milking herd's housing in all-year-round calving systems. Every cow will go through it and the health and performance of each cow is impacted by it. For herds that are seasonal or block-calved, transition is even more important because there is only one chance to 'get it right' each year.

Cubicle comfort and extended lying times help to protect hoof structures so ensure:

- At least one cubicle per cow, or 10m² of lying space
- Cubicles are appropriately sized for cows in the herd
- There is at least 76cm of feed-trough space per cow
- Adequate mechanisms to reduce the impact of heat stress during the summer
- Easy access to a suitably-sized footbath

Supplementing the right trace minerals

Ensure that the transition-cow ration is correctly formulated, including trace mineral supply. Cows are supporting a growing calf and heifers are also working hard to support udder development. This requires trace minerals. In the case of bone and skin formation, predominantly proteins and macro-minerals are needed, but it's trace minerals that keep everything together.

Correct supplementation with trace minerals means cows and heifers have more robust immune systems and can divert more energy (glucose) towards production, while at the same time helping reproductive performance and maintenance of healthy claws. There is good evidence that cows fed Zinpro Availa Dairy have improved hoof health as a result of having a better glucose balance. This is a result of the unique way the trace minerals are absorbed via an amino-acid transporter.

Many herds have a far-off and a close-up dry group, with the far-off cows fed the least-cost supplementation. Switching to better-quality supplements, across all dry cows, will result in a reduction in transition-cow problems. It is worth the investment when the long-term implications of successful transition are taken into account.

Use data to reduce the impact of lameness on transition

To help producers reduce the impact of lameness on transition, Zinpro has recently updated and extended its Zinpro FirstStep Hoof Health and Management Program.

The program provides recommendations to improve hoof health and reduce the costs associated with lameness. The Transition Assessor in this program identifies the risks by looking at a herd and unit's facilities, milk production and transition diseases.

The outcome is a detailed report that allows producers to focus on the areas of management that will deliver the best return. The report prioritises the changes required to improve performance, many of which can be quite small and easily implemented.



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TAKE A STEP-BY-STEP TEAM APPROACH TO MANAGE LAMENESS

Lameness is one of the most common issues seen in the UK dairy herd, with clear repercussions on animal welfare and productivity. Ceva Animal Health encourages taking a team approach when it comes to tackling mobility issues in a herd. The 'FAB FIVE' foot treatment team includes producers, vets, foot trimmers, mobility scorers and nutritional consultants each playing their role, whether this is in day-to-day management and treating lameness, or in prevention programmes across the whole herd.

To demonstrate the benefit of a team approach, Ceva has developed a series of dairy-cow lameness and mobility videos and a step-by-step guide, highlighting the importance of implementing a robust and on-going treatment plan to improve cow comfort and reduce lameness in the short term, which can lead to increased production and better herd welfare in the longer term.

Step 1: Review the whole herd's mobility status

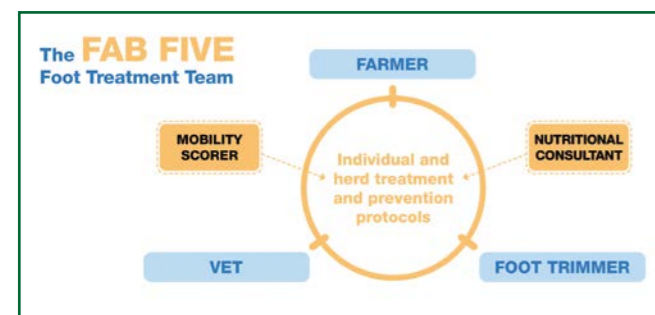
- Use an independent RoMS-accredited mobility scorer.
- Pick up early lameness cases, where prompt treatment leads to better outcomes.
- Keep accurate and detailed records that can be used to create a management action list of new, chronic and maintenance cases.

Step 2: Seek specialist advice

- Immediate vet attention for all severe or painful lesions and to develop a treatment plan.
- Contact a mobility mentor (if this is not the attending vet), such as someone who has been trained to deliver the AHDB Healthy Feet Programme.
- Bring together the 'FAB FIVE' foot treatment team for good decision-making.

Step 3: Initial treatment protocols

- Lameness should be treated within 48 hours of identification by the mobility scorer (or sooner, particularly for cattle with severely impaired mobility) and then at least fortnightly until healed.
- All hoof trimming should be completed by a trained and qualified trimmer.



- All lame cows should be rechecked after between three and five weeks, or sooner for severe lesions, monitor healing.
- If digital dermatitis (DD) lesions are present, cows should be rechecked daily to monitor healing.

Use of NSAIDs:

- Check before using NSAIDs to ensure the optimum product and administration route is selected.
- Record all cows with lesions to draw up a list of those cows requiring pain relief.
- If approved by a vet, the first dose of a NSAID can be administered in the crush, at time of trimming, to reduce further stress on the cow and additional labour.
- Ensure cows requiring further doses are clearly identified and recorded.
- One member of the team should be responsible for on-going NSAID administration.
- NSAIDs containing the active ingredient ketoprofen have a zero milk withhold and are licensed to treat the pain associated with lameness

Step 4: On-going treatment, prevention and monitoring

- Continue to use an independent mobility scorer every two weeks in the first instance and/or train a member of the dairy team to use the AHDB scoring system.
- On-going treatment should occur daily, with all new score 2 cows seen within 48 hours after mobility scoring.
- Plan for regular visits from a trained and qualified foot trimmer who is regularly assessed as competent.
- Develop daily foot-bathing protocols for milking cows (as approved by a vet).
- Set up training plans with dairy staff to ensure they are able to conduct accurate and timely foot checks.

For further information and to view the mobility videos visit: www.wavegoodbyetopain.co.uk.

Ceva Animal Health manufactures the NSAID, Ketofen, which contains the active ingredient ketoprofen. This has a zero milk withhold and is licensed to treat the pain associated with lameness.

Treatment should include some or all of the following: TRIM, BLOCK, NON-STEROIDAL ANTI-INFLAMMATORY (NSAID) PAIN RELIEF and TOPICAL ANTIMICROBIAL SPRAY (as advised by your vet)



Ketofen[®] Break the pain

NSAIDs (non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) such as Ketofen containing the active ketoprofen have a zero milk withhold and are licensed to treat the pain associated with lameness.

Powerful NSAID ^{1,2,3}	Fast acting	1 day (IV) meat withdrawal	No milk withdrawal
Pain associated with lameness	Acute mastitis & udder oedema	Can be given for 1 to 3 days	Post calving paresis

A recent study⁴ concluded that in dairy cows, the addition of **Ketofen 10%** to protocols for the treatment of pain and lameness associated with digital dermatitis, could be beneficial for animal welfare and productivity.

References: 1. Diaz-Reval M.J. et al. 2004. Evidence for a central mechanism of action of S-(+)-ketoprofen. *European J. Pharmacology*, 483: 241-248. • 2. Netter P et al. 1985. Diffusion of intramuscular ketoprofen into the cerebrospinal fluid. *European J. Clinical Pharmacology*, 26: 319-321. • 3. Whay H.R., Webster A.J.F., Waterman-Patterson A.E. 2005. Role of ketoprofen in the modulation of hyperalgesia associated with lameness in dairy cattle. *Vet. Record*, 157: 729-733. • 4. Kasiara K, Anagnostopoulos A, Bedford C, Menka T, Barden M, Griffiths BE, et al. Evaluation of the use of ketoprofen for the treatment of digital dermatitis in dairy cattle: A randomised, positive controlled, clinical trial. *Vet Rec*. 2021;e977. <https://doi.org/10.1002/vetr.977>

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Georgia Thresh

AUTOMATION: THE KEY TO CREATING MORE HOURS IN A DAY

The latest 3D camera technology can help to unlock the cost-savings and benefits of regular mobility scoring.

Mobility scoring is one of those jobs that often falls foul of there just not being enough hours in a day, yet the evidence is that more frequent scoring will improve herd mobility, improve performance and reduce the financial consequences of lameness.

In the same way that automation has underpinned improvements in areas such as fertility management and heat detection, it offers the same potential to improve herd mobility.

“The Stride survey shows that 76% of respondents either do not mobility score cows or do so less than quarterly,” says HerdVision’s technical vet Georgia Thresh. “This represents a significant missed opportunity to crack down on lameness. But perhaps it’s unsurprising because manual mobility scoring is a time-consuming exercise.

“First, cows have to be individually and manually scored, and then the results need to be analysed in order to assess the status of the herd to identify trends and root causes that can be addressed. Are there problems at a particular time of year, in a specific building, or in younger or older cows?”

Mobility scoring

Mobility scoring is the acknowledged way to assess mobility and allow ranking of cows. Increasingly, quarterly scoring is stipulated by many milk contracts, but regular scoring offers far more advantages than just meeting contract requirements.

The cost of an average case of lameness is estimated to be £330, due to a combination of treatment costs, labour, reduced productivity and increased culling.

AHDB suggests that lameness rates average 30%, indicating it remains a big issue and drain on profitability.

The true consequences of lameness are probably underestimated on farm for a number of reasons. Often the condition is progressive with a gradual decline in mobility, which can significantly impact performance.

“A cheque is rarely written for many of the costs and implications. There is no direct cost noted for the additional time spent treating lame cows, for the lost milk production or the consequences for fertility. It is only in extreme cases, such as when the vet or perhaps the foot trimmer is called, that an identifiable cost arises,” she explains.

As with many conditions, the foundation of effective lameness control is monitoring and early intervention. If cows showing signs of impaired mobility can be attended to more quickly, the extent and duration of the problem, and the financial consequences, can be reduced.

The difficulty is making the time for this in already hectic dairy management schedules. Few, if any, units have the time available to mobility score all cows as regularly as required to allow early intervention. “Scoring cows in robot herds presents additional challenges. And, as scoring is against a subjective scale, there is a risk of different interpretations leading to inconsistent results. It is for these reasons that automation presents an elegant solution,” adds Ms Thresh.



She suggests that automation has underpinned data-based decision-making in other areas of herd management and believes there are strong parallels between mobility scoring and heat detection.

“Until fairly recently, heat detection required significant and regular periods of time to be dedicated to watching cows, with trained staff looking for signs that cows were in heat. But signs could be small and many cows would come into heat only for a short duration when not being observed, which meant a proportion of heats were missed.

Automated systems

“As with mobility, no cheque was written for the financial consequences, so the costs – or losses – were not clear to the business.”

That said, these issues were addressed by the introduction of automated heat-detection systems, using collars, pedometers or other tech. The result has been increased accuracy of detection, improved reproductive performance, data to allow management changes to further improve performance, and time released for other activities – or to simply to take a break.

“Camera technologies, such as HerdVision, offer the potential to deliver similar improvements in reducing lameness issues. Assessing cow mobility every day develops an accurate and dynamic picture. Problems are identified sooner and flagged up to allow the team to intervene both earlier and more effectively. This improves prognosis and herd welfare. Is the number of score 2 and 3 cows increasing, indicating a specific issue? The data allow trends to be assessed, identifying the root cause of problems.

“As a natural prey animal, cows show different mobility when not observed by humans, making camera technologies additionally valuable,” she adds.

The Stride survey suggests that as an industry there is a need to engage more effectively with mobility scoring. “Camera systems to assess mobility will deliver significant cost-saving benefits for businesses looking to develop a planned and pro-active approach to mobility improvement, by providing an evolving and consistent interpretation of lameness at a herd level while also reducing demands on farm staff,” says Ms Thresh.

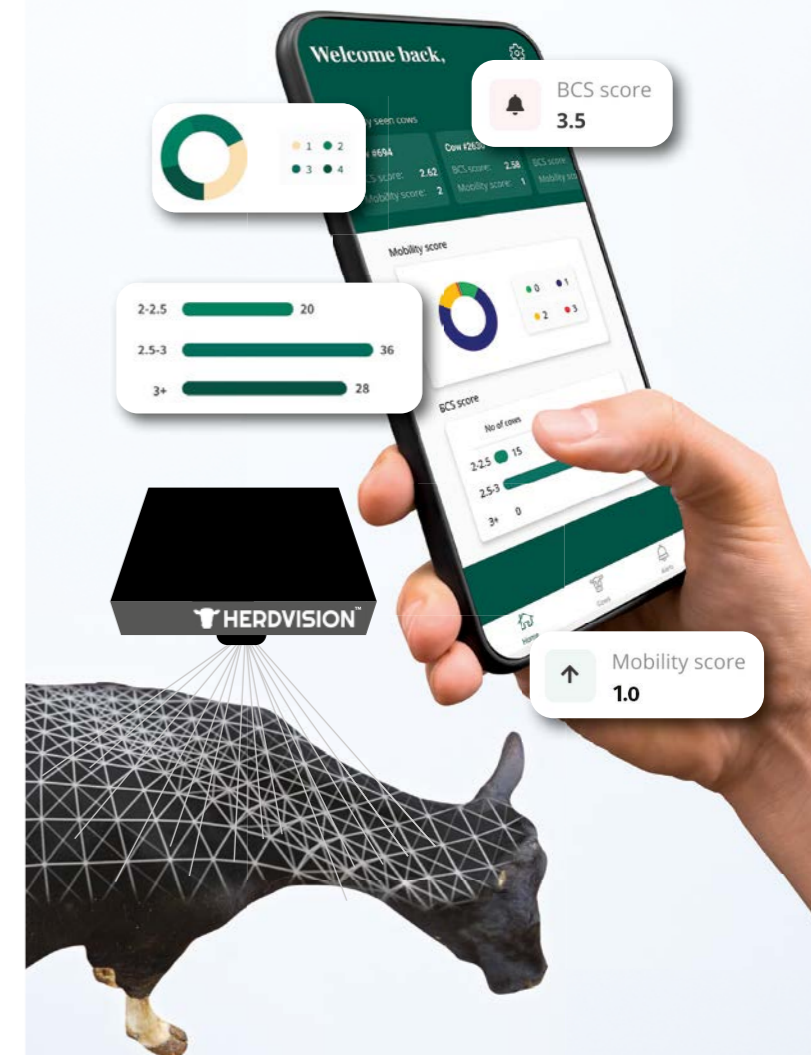


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- Reduced treatment costs and production losses





Jonathan Thomas-Nash

INVEST IN PREVENTION

The Stride survey results illustrate that compromised foot health and mobility remain a problem on many farms, irrespective of herd size and system.

Jonathan Thomas-Nash, Neogen's genomics and animal safety specialist, says the survey results highlight two areas where investment could deliver benefits to UK dairy herds.

"For generations, farmers have sought to breed cows with better mobility and foot health by focusing on sire selection. We know many of the traits that are associated with mobility," he says.

"These include, feet and legs, foot angle, and ready legs. But if hoof health is something farmers wish to improve within their herd, the Lameness Advantage (LA) trait should be considered and selected for.

"This is because LA offers a direct selection for hoof health, as the index has been developed using on-farm lameness records."

However, until recently there has been a lack of equivalent data on the female lines to maximise genetic progress. Genomic testing stands out as the most precise method for grasping genetic potential and serves as an excellent precursor for informing management choices.

"The survey showed that while 65% of respondents consider legs and feet when making breeding decisions, only 30% are using female genomic information," says Mr Thomas-Nash.

He urges farmers not to use single trait selection but, instead, Neogen recommends incorporating the traits producers wish to use into a customised index.

Lameness Advantage (LA) is the first trait that directly selects for reduced lameness incidence. LA is composed of on-farm records and additional data on locomotion and feet and legs. Scores range from -5% to +5%, and these figures indicate the likelihood of a cow becoming lame in each lactation. For instance, a heifer with a +5% LA is anticipated to have a 5% greater chance of becoming lame compared with a herd mate with a LA score of zero.

"By incorporating Lameness Advantage into a customised index, farmers can breed cows that are better suited to their system," says Mr Thomas-Nash. By understanding the genetic potential of the females in the herd, farmers can more accurately match them with suitable sires, thereby protecting the investment in semen.

Proactive approach to footbathing

A well-designed foot-health programme should include routine foot-bathing – a proven way to help reduce problems with infectious pathogens responsible for digital dermatitis (DD). He adds that some respondents reported their frequency of foot-bathing increased when problems, such as a digital dermatitis outbreak, occur, implying a reactive rather than preventative approach.

Three key elements are necessary for infections to develop: the presence of bacteria; poor hygiene that facilitates the transfer of bacteria; and compromised skin condition, because bacteria cannot penetrate healthy skin.



With good genetic selection and management, including regular foot-bathing with a proven footbath solution, it is possible to reduce the risk and consequences of DD. Concerningly, the survey results showed that only 78% of respondents were regularly foot-bathing milking cows, while 11% did not foot-bath at all.

"A proactive not a reactive approach should be a pre-requisite in improving foot health on farm. In many instances, time was given as a reason for not foot-bathing while other respondents said they only foot-bath cows when they experienced a disease outbreak.

"Foot-bathing with a proven foot-bathing solution is not a way to treat existing lesions, but it can play a role in reducing new infection rates, reducing the risk of disease-causing organisms and the spread of bacteria," says Mr Thomas-Nash.

"Making foot-bathing a part of the daily routine is the best way to help stay on top of infections. An effective foot-bathing solution will ensure good skin contact with a powerful disinfectant that's proven to be effective against the major bacteria while also promoting better hoof condition."

Neogen Hoofshield Advance contains a unique combination of disinfectant, surfactants, and conditioners to improve general hoof quality. Hoofshield Advance is free from formaldehyde and copper sulphate and has been designed specifically to target the bacteria that causes DD.

"While it takes time to ensure that the footbath is regularly replenished, the time required will be far less than the time taken to treat an infected cow. And it will reduce stress for the cows and dairy staff."



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THE POWER OF A VET-LED FOOT HEALTH SERVICE

Herds with good mobility and healthy feet are more productive and efficient. Cows with poor mobility produce less milk, have reduced fertility, incur vet and medicine costs, and are more likely to leave the herd earlier.

Co-operation between vets and cattle hoof trimmers represents the next level of hoof care and herd mobility management. By working together, we can provide a service that can facilitate improvement in cattle welfare. Lameness is probably the major welfare issue that we deal with and progress as an industry will bring significant benefits. To achieve these goals, we need the skill of the foot trimmer and the vet to come together to allow progress to be monitored and actions to be focused on the correct interventions.

Somerset's Delaware Veterinary Group, one of the farm practices in IVC Evidensia, has a long-established team of para-professional foot trimmers who work alongside the vet team to help producers look after their herd's feet.

Hoof-health team

Vet and cattle hoof trimmers often work separately without much collaboration, but both have unique skills that can be brought together to complement each other. Vets have a comprehensive knowledge of bovine health and anatomy and the diagnostic skills to identify underlying health issues. Vets can also prescribe treatments and develop holistic management plans that are tailored to the specific needs of each herd and units.

Cattle hoof trimmers specialise in hoof maintenance skills, wielding precision tools and techniques to ensure optimal foot health and functionality. We have a team of three foot trimmers who all have additional recognised qualifications in hoof care.

Comprehensive approach to hoof care

The use of data is another area of synergistic collaboration where various data sets can be used to identify herd-level challenges to foot health. Mobility scoring is the cornerstone of any foot health service and is used to screen the herd for lame cows and measure the progress of hoof-health plans. Our foot trimmers are RoMS accredited. This is a recognised qualification that gives standardisation to a scoring system that scores cows between zero and three. A zero score is given to a cow that is fully mobile with no signs of lameness, and a three is given to a cow that is visibly lame and unable to keep up with the rest of the herd. Vets can use this data to analyse the progress of lameness over time.

Delaware Vets uses the VetImpress system to record mobility scores. Our team of foot trimmers also use this software to record all their trimming events. Any lesions

that are found can be collated for every cow on each farm. This data can be extremely valuable for vets when designing a treatment plan. Is there a type of lesion that's more prevalent than others? Does this change through the year? At what stage of lactation do cows typically go lame? What is the response to treatment? All these questions can be answered with accurate and comprehensive records.

Early detection and intervention

Regular foot trimming ensures that prompt and appropriate treatment can be given to lame cows. We encourage producers to give 'first aid' to all lame cows as soon as possible and present these cows to the foot trimmer at the earliest opportunity. We can work together as vets to prescribe the correct treatment for specific types of lameness. Because lameness is an expression of pain and inflammation,

pain relief and an anti-inflammatory treatment will have significant benefits.

The other area where having a vet-led foot-trimming team can have significant benefits is that complex and challenging cases can be referred quickly. Local anaesthesia is required to perform surgical procedures. This is made much easier with the crushes used by the foot trimmer, which restrain the cow safely and efficiently.

Producer education

Beyond the confines of individual farm visits, vet and foot trimmer teams provide foot trimming courses to allow producers to proactively manage hoof health. Through these on-farm demonstrations, insights into hoof-care best practice can be shared. We can equip producers with the tools and techniques to recognise early signs of hoof problems, enabling them to take prompt measures to prevent issues before they escalate.



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SCAN ME

WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY...

What are the challenges that UK producers face when tackling their hoof-health issues? Four key industry specialists share what they believe are the solutions to maintain the rate of mobility improvement.

Running a total of 1,500 cows across three dairy units, producing nine million litres of milk each year, all managed on pasture-based systems, means that maintaining good hoof health is a clear priority for RABDF executive chairman and Cumbria-based dairy producer Robert Craig Robert and his team.

Looking at the UK herd as a whole, he says that mobility appears to have 'flat-lined' with little change in recent years, despite lameness still being a significant issue for many herds. And he says that the industry really hasn't got on top of it yet. "It's not system specific either – all herds and set-ups can have mobility issues. I'm not sure why producers haven't taken a harder line – fresh eyes may be needed.

"And I believe that a zero-tolerance approach must be adopted if we're to see significant improvements. Improving hoof health needs to be a priority."



Nick Bell



Paul Tompkins

He adds that producers need to know their – and their teams' – capabilities and buy-in foot-trimming and specialist vet services, and possibly invest in better equipment and technology, to get on top of a problem. "This is particularly important if they want to stop 'firefighting' and actually begin to control foot health issues and prevent mobility problems."

Consumer perception

Perception is important too, according to Mr Craig. "When cows cross public roads, as many grazing herds do in the spring and summer, it's the final few that motorists – the public – will remember. Consumer perception is just as important as producer perception and this should help to motivate a zero-tolerance approach."

The good news is that there's a wealth of data available. Foot trimmers can tell producers when a cow's feet were most recently lifted, as well as her individual treatment history. "We need to be 'smart' and more professional when it comes to tackling lameness. Think long term – there are no quick fixes. Look at the herd and unit as a whole. Poor cow tracks and worn-out concrete may need replacing, or herd nutrition may need tweaking.

"Producers need to look at the whole picture, with their herd management team. Improving foot health requires focus and continuous work to stay on top of it," he adds.

Important foundations

NFU Dairy Board chair Paul Tompkins, who manages his herd in the Vale of York, says that dairy businesses face a significant number of challenges as they strive to continue to produce milk of the highest nutritional quality with exemplary standards of animal welfare.

"For many herds, the difficulty is in prioritising management time and focus to optimise business performance and efficiency, but ensuring high levels of mobility and foot health are important foundations for efficient milk production.

"Cows that are sound on their feet are able to perform more effectively. We know a great deal about the factors that contribute to better mobility and how the conditions that can impact it can be managed. It is unrealistic to say that we can ever achieve a zero level of impaired mobility, but there is still progress that can be made."



Richard Simpson



Robert Craig



Mr Tompkins says that sometimes it is important to take a step back and look at particular opportunities in more detail, through a fresh set of eyes, and to move the opportunities up the priority list. "To see the supply chain collaborating for the benefit of its customers, as in the Stride initiative, is commendable and sends an important message.

"Improving mobility and foot health requires a wide range of management approaches and preventative measures and that this is best achieved by



collaboration. Producers are not on their own and should draw on the available expertise to help develop effective strategies.”

Poor foot health and compromised mobility remain significant issues for the industry, and the recent Kingshay Dairy Focus report highlighted the consequences of compromised mobility, as the organisation’s development director Richard Simpson explains.

“In the report to April 2023, the average incidence of lameness cases in our sample was 33 per 100 cows. Although this is down from 40 cases per 100 cows five years ago, there is still room for improvement. For example, in 2023, the top 25% of producers in the sample saw 19 cases per 100 cows.

“At an average cost of £332 per case, the difference between achieving average and top 25% levels is £4,749 per 100 cows per year in lost production and increased costs.”

The report also highlights that mobility is a still the third most important reason for culling, accounting for 7% of all culls. Mr Simpson says that many of these are also ‘casualty’ cows and so produce no income when they leave the herd.

“There remains a huge opportunity to improve overall foot health to increase productivity and reduce costs. It will also improve public perception of the industry and, importantly, help reduce stress on the farm team who have to deal with the problems.

“At the heart of the solution must be better monitoring and increased recording of mobility to understand the issue and its real cost at an individual herd and dairy business level. Then producers must use the information to identify where steps can be taken to prevent problems occurring, as prevention is preferable to treatment.

“There is no silver bullet to achieving better overall foot health. Each herd and unit is different and will have its own specific challenges to overcome, so it is important to involve the whole dairy management team, as well as key external advisers, to develop a hoof-health plan. But the benefits of increasing the focus on mobility management will be significant for the herd and will also benefit the whole dairy industry.”

Foot trimmers

Herd Health Consultancy’s renowned vet and hoof-health specialist Nick Bell has some strong views on how UK herd mobility should and could be improved.

“The barriers to hoof health are the same as they were 15 years ago – a shortage of time and labour. But the good news is that there are ways around these issues, and we have seen greater uptake in the use of professional foot trimmers on UK dairy units.”

That said, he added that a good foot trimmer is hard to find. “There’s a shortage, so once you find one be sure to look after them. Build a good relationship and treat them well. They are in such demand that they can pick and choose which herds they work – so make sure they want to pick yours.”

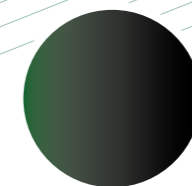
Sound advice from someone who also knows the importance of finding a good foot trimmer. “They need to be highly skilled and producers are allowed to be choosy too. So look for training credentials and customer recommendations.”

Dr Bell says that producers also need to be quick off the mark when it comes to poor mobility. “Too many cows are left until the end of the month, when the foot trimmer is due to visit. If you have a cow with mastitis in the morning, you treat her that morning. You wouldn’t leave her to the end of the month. The cow showing early signs of lameness should be exactly the same and treated quickly – and certainly on the same day it’s picked up.”

Lameness cure rates plummet if the problem is left for one or two weeks before treatment. “Waiting for three or four weeks can mean irreversible damage. So look at her feet today and treat her now.”

This includes cows that are showing even the slightest sign of reduced mobility. “That’s when producers should be lifting feet and tackling any issues. At this point, bruising is easy to treat and recovery will be speedy and full.”

Dr Bell says that huge in-roads have been made into reducing levels of digital dermatitis in UK herds, with producers understanding the importance of regular foot-bathing to control the condition. “But there’s still room for improvement here with dry cows and youngstock. They should also be run through the footbath, where necessary, on a regular basis.”



To ensure this, and prompt checking and treatment of cows with reduced mobility, clear delegation of responsibility for hoof health can help. “Cows being missed is one of the biggest issues that can, ultimately, lead to poor mobility, lameness and early culling. The industry is under acute labour pressure and there’s only a small window to pick up problems and tackle them successfully.

Harnessing tech

“So harnessing tech to help reduce the burden on staff, in terms of mobility scoring and drawing up treatment lists, will help. But someone also needs to be responsible for ‘actioning’ that list. The best way to ensure that happens and to motivate the person responsible is to make sure they have easy protocols to follow and access to a good crush. It needs to feel easy.

“Day-to-day decisions are important. What you don’t do today can have repercussions four years down the line. Yet what you do today may not appear to have an immediate impact, but herds and dairy businesses will see the benefits in the longer term. “So take time to motivate staff, build up some momentum and make mobility a priority.”





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