

## Championing regenerative agriculture: making the case for dairy farming

Having spent months looking at each other via video meetings, this week's Groundswell show was a welcome sign things are starting to return to normal. First Milk's Responsible Sourcing Manager, Lee Truelove, reports on the show.

A significant part of our interest in regenerative agriculture is that it provides our best opportunity to make a strong environmental case in favour of grass-based dairy farming. We believe many of our members already practice regenerative farming techniques so there is an opportunity to promote this as a unique selling point.

Although this was not a normal farming show, the place was full of real farmers. Maybe they didn't have anywhere else to go or maybe regenerative agriculture is something increasingly attractive to more and more farmers. There was talk of society's broken relationship with nature, how decades of government and industry incentives/advice had focused on yields and how agricultural development had too often been about overpowering nature with ever larger machines and more powerful chemicals. Groundswell is about demonstrating everything in farming needs to start with healthy soils. The soil is a farm's greatest asset, yet it's the part many farmers know least about.

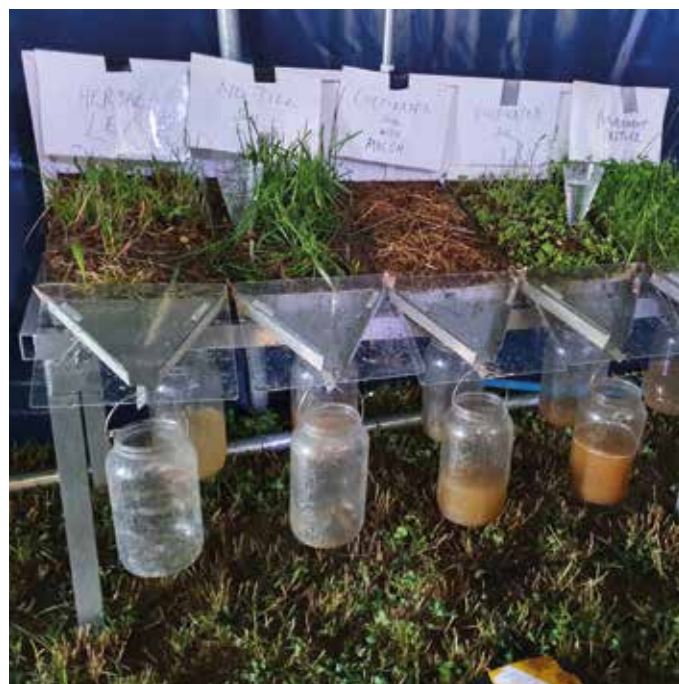
Importantly for First Milk and its members the show reiterated the principle that truly healthy soils are only possible with the integration of animals. Cows can be incredibly beneficial for soils, if they graze in a managed way, on diverse pasture, allowing good recovery periods for each field.

All the farmers we spoke to had several things in common; a positive outlook about the future for farming, a willingness to change and a happiness to share their experiences freely in order to help other farmers.

### Rainfall simulation

Elsewhere at the show a rainfall simulation display was being operated. Every 1% increase in soil organic matter holds around an additional 20,000 gallons water/acre. The simulation showed the effect of 2 inches of rain on three different crop/cover types.

It was very 'clear' there was a run-off risk from cultivated soil, but it also confirmed the benefits of well-established permanent pasture and herbal leys.



Rainfall simulation display

Professor Jane Rickson from Cranfield University explained the '3 Rs' of soil and water protection.

### 1) Receiving

- Can your soil absorb rainfall quickly?
- Does the plant cover help take the energy out of heavy rain events?
- Is your soil compacted so it becomes waterlogged while soils underneath are dry?

### 2) Retaining

- Your soil's organic matter content is your farm's own aquifer
- The root matrix is like a sponge, the deeper the better
- Does your soil 'flip' quickly from too dry to too wet?

### 3) Release

- How quickly do ditches fill up after heavy rain?
- Is this water flow slow and clear?
- Or do you have a gushing brown stream heading down the road?

During his speech at Groundswell, the Environment Secretary, George Eustice, said:

*“Everyone recognises we need to change our approach to tackle the environmental challenges both on climate change, but also on biodiversity. Leaving the European Union gives us a great opportunity to show the world how we can do this, through a seven-year transition to reorder farming incentives so we support a regenerative agriculture. That is precisely what we want our future policy to do.”*



### Dung beetles – where there’s muck, there’s brass!

Claire Whittle, aka farm vet ‘Dr Dowhittle’, outlines how the humble dung pat is a small, but vital, part of the whole farm ecosystem.

Dung beetles are the unsung heroes of agriculture. Worth about £350million/year to the UK livestock industry, dung beetles provide many ecosystem services. They reduce pasture fouling by breaking dung down and prevent parasites and pest flies from completing their lifecycles.

‘Dwelling’ species literally drink the liquid portion of dung. The ‘tunnellers’ increase nutrient cycling by digging burrows and pulling manure under the soil to lay their eggs. These burrows increase soil permeability and reduce the risk of soil erosion and surface run-off. They are an indicator of a healthy micro-habitat and a vital food source for bats and wading birds.

But dung beetles continue to be affected by changes in agricultural practices, with nearly 50% of species threatened or nationally scarce. Dung beetles need livestock to thrive, and the loss of permanent pasture through changes in land use has reduced their populations. Farmers and landowners can play a positive role in both protecting and enhancing these ecosystem engineers.



Dung beetles are adversely affected by antiparasitic products with sub-lethal effects reducing their ability to breed. A diagnostic approach to using wormers, such as faecal egg counting and only worming when necessary, can reduce the impact on dung beetles significantly. For more information on dung beetles and what you can do to help, go to [www.dungbeetlesforfarmers.co.uk](http://www.dungbeetlesforfarmers.co.uk).

### Regenerative farming summary

The common themes repeated many times, both within presentations and as part of conversations with farmers at the show, were:

- Gross margins from regenerative farming are similar but, often, using less capital/machinery
- Regenerative farmers expect to benefit from the changes being introduced by government, but that should not be the sole reason for driving change. Farmers must want the changes to succeed to gain the benefits
- Many farmers believe introducing regenerative farming principles will also future proof their business as customer requirements are changing rapidly
- The ambition is to create healthier soil, healthier plants, healthier animals, healthier food, healthier people and a healthier planet

- One farmer commented, “I have farmed our place for 30 years and didn’t have a clue what was going on beneath my feet.”

### Links/resources

- <https://groundswellag.com/>
- <https://www.farmcarbontoolkit.org.uk/>
- <https://www.dungbeetlesforfarmers.co.uk/>

### Points to consider to enhance soil health this summer:

- 1) Only apply fertiliser if required, based on recent soil test results
- 2) When reseeding, trial the use of a direct drill or slot seeder, instead of plough and cultivation
- 3) Increase the diversity of your grass seed mixture with legumes, plantains, chicory and deeper-rooting perennial grasses

# Cleaning chemicals - best practice reminder

Quaternary Ammonium Compounds or QACs (sometimes known as QUATs) are found in disinfectants and sanitisers, and contain two main compounds, namely BAC (benzalkonium chloride) or DDAC (didecyldimethylammonium chloride). These are found in general household cleaners such as antibacterial washing-up liquid, mouthwash and toothpaste, as well as disinfectants used on farms and in food production.

These substances are difficult to remove from surfaces. This is why the Red Tractor scheme does not allow the use of QAC-containing products on milking equipment.

We ask you to check the chemicals you are using near the milk storage or milking equipment are free of QACs. If unsure, ask your chemical supplier to confirm the products they supply are QAC free.

Some QAC products may be recommended by your vet for cleaning calf pens but please ensure these are not stored or used anywhere near the dairy or parlour. QACs may also be present in products used for teat



cleaning and disinfection particularly where mastitis is a concern. Care must be exercised when specifying or using these products as even low levels can lead to milk contamination.

If you do find you are inadvertently using a QAC near the parlour or dairy, please stop using it immediately and ask your chemical supplier to recommend a QAC-free alternative.

For more information or advice about QACs, please contact your Area Manager.

## 2021 Responsible Farming Awards

**Deadline for nominations Friday 30th July 2021.**

The Responsible Farming Awards form part of the First4Milk initiative celebrating members demonstrating excellence in the three categories of Animals, Earth and People.

**Animals:** Members who demonstrate best practice, use of new technology, or extremely high levels of stockmanship, to improve the care of their animals.

**Earth:** Members who farm efficiently and in harmony with the environment, such as enhancing habitats for wildlife, significantly reducing carbon emissions or protecting watercourses from pollution.

**People:** Nominees demonstrate leadership by investing in the development of their team, actively engage with their community and promote dairy farming to others.

**Chairman's award:** An additional award to a member demonstrating professionalism and dedication to dairy farming.

Each category winner is awarded £500.

To make a nomination, send a short summary (max 100 words) of the nominee's achievements to [membershipteam@firstmilk.co.uk](mailto:membershipteam@firstmilk.co.uk) by Friday 30th July 2021. Members can nominate themselves or others. We also invite those from allied industries, e.g. consultants, feed suppliers, vets, to nominate a member. Last year's nominees will automatically be entered as awards were unable to be made in 2020.

Shortlisted nominees are visited by a member of the independent judging panel comprising representatives from the retail and agricultural industries.





# New beef finishing contract option



One of our major cheese customers, Sainsburys, is offering the opportunity to take part in their integrated beef contract. ABP and Sainsburys' integrated beef contract, an industry-leading initiative, was launched in August 2019.

The scheme's development involved both consumers and farmers with the clear aim to produce high-quality, consistent and sustainable beef through a fully integrated supply chain. It uses genetics exclusive to the programme from one of the UK's largest providers. Genetic progress continues to deliver substantial benefits towards meeting important productivity improvements, helping the UK beef industry remain competitive in the face of global competition.

## How the scheme works

The finisher receives weaned calves supplied by ABP's integrated farming business, Blade Farming. These dedicated rearers are paid a management fee instead of a price per kilogramme, with no deductions for confirmation at slaughter. The recommended slaughter age is 20.5 months. The scheme aims to provide fair fees, transparency and price assurance.

## Benefits for a finisher

- Contracts do not require any capital outlay
- Model allows forward planning with a lifetime price guarantee per head

- Uses proven genetics for easy calving, faster growth rates and better feed efficiency
- Dedicated back-up support from dairy through to finish
- Free, industry-leading farm software to track growth rates and performance
- Unique business model for calf rearing
- Efficient production system for a sustained reduction in environmental impacts, particularly when quantified relative to the farm output achieved
- Guaranteed prompt payment by BACS with no commission or added costs
- Opportunity for young entrants entering beef farming and allows existing finishers to expand and release capital
- Easy-to-meet specification grid with no deductions on confirmation; the grid is paid on weight and fat class

To find out more, call **01458 259 413** or email [info@blade-farming.com](mailto:info@blade-farming.com)

# Annual Member survey



Each year we conduct a member survey to gain greater understanding of your thoughts and opinions on First Milk.

Your feedback is important to us, and we have once again appointed independent marketing research company, Marketing Means, to conduct our 2021 Member Survey.

As previously, we are using a telephone survey, the easiest and most convenient way to access members across the broad geographical spread of our milk field.

If you receive a call from Marketing Means, please be assured it is genuine. The survey takes 5-10 minutes and your responses are totally anonymous.

Your participation is of great value to First Milk and we thank you in advance for taking part.



Telephone: **0141 847 6800**

Email: [membershipteam@firstmilk.co.uk](mailto:membershipteam@firstmilk.co.uk)

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