

CONFERENCE OPENING ADDRESS

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MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Meeting the challenge is a very appropriate title for this conference, at the present time the dairy industry and indeed the agriculture industry are facing major problems. Some of these problems we can solve ourselves and there are others that are beyond our control. Climate change is one aspect which in my opinion we can do little about, but it will mean that we will have to change the way we grow crops and even introduce new cropping rotations. Here we can take advantage of new technology. This will be essential if we are expected to feed the world's ever growing population.

In the future there is the risk of new diseases both in plants and animals. Schmallenberg is the perfect example, this disease appeared 3 years ago and nobody knew much about it at the time.

However, the farming industry has always been known to adapt to new technology and cope with change.

You may wonder what this has to do with the discussions over the next few days. In my mind, the industry has many decisions ahead and the Guernsey breed is no exception. Here we have a breed that we all love but it is in serious decline world-wide. I would suggest that one of the reasons is fertility, the ability to get cows back in calf.

The calving index at present is increasing by a day every year. This is bad news indeed. We are falling way behind other breeds in this aspect, so one begs the question.....is this the reason registration are falling. I suggest it is - as a result barren cows have to leave the herd and are replaced by a more fertile breed, which would appear to be the Jersey. Added to this there are less heifer calves being born, resulting in less replacements being reared. This is the biggest challenge the breed is facing over the next few years and there is no quick fix. Hopefully this decline in fertility can be halted over the next 3 years and progress made within the next ten.

We need to breed the right type of cow. Now, everybody has got an opinion on this and individual breeders have their own views.

Producers breed high yielding cows back to bulls with high PTAs for milk. This then carries on for several generations and appears to be the easy thing to do because producers are paid for the amount of milk they produce. Even without a change in diet or environment, the next generation will have the potential to produce more milk under the same management conditions. The problem then arises that you are feeding a 9-10,000 litre cow on a diet designed for a 6-7,000 litre animal and then you wonder why the wheels fall off!

Today producers have got a wealth of information when it comes to breeding cows, one has quantitative information regarding cows and sires and in the future genomics to really drive the breeding programme forward. There is information on classification, family history and linear assessment of each cow that is recorded. National milk records will help breeders make decisions based on fat and protein and now fertility. We must never underestimate the importance of functional traits because we know that there is correlation between life span, legs, feet and mammary which will determine the longevity of the cow.

We need cows to do a least four lactations to become profitable. We need to look at daughter fertility and cell counts. Breeders need cows to survive and to pay their way. If the Guernsey fails in this respect it will become a rare breed and all its golden niche market products will disappear for good. I don't think any of us want that.

So what type of Guernsey cow are we looking for, may I suggest we are looking for an animal with a high dry matter intake and food efficiency, that has the body capacity and strength to cope with high intakes and is suited to an intensive system.

Guernsey cows need to have the right set of leg. Straight legged cows will not last on concrete and will land up being rolled into a loader bucket. Another important trait is of course the mammary system. Good udder texture is vital as this aids milk let down and gives the cow the ability to milk out clean and avoid mastitis. However, all these traits become meaningless if you can't get the animal to calve regularly. Many top cows have been lost because of this. I know because we have experience on the island and I know that it is happening in other countries. I don't believe it is down to feeding as some people have suggested but is more likely to be the lack of ability to conceive.

This brings me back to my earlier comments that breeding cows to high plus bulls is not sustainable if the families are closely related. In the Guernsey herd the bulls with high plus figures on milk will have daughters in most herds, which means that a large number of cows, especially if sons are used from these high milk bulls, will be closely related.

We must look closely at cow families with something slightly different...different pedigree. Breeders should not ignore any of the important traits as mentioned earlier but one can select sires with a slightly smaller plus figure for milk that still have good dairy characteristics.

Here in the island we are not immune from these problems but we have made a start in trying to at least stop the problem from getting any worse. It is perhaps more important that we make speedy progress because we have no plan B. We are unable to import any heifers as replacements due to our high health status and government regulations. So it is important that we maintain our island herd numbers to allow self-sufficiency in liquid milk production.

Recently the general public on the island demonstrated its support for the local dairy industry when English milk (white water) was imported due to a plant failure at the dairy with the result that local milk could not be processed. English milk was left on the supermarket shelves when the real stuff became available. Although English milk was cheaper, it remained unsold.

I hope that over the next two days we will have serious discussions on how we might progress in solving the problems of infertility and increasing levels of inbreeding. If we don't succeed in coming up with positive answers, there is a risk that our favourite breed will disappear and that would be a complete disaster for all of us.

THANK YOU.