Working together in Westland: A case study

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Problem
It was February and a supplier had exceeded the geometric average for somatic cell counts (SCC) as set out by the European standards, for the past three months.

At Westland, any supplier who fails to meet the three month geometric average SCC standard is sent a letter notifying them that they have exceeded the limit and requesting that they reduce the SCC. A copy of the letter is also sent to me, as company’s Farm Liaison Officer, for follow up.

On receipt of the letter I made an appointment to visit the farmer concerned. When making the appointment, there was some discussion about what they thought the possible causes of the high SCC could be. Other questions included timing of the last machine test, if they were post milking teat spraying, frequency of rubber-ware changing, herd testing and frequency and how much clinical mastitis they had been treating.

During this discussion it became clear that, although they were herd testing, the results were not being clearly understood or used to any degree. Cows with high SCC were being identified but unless these cows showed clinical mastitis, nothing further was done with these animals. As the discussion progressed I also discovered that they did not have any idea how to identify a high SCC animal, and had never heard of an RMT (Rapid Mastitis Test). My appointment was made to visit at milking time so I could demonstrate the RMT, and check for other problems and possible causes. I also requested their permission to make contact and discuss their SCC problem with their vet, to which they had no objection.

The farm visit
I arrived at the farm for an afternoon milking. The shed was a 36-bail rotary and milking was carried out by the farm owners, a husband and wife team, plus one other labour unit. They were milking 460-470 cows.

As the milking got underway, cows that had exceeded a SCC of 500,000 cells/ml at the most recent herd test were identified, plus any cows that had clinical mastitis through the season. Even though the herd test information was now more than two months old, we felt we had to start somewhere. All the identified cows were RMT tested, and any cow that indicated a high cell count was marked for drafting and further testing. Approximately 30 cows were marked, drafted out, and their milk excluded from the silo for the following morning milking.

At the end of the milking the question was asked, what now? My advice to them was to contact their local vet and seek advice on testing for the type of infection, so they knew what they were dealing with, and which treatment should be administered to these drafted cows. The next herd test was also discussed and the possibility of bringing it forward to an earlier date so the information was more current and relevant.

At this point it became clear that the farmer and his wife were becoming overwhelmed by all this information, and this was just compounding the problem. On recognising this, I offered to make contact with the vets on their behalf, to explain our findings, and brief them on our discussions, but reminded them that they needed to make the appointment for a visit if that was what they wanted.
The vet visit

Later the next day the vet made contact and informed me that he had received a call from the farmer concerned, and an appointment had been made for a visit the following day. After that visit, the farmer called to say that the vet had been very happy with the advice supplied, and an earlier herd test had been booked. Milk samples had been collected and were on their way for testing for bacteria.

Over the next few weeks several contacts occurred between the vets, the farming couple and me over this SCC issue. Usually, I would follow up with the couple after a vet visit, to keep things on track and reinforce what the vet had advised. One issue was that cows were being held directly after milking, in an area which was heavily contaminated with manure. This was less than ideal and may have been contributing to the problem. After a second visit by the vet, and no further action by the farmer, I was asked to follow up and stress to them the importance of clearing off and resurfacing the area.

I was also able to help the farmers gain quicker access to the herd test results. After the herd test, the farmers were getting agitated about the length of time it was taking to get the results back. They had contacted LIC, but as they didn’t have an internet connection, they couldn’t get the results until the following week. I provided LIC with my email address and the test results were emailed directly to me, to speed up the process.

Approximately one month later, the farm was milking 26 fewer cows, they had reduced their bulk milk SCC from an average of 440,000 to 235,000 cells/ml, and were supplying a greater volume of milk on a daily basis, to the factory.

Summary

We had a supplier with a recurring problem with high bulk milk SCC. Together with the co-operation of the farming couple, Westland Milk Products staff, the local vet and LIC we were able to achieve a satisfactory outcome for all parties.

The working relationship between Westland Milk Products and the local vets has been built up over a number of years. It is based on mutual understanding, respect and trust shown by both parties to each other’s respective businesses. The communication between WMP liaison staff and management, and the vets has been outstanding, which has played a vital part in building trust and respect.

Other schemes that we promote or run in the region have also helped to foster this relationship. These include the Leptospirosis vaccination scheme, BVD surveillance testing and rural professional group meetings, where farmers, dairy company staff and vets meet and work together. WMP regularly hosts an annual meeting of all West Coast vets, usually in late winter and prior to the new season starting. This is a two way meeting that helps to keep everyone up to date on any happenings or developments in our respective businesses.

We believe that the outcome in this particular case would not have been as successful without this on-going, trusted and professional working environment.