

Newsletter 2026, Q3

Aug 2026

UK Dairy Day

The DHHPS will have a stand at UK Dairy Day in the "Sharing Knowledge Zone" on Wednesday 16th September in Telford, Shropshire. Please come and see us if you are around on the day.

Tackling Heat Stress Across the Farm

Hot weather presents a range of challenges for dairy producers. Heat-stressed cows eat less, produce less milk, have reduced immune function, higher somatic cell counts (SCC), and poorer fertility. They also spend more time standing and less time lying down. A cow's core body temperature rises while lying down, therefore standing helps dissipate heat and lowers body temperature. As a result, an **increased proportion of cows standing** is another useful indicator of heat stress. Spikes in lameness often follow periods of hot weather.

Recognising Heat Stress

Early signs of heat stress include:

- Increased standing behaviour
- Seeking shade
- Faster breathing or panting
- Bunching around water sources

Open-mouth panting is a sign of more severe heat stress and requires immediate attention.

One of the easiest ways to assess heat stress is by monitoring respiration rate. A useful rule of thumb is **60 breaths per minute (approximately one breath per second)**. If at least 25% of the cows in a group are breathing at this rate or faster, they are struggling to cope with the heat and additional cooling measures are needed.

Ventilation

Effective ventilation is essential for reducing heat stress. Ventilation refers to the exchange of stale air with fresh air, which is important not only for cooling cattle but also for maintaining good respiratory health for both animals and people working in the shed.

During summer, the target ventilation rate is **40–60 air changes per hour**, while **4–8 air changes per hour** is generally sufficient during winter.

Cooling in Collecting Yards

Collecting areas can be among the hottest locations on the farm due to limited natural ventilation. However, they also provide a cost-effective chance to cool cows before milking.

Installing fans to deliver high-velocity airflow onto the cows can significantly improve cooling. However, in enclosed spaces, air can quickly become hot and humid if it is continuously recirculated. For maximum cooling efficiency, high-speed airflow should be combined with soaker systems. Farm staff also need to be mindful to minimize tight bunching to maximise the body surface area of the cows being exposed.

Prioritising Resting Time

Adequate lying time is essential for cow comfort and productivity. **Cows should spend at least half of each day lying down.** During hot weather, providing high air speeds over the lying areas is particularly important, helping cows remain cool while resting without sacrificing lying time.

Cows at Grass

When managing cows in pasture-based systems during hot weather, consider the following:

- Provide a plentiful supply of clean, cool drinking water.
- Ensure access to shade through trees, portable structures, or farm buildings.
- Minimise handling and movement, particularly during the hottest part of the day.
- Consider supplementary feeding where appropriate to help maintain feed intakes.

All Age Groups Can Benefit from Cooling

Lactating cows produce approximately twice as much metabolic heat as non-lactating animals, making them especially vulnerable to heat stress. However, cattle of all ages are affected by high temperatures.

Research has shown that calves born to heat-stressed dams often have poorer health, reduced survival rates, and lower lifetime performance. Providing effective heat abatement for pregnant cows and heifers, calves and growing heifers should not be overlooked.

RoMS mobility scoring course

We are running a RoMS accredited dairy cow mobility scoring course on Tuesday 25th August at Langhill Farm, Roslin, Midlothian. To register, please contact the DHHPS office.

Too many barren ewes last year?

It may have seemed ages ago, as the results would only have become apparent at scanning or lambing earlier this year. Can you remember how many barren ewes were there in the flock? One or two? Or too many....? **The target is to have less than 2% barren ewes in the flock**, and any more than 3 – 5% barren ewes is worth further investigation.

There are a large number of factors that can affect barren rates in ewes, although they can be broadly separated into issues affecting A) **conception rates** and B) **early embryonic death (EED)**. Poor conception rates may be due to issues with either the ewes or the tups, that reduce ovulation and/or fertilisation. EED may be caused by a number of infectious diseases such as toxoplasmosis and Border Disease, as well as trace element deficiencies like selenium. Which groups of ewes were affected can give you a guide as to where the problems might have arisen. If most of the barren ewes were young, this might point towards infectious disease issues that they encountered when they joined the main flock. If the barren ewes were older, might this suggest issues with broken mouth or chronic diseases in the flock? If there were lots of ewes getting tupped repeated with different coloured raddle marks, this would indicate that the ewes were cycling, but there were issues with poor fertilisation and/or infertile tups.

One of the difficulties for trying to reduce barren rates is the timescale involved in the ewes' production cycle. It is usually quoted that it takes **2 months for the sperm to develop within the testicle**, and **a similar period of time for sheep to put on one unit of body condition score (BCS)**. Therefore if there are issues with tup fertility or poor ewe BCS, they needed to be identified and corrected now, well in advance of tugging.

What to do now to get ready for tugging:

- **Check your tups over.** Give them a thorough MOT, and make sure that they are fit to work. Remember the three "T"s: teeth, toes and testicles. Given the time it takes for sperm to be produced and mature, they need to be checked over for any problems now.
- **Check if infectious disease might be underlying any poor barren rates.** Your vet can take blood samples from a sample of the ewes to check for the presence of potential infectious diseases in the flock. There are vaccines available for some of the key diseases, although they need to be given well in advance of tugging time.
- **Check the body condition score (BCS) of your ewes now**, and again prior to tugging time. Depending on location in the UK, the hot summer and lack of grass will have affected ewe body condition, and this may not be immediately obvious unless you get "hands on" to BCS your ewes. Target BCS at mating is 2.5 – 3.5 depending on breed and system. Weaning lambs early will take some pressure off the ewes, and reduce grazing competition. If ewes are in poor BCS and grazing is in short supply, some supplementation will be necessary.
- **Check for parasite burdens**, especially haemonchosis and liver fluke (depending on region and potential risk). Our new online course is available for vets, SQPs and farmers to identify and control haemonchosis. Further details at: https://www.shortcourses.ed.ac.uk/course/fam_acha
- **Check the ewes over at weaning**, and identify those ewes that will not last another breeding season due to broken mouth, poor udders or chronic lameness. Getting these ewes away as soon as possible will reduce grazing pressure with less mouths to feed.
- **Check on trace element status**, and the presence of any underlying disease issues. The DHHPS pre-mating sheep profile is the best option for this, testing for chronic disease issues (looking at albumin and globulin levels) and trace element status (copper, cobalt and selenium). DHHPS costs are currently £340 for 10 sheep.