

Two dairy farmers reflecting on their key-take home messages from IDF 2017

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Laura Teasdale and Phil Latham received one of AHDB conference grants towards the cost of attending the IDF World Summit in Belfast. Here they share their experiences of the event.

Laura Teasdale



Attending this conference made me think about the milk we produce much further than the farm gate. All of the countries that were represented and all of the stakeholders involved from farmers and processors to food technologists, the list is endless. In one of the sessions it was estimated that 1 billion people worldwide have a connection with dairy.

My favourite in terms of delivery & engagement was by far Jolanda Jansen. Jolanda focused on communication and while there were no 'new' messages as such the way she communicated them was so lively her examples have stuck!. She highlighted that an important role of the vet is to communicate with the farmer yet vets are not taught communication skills to be able to effectively influence the farmers behaviour especially with regard to antibiotics. Her presentation has inspired me on the farm to communicate more effectively with our vet – even though they may not have been taught how to communicate, I have and applying those thoughts and by asking more open questions has already expanded our conversations beyond yes she is in calf!

My next favourite was Jennifer Walker of Deans Foods Texas. This presentation really made me think about the image of dairy farming and the difference between customers and consumers in the level of information wanted, especially her thoughts around consumers in that they want pasture/organic etc as they are buying their idea of what is best for the cow even though there is no evidence of better welfare. The model she described of farm assurance with the risk bases strategy and giving increased inspections to those who did not comply I also found interesting in light of farm assurance in the UK. To summarise consumers need to think about the cow not them!

Finally Sacha Siegel of the European Energy Exchange looking at the use of futures markets for dairy again an engaging speaker looking at the risk management strategies. His examples of the price that a farmer would have got by fixing just a few weeks earlier could make a significant impact to a business. It highlighted risk elements to me and naturally farmers tend to hang on for that little bit extra when in these markets it could well turn out to be a lot less! Definite food for thought for farmers who do want to get into trading milk.

I would encourage farmers to apply for a funding place to go to a conference, while they might not feel it is 'for them' they will get a lot out of these experience in realising just what does go on past the farm gate. Some of the talks they won't find interesting but bits from others they will and it is definitely something I would not have done without the sponsorship of AHDB.

Phil Latham



My first trip to an International Dairy Federation World Dairy Summit turned out to be far more than just a mouthful. It was an eye opener on many levels. I didn't start well as I never quite realised how pedantic an airline could be but 6.01 was too late to get the 6.40 flight from Liverpool by just a single minute so I had a little time to read up on the programme and contemplate the error of my ways. Belfast international airport was a 40 minute silent taxi journey to the conference centre which was a surprise given the Irish reputation for craic and chatter.

The initial sessions were excellent. Michael Gove on great form extolling the virtues of innovation in dairy and technology to help us cope with a reduced access to EU migrant labour and a hint that perhaps that a seasonal non EU labour scheme might develop. He painted a vision of how we might work with our European partners, a relationship which Phil Hogan described as looking very similar to what we currently have with our existing membership.

The world dairy leaders identified clearly that something is wrong in the world. We are not reducing food poverty anymore. Obesity is increasing at the same time as malnutrition and there are more people to feed. There are 7 billion people on the planet and 2 billion don't have adequate nutrition. Out of 5 billion adults in the world 2 billion are obese and 1 in 12 has type 2 diabetes. As well as the changing world order the world dairy leaders identified that we must find new vigour to push the benefits of dairy in consumer's diets to address the mistruths and myths that vegan campaigns use to knock our products. Dairy companies and farmers need to reconnect with young consumers and reposition the product in consumer's minds as a functional and integral component of modern diets meeting health and indulgent criteria. Myths about hormones, fat content in whole milk and the number of consumers claiming adverse reactions need addressing to reverse the erosion of trust in our products.

The sessions on global trade were most interesting. The New Zealand trade negotiator painted a really great picture of a country with a tremendous history and clear strategy to reduce trade tariffs through trade agreements with local partners around the Pacific rim. The American position was somewhat in contrast. Their position had changed on agreements and they're seemingly now heading towards a more isolationist position or at very least going through a period of considerable renegotiation with withdrawal from trans pacific partnership agreement, the transatlantic trade partnership agreement being stopped, possible withdrawal from the Korean trade agreement and the north American free trade agreement. Their position was best described as having significant uncertainty but with most global growth which drives demand being outside the US it seems certain that their current position will have to change.

After the Uruguay round of WTO talks the dairy industry has seen increasing volatility. There seems to be almost a 3 years cycle to the pattern that has developed but the volatility was shown to be very much a functional of both the product and the market conditions in any given country. To a large extent its farmers that have been left to carry the volatility risks as national governments find it hard to regulate market conditions if the pressures are international. The best way to manage the volatility was to be good at what you're doing and this chimes well with the latest AHDB Brexit report which concludes that the best performers will prosper despite the final shape of any agreement in future trade. New tools were merging within the EU to facilitate hedging of risk by companies like EEX who are seeing greater volumes being traded. Futures were providing better market signals to producers about market sentiment but while producers crave price stability it might be 'better to have a volatile price than a smooth crumbly price'.

Perhaps the most insightful sessions for me were the ones on antibiotics and animal health. A number of strategies from vets from different countries were being adopted to try and promote cow health and reduce the need for therapeutics. The drive for improving standards described by Red Tractor and Dean Foods in the US to drive and enhance standards and demonstrate to best practice to consumers who increasingly care about provenance highlighted the need for farm assurance and the optimisation of herd health.

The fact that no new antibiotic classes have been developed since 1985 was a significant cause for concern. We have no new tools available and increasing numbers of resistant bacteria. The rise in resistance could pose a catastrophic threat to society in just a couple decades and routine operations might become deadly risks. It costs £250 million to develop a new antibiotic but as new antibiotics would be saved as a last line of defence its hard for any pharmaceutical company to invest as their product wouldn't be used. With that amount of investment a company would be better developing a product for hypertension which they can sell to customers every day of the year. The development of new antimicrobials may be incentivised using novel global approaches such as extending the patent for 5 years of all a drug company's product portfolio to give them the economic incentive to make the investment. In the mean time we must do what

we can to 'use the right drug in the right amount by the right route for the right time period'.

A great conference with great hospitality and some great presentations too numerous to describe in great detail. Perhaps the last take home message was that the greatest change in animal disease level in the next 10 years will probably be driven by social science rather than therapeutics. I'm rather hoping that this is true for the control of bovine TB. We've always had the rules and regulation about TB but with more education through the TB advisory service and a new social dynamic that comes from stakeholders within the cull zones and possible targeting of compensation we might bring about the necessary behavioural change to alter the course of this disease.

Research Themes

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