# The bovine bucket list

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**Achieving consistently high performance and profitability in dairy operations remains a universal challenge, but the most significant gains still come from mastering the fundamentals of health and productivity. In my experience consulting on dairy farms around the world, complex problems often trace back to failures to provide cows with their basic needs.**

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My approach focuses on what I call 'the bovine bucket list' or BBL – a set of five go-to questions you need to ask any time you are reviewing your dairy operation. The answers will provide a clear call to action to the team and require some investment in time, infrastructure, and training, but yield noticeable improvements in income over feed cost (IOFC) or cost of production per litre of milk (COP). This is not just a checklist, but a practical framework for evaluating your operations, identifying the most impactful areas for investment, and driving both cow health and farm financial success.

The BBL begins with the most crucial, yet commonly overlooked, element – healthy hooves. Far too many herds still operate with lameness rates near 25%, which means there is considerable room for improvement. Lameness doesn't just affect mobility; it drives a cascade of issues including compromised transitions, reduced fertility, mastitis, and unnecessary culling. Addressing hoof health is foundational to unlocking a cow's true production potential and directly reduces the cost of production per litre of milk.

Closely linked to health is comfort. Cows need sufficient time and suitable facilities to rest. Small improvements, whether in bedding management, stall structure, or daily routines, can significantly increase lying time, reduce stress, and boost milk yield. Utilising on-farm observation or digital monitoring of cow behaviour allows us to measure the benefits of these changes and optimise them further.

A smooth transition period is next on the list. More than just warding off metabolic disorders such as hypocalcaemia or ketosis, a thoughtful transition strategy enhances lifetime productivity and cow longevity. Effective management during this window pays off for both animals and farm teams, lowering disease risk and supporting stronger health outcomes.

The way we rear our heifers determines the future productivity of the herd. High-performing cows start as healthy calves, and robust heifer-raising protocols ensure animals reach maturity with the greatest potential for optimal milk production and long-term well-being.

Underlying all these foundations is the importance of consistent, effective routines. Reliable systems for feeding, care, and environment create the predictability cows need for health and performance. Regular review and proactive adjustment of these routines – always measured against the BBL – help teams continually improve.

A key message from my talk is the importance of marrying animal care with proactive, nuanced financial management. Too often, we rely on single income-over-feed-cost (IOFC) numbers, missing the insights gained from tracking rolling and real-time feed and milk prices. By integrating financial and animal health metrics, we pinpoint where investments in cow welfare deliver the greatest returns.

This presentation aims to provide a visual, evidence-based roadmap for delivering on the bovine bucket list. By consistently meeting cows' fundamental requirements – hoof health, comfort, transition, heifer rearing, and routine – we create value that is both measurable on the balance sheet and visible in herd vitality. As dairy professionals, our greatest asset is the cow, and prioritising her basic needs is the surest path to a thriving farm business.