



Beef and Youngstock Matters

March 2016

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This edition finds us at calving time for the majority of beef farmers.

Prices are holding up compared to other stock, but as ever it is the technically efficient farmers who continue to make a good return.

In this issue there is an article on understanding the costs within your beef unit, with AHDB looking to recruit farmers for a project. There are additional articles on how and why to tighten calving periods and how to identify best grown heifers to go to the bull.

Within the practice we have been working on a new Herd Health Plan which is simpler and more user-friendly than the Red Tractor one. Longer term we hope to identify farmers who have good figures so that we can have a discussion group similar to the Large Flock Discussion Group. Let's hope the Spring dries up and the calves all pop out easily.



Andy Adler

Reducing Heifer Calving Difficulties

Lots of work goes into rearing beef heifer replacements which is essential to achieve a cow that will hopefully produce 1calf/year.

A frequent recommendation of many vets is a target weight of any heifer to be 65% of their breed's adult weight **before** breeding. This is an excellent recommendation and many farmers are good at doing this by eye, but weighing or measuring heights are more accurate and reliable ways to ensure that the heifers are mature at the onset of calving. Despite these guidelines heifers still suffer from calving difficulties.

Reasons for calving difficulties:

- Most frequent is the oversized calf. Expected breeding values of bulls/semen should be examined. Particularly calf birth weights and gestation lengths.
- Undersized heifer pelvis particularly in immature

animals.

- Body condition: increased fat in the pelvis increases calving difficulty.
- Malpresentations of calves (head back, breech, twin etc.).
- Uterine torsions and closed cervixes.

Our aim should be to select the appropriate bull for a mature heifer and get her into the correct condition for calving. Despite diligence there are always going to be heifers with abnormally shaped or small pelvises despite the size of the cow.

We have a piece of kit at the practice which can help;- a "Pelvimeter". This gadget identifies animals pre-breeding with abnormally small pelvises- breed specifically. There is evidence to suggest that up to 10% of heifers with potential problems can be identified even at this stage. The Pelvimeter is inserted rectally to

measure the pelvic bones internally. This is best done when weighing or making breeding decisions. A good crush is essential.

Armed with this information you may wish to use an "even easier calving bull" or choose to fatten bearing in mind a dead calf, or caesarean section with dead calf will significantly reduce the margin per calf.

There is certainly work in other species which highlights the importance of a "nice stress – free calving". Lambs born without assistance are quicker to stand, suck and play. Avoiding difficult calving is crucial.

Speak to your routine vet today to discuss the merits of reducing interventions at calving further, and decreasing calf mortality.



Gareth Foden

The Compact Calving Period — Part 1

The beef suckler herd is traditionally a system associated with little input and inevitably a lack of investment compared to other more intensive farming systems. Despite this it still makes sense to run your system as efficiently as possible with specific targets in mind. The most encompassing performance target has been defined as having at least 94% of cows wean a calf from a nine week breeding season. While many systems will have the ability to get their cows in calf, it is getting this all to happen within a compact period of time that's the difficult part. But why do we care?

Herds with a compact calving period will have calves that are older and heavier at weaning, assuming that weaning is at 8 months from the start of the calving period. Table 3 shows how calves from a good calving pattern will be on average 25kg heavier than those born from a moderate calving pattern. This weight difference translates as a loss in

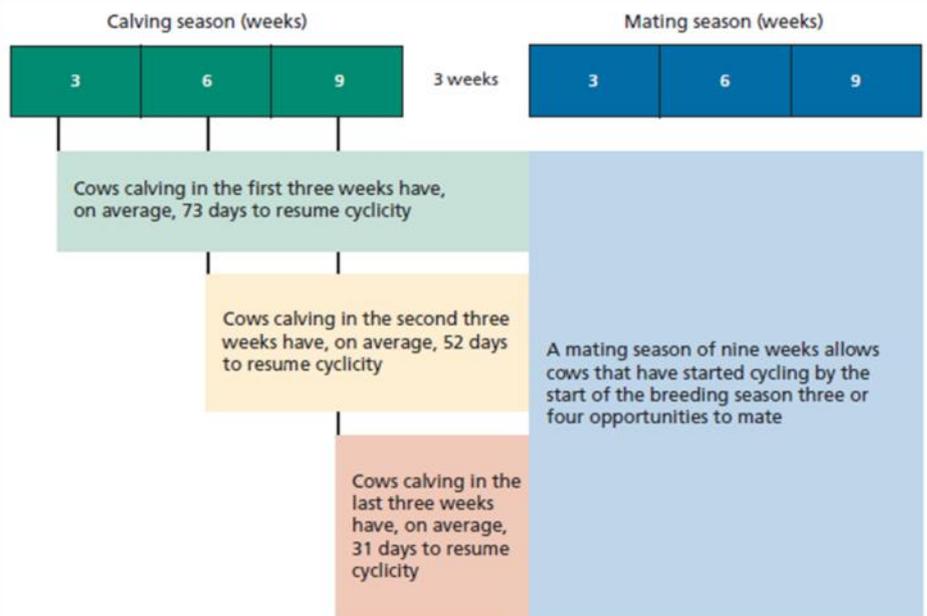


Figure 1: A diagram showing the average number of days cattle have to resume cycling depending on when they calve

value of £49 per calf, or approximately £4900 for every 100 cows in the herd. Granted, some smaller calves born towards the end of the calving pattern may have their weaning delayed; regardless of whether lighter animals are being sold or whether animals are kept for extra days on farm until being sold both equate to a loss in beef herd profitability.

Apart from the direct financial

gains, a compact calving period will also decrease labour. There will be a reduction in time spent supervising calvings, as well as a reduced risk of difficult calvings from over-conditioned animals towards the end of the calving season. Cows and calves will also be easier to manage as a whole due to all being at a similar stage of production.

A good calving pattern will produce a much more even batch of calves that will have an improved marketability. Furthermore, having a more even batch of calves will mean there is less opportunity for disease to build up among the older calves and get passed to the more susceptible younger calves towards the end of the calving season.

Table 1: The impact of calving pattern on average weaning age, weight and value of calves. Data from 'Fertbench' 2011

	Calving Pattern %		
	Good	Moderate	Poor
First 3 weeks	68	35	13
Second 3 weeks	21	20	15
Third 3 weeks	11	20	16
Fourth 3 weeks	0	18	38
Fifth 3 weeks	0	5	14
Sixth 3 weeks	0	2	4
Average weaning age (days)	220	199	180
Average weaning weight (kg)	299	274	252
Weaning value at £2/kg	£597	£548	£503
Difference in value per calf		-£49	-£94

Poor fertility and a prolonged calving period tend to be a vicious cycle, each problem spurring the other on. All cows require a period of time after calving before they are cycling and able to get back in calf, on average 60% of beef cows are cycling by 40 days and almost all are cycling by 80 days. This can create dilemmas though, as cows that calve towards the end of the calving season may only have one or two opportunities to get back in calf. This then inevitably leads to the decision of whether cows that are not pregnant by the end of the mating season are allowed a further opportunity to get in calf. While you may have more calves reared in that one year by extending the mating period, this will mean that poorer cows

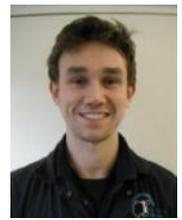
with reduced fertility remain in the herd. Many of these cows will then be even later within the calving season the subsequent year leading to a further increase in the calving interval as well as the potential for not getting in calf at all – in essence only making matters worse. While extending the calving period may mean a few more calves, the decision will inevitably lead to a herd with poorer fertility and a longer calving interval as well as fewer calves produced over the long term.

To achieve a compact calving period – the target being 96% of cows in calf by 9 weeks, and 65% of them being within the first 3 weeks – can be difficult but the financial incentives are

there. For a herd to reach its reproductive potential there are 4 main areas of management to focus on:

- Nutritional management of cows
- Management of heifers and second calvers
- Prevention of dystocia
- Bull fertility

These points will be picked up on and discussed in part 2, until then if you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact us.



Ben Barber

AHDB Stocktake

Many of you will be familiar with Stocktake.

AHDB (formerly EBLEX) annually recruit commercial businesses for ½ a day data collection (on farm, done for free) so that the entire business can be costed. Fixed and variable costs are calculated, as are margins (per cow to the bull, per kg of beef produced). It can be done for beef suckler units, store units, replacement animals, mixed enterprises etc and we are strongly encouraging herds to be involved.



Ask yourself...

- Do you know how much it costs you to produce each animal?
- Do you know what is limiting your profit margin- is it your performance or is it large costs in your enterprise?
- Do you want to invest- where are you making or losing money before this?

If you don't know, you could benefit.



For more information please look at

www.beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk/returns/stocktake/

Please feel free to show to your routine vet once done. Available for sheep enterprises also.



Emily Gascoigne

Top tips for staving off staggers!

Grass staggers a.k.a. hypomagnesaemia is a condition of low blood magnesium in cattle (and sheep) and is a true veterinary emergency due to the risk of sudden death if not treated promptly. The two high risk periods are spring and autumn. As with most disorders it is important to be aware that once you see the signs of the disease you are only seeing the tip of the iceberg.

Provide an additional source of forage when out at pasture.

This can be in the form of hay, haylage or silage and as well as providing a source of magnesium can help reduce fast gut transit times associated with lush grazing and improve absorption.

Supplement magnesium

This can be done in feed, such as high mag-concentrates, in the water or by blousing, but best to avoid licks as you may miss some cattle.

Avoid grazing high risk pasture (especially with most at risk cows)

Older lactating cows are the most at risk of staggers. This is because milk production increases demand for magnesium and older cows are less able to mobilise magnesium stores. High risk pastures include lush grass, those with acidic soils or known to be low in magnesium or that have been treated recently with fertilisers rich in nitrogen and potassium (such as slurry).

Improve pasture

Chicory, cocksfoot, lucerne and clover are all relatively high in mag. Legumes such as clover and lucerne also have the added benefit of fixing nitrogen, reducing the need for the application of fertiliser. High magnesium fertilisers can be used or pastures can be dusted with calcined magnesite.



Be aware of the signs

Acute staggers may present as neurological signs ranging from excitability, nervousness, twitching, a staggering gait (as if drunk!), twitching eyes and eyelids, exaggerated reflexes and grinding of teeth. Sudden death is also common, often with disturbance of the ground surrounding the carcass. All sudden deaths must be reported to the APHA to rule out anthrax. Staggers can be ruled out easily on post mortem, which is a good idea as if hypomag is the underlying cause it is likely other cattle are at risk.



Josh Swain

Events

Safe and Effective use of Veterinary Medicines

Wednesday May 11th at Evershot.

This workshop aims to increase trainees knowledge of safety and good practice as well as outlining the legislative requirements for on farm medicines use. The course also aims to increase trainees understanding of the different types of medicines used and how these relate to the common diseases relevant to their farms.

For further information or to book your place contact 01935 83682
Or email courses@synergyfarmhealth.com

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