

FINE TUNING CALF MANAGEMENT UPS PERFORMANCE AND HEALTH

FINE TUNING CALF MANAGEMENT AT STRICKLEY FARM, KENDAL, HAS IMPROVED CALF PERFORMANCE AND RESULTED IN LONG-TERM BENEFITS BY REDUCING AGE AT FIRST CALVING.

James Robinson, who farms 130 organic Dairy Shorthorn cows plus followers, has been working with his vet Kirsty Ranson of Westmorland Veterinary Group, since 2014, looking at calf performance.

They have been using Calf Tracker-an online tool that monitors the growth and health of calves from birth to weaning, with the weights of calves being measured every couple of weeks using a weigh tape and recorded in the online application.

While calf performance wasn't bad prior to 2014, Mr Robinson admits it could have been better.

"We were calving heifers at 28 months and wanted to reduce this. Kirsty was the catalyst to help focus our attention on calf management," he says.

Colostrum feeding

One of the first areas they looked at was colostrum management. Previously, if calves were up and sucking then Mr Robinson thought they were fine. However, when calves were tested to assess colostrum transfer the success rate was only 80% - meaning 1 in 5 calves failed to get enough colostrum.

Now calves are tube fed 3l of colostrum within the first couple of hours of life, and the farm has even invested in a portable milking machine to strip colostrum from the cows.

"This means we don't have to turn the parlour on and we get the colostrum instantly," he says.

Investment in a calving gate for two of the calving pens has made it easier for cows to be stripped and calves stomach tubed. “It has reduced the stress on the cow and the handler,” adds Mr Robinson.

In the last 12 months, 20% of calves have been tested for colostrum transfer with 100% success rate.

Some colostrum is also frozen. As the herd is monitored for Johne’s disease, should any Johne’s positive cows give birth, then their calves are given frozen colostrum from a non-Johne’s positive cow.

Whole milk, which has a butterfat of 4% and protein of 3.35%, is fed to calves because of the high price of organic calf milk replacer. The amount of milk being fed has been increased from 2l given twice a day (4l in total) to a total of 5l split over two feeds.

Although this is costing extra, with milk worth about 40p/l and the cost to feed calves at £2 a day, Mr Robinson believes it is worth it.

“It has helped to increase growth rates, so if we can get calves growing better and meeting their target bulling weight by 13 months, then it’s worth it,” he says.

Ration

An ad lib total mixed ration consisting of a calf starter, 15% straw and 85% silage, which is chopped to 1.5 inches long, is also introduced when calves are one-week old. This is to help their rumen develop.

Calves are then weaned gradually using a step-weaning approach. From eight weeks milk is reduced from 5l to 3l a day, which allows an increased intake of cake. Mr Robinson says by eight weeks they will be eating 1.5kg of cake a day and will have doubled their birth weight, averaging about 90kgs.

All calves born from late August through to spring, are put in a calf jacket, which Mr Robinson says has resulted in about 90g/day difference in growth rates, or 5kg by weaning time when jackets are removed.

Performance improvements

“All these small management changes have had a big influence on calf performance”, explains Ms Ranson.

“From birth to weaning in October 2013 calves were averaging 560g/day and from weaning to bulling 680g a day. Since making the management changes, calves are now averaging 850g/day from birth to weaning and 810g/day from weaning to bulling,” she says.

The target is 800g a day. This means heifer calves are meeting their target service weight of 345kg at 13 months old, which is allowing heifers to calve down from 22 months.

Their average age at first calving is 26 months. Prior to 2014 was over 28 months.

For 30 heifers born in 2014, 10 calved over 26 months and 20 under 26 months of age. And for those that calved under 26 months of age their average serve per conception in first lactation was 1.16 compared to 2.5 for those over 26 months of age.

Financial benefits

At an average £12 a straw for semen this in itself is saving money, with it costing on average £13.92 to get a heifer back in calf in first lactation under 26 months vs £30 over 26 months.

This is without taking into account costs for building space and feed.

Mr Robinson says: I would rather have a heifer in milk at two years old than a heifer in calf at this point for another 5-6 months,” he says.

Ms Ranson says by fine-tuning management and getting the heifers in calf earlier, this has resulted in the rearing time being cut by 4 months for a large proportion of the herd. “If we are rearing 40 heifers a year, and it costs £1.18 a day to rear them and a large proportion of them are getting in calf at 24 months, then that’s a saving of about £5,700 a year.”