

TIME TO CHALLENGE SACRED COWS FOR SECURE SUCKLER HERD FUTURE

When not a single category of beef suckler herd analysed by Eblex in its Stocktake Report 2014 [ref] could show a profit - alarmingly, not even among 'Top Third' high achievers - the time has come for farmers to think the unthinkable if this important sector of farming is to have a viable future.

In the quest for profitability, Zoetis vet Dr Jude Roberts suggests starting with what farmers themselves want to achieve. "Without knowing each individual's goals and ambitions, a safe assumption is that all farmers want a long term future in farming," she offers. "They want to enjoy farming, feel pride in their occupation and achievement, and build a business that supports a secure farm-based lifestyle.

"This being the case, one reasonable suggestion to farmers with these ambitions is to look for sacred cows in their farming systems that ought to be challenged in pursuit of improved financial performance and security.

"A commonplace example is whether keeping a breeding bull is the best option. To cover feed and bedding at £2/day, £150/year for vaccinations, worming, hoof care and vet's time, £500/year depreciation and another £2.50/week for odds and ends, the annual cost of keeping a bull is at least £1,500. The Eblex report confirms a typical cow/bull ratio of 30/1, which equates to a mating cost of £50/cow/year."

Offering a number of ways that can improve financial performance in suckler herds, a proven alternative to bull ownership is available, according to Dr Roberts. The advantages can include:

- >More saleable kilos of beef, whether as stores or finished, by any given date. For example, the difference between early and late born spring calves can be 100kg live-weight at the autumn weaned calf sales, worth in the region of £200 per head sale value.

- >On the best cows, option to use bulls selected for improving maternal traits - and thereby overall herd quality and value - in the next generation of replacement heifers.

- >On the rest of the herd, option to use bulls selected for easy calving, or above average calf growth rates, or shorter gestation length, or other desired characteristics.

- >A shorter calving period.

- >Uniform batches of calves that can (i) be managed all the same without disadvantage to the younger ones, then (ii) be presented for sale as 'peas-in-a-pod' groups.

These gains can be pursued at very similar cost to keeping a bull on the farm, explains Dr Roberts, via a CIDR-Synch programme of breeding synchronisation and fixed time artificial insemination, which eliminates one of the most problematic aspects of AI, namely heat detection.

A farmer who has attained these in practice is John Dunwell at Buskey View Farm, Ruswarp. near Whitby [ref]. On 33 hectares of 50/50 improved and rough grazing, some on steep valley slopes, he runs a 45-cow spring calving pedigree Blonde d'Aquitaine suckler herd in addition to working full time as a breeding technician for a large genetics business.

In previous years with a breeding bull on the farm, Mr Dunwell says the shortest ever calving period was 10 weeks. Using synchronisation and fixed time AI, it was six weeks in 2014. "This has really helped improve cashflow," he adds. "Calves born earlier are obviously bigger when we sell at the excellent autumn suckler calf sale here in Ruswarp."

Additional advantages of the system include faster genetic gain in replacement heifers; keeping two more cows - and therefore gaining two extra calf sales - instead of the bull; selecting bulls for calving ease, which means fewer dead calves and assisted births; and John's own personal safety: "In winter, I do most of the cattle work in the dark

of early morning or evening," he explains. "No longer do I have to be wary of where the bull is and what he's thinking."

On the practicalities, he reckons the system is a straightforward matter of working with his vet, Wendy Welford from the Clevedale practice, to understand what's involved and compile with her help a simple a day-by-day action list. Apart from insertion of a controlled internal drug release (CIDR) device at the outset, all other elements can be performed by the farmer or a member of staff.

Across a number of client herds, Mrs Welford vouches for the gains listed by John Burrells. In addition, she emphasises that synchronisation and fixed time AI enables easy calving bulls to be used on maiden heifers, and saves time and manpower that would otherwise be tied up on heat detection.

These clients include John and Ann Burrells at Watergate Farm, Egton, near Whitby [ref]. On 36 upland hectares, about half of their 50-cow suckler herd calves January onwards, and in 2014 this covered a 12-week spread. In new year 2015, the calving period is predicted to reduce to nine weeks.

In addition to tightening the calving period, a CIDR-Synch programme of oestrus synchronisation and fixed time AI is allowing the use of high EBV AI sires. Cows are mainly Hereford cross and a few continental crosses, all out of Holstein-Friesian dams. They are bred with carefully chosen Charolais sires to produce high value suckler calves for sale at about nine months of age.

"The Charolais breeds a great calf, but you do have to select for calving ease," says Mr Burrells. As the owner of a haulage business, he has a limited amount of time for working on the farm and so simplified management and trouble-free cattle are essentials.

According to Ann Burrells, who works as an accountant at a local practice, the combination of CIDR-Synch and careful sire selection are certainly helping achieve this. "From what we've seen, I'm surprised that many farmers have yet to catch on to the advantages we're gaining," she says.

¹ Eblex, October 2014. Stocktake Report. AHDB, Stoneleigh, www.eblex.co.uk.

² John Dunwell, 5th August 2014. Personal communication with the author. Buskey View Farm, YO22 5HN.

³ John & Ann Burrells, 5th August 2014. Personal communication with the author. Watergate Farm, YO21 1UG.