

CALF REARER'S GOOD CUSTOMER RELATIONS BUILT ON PNEUMONIA PROTECTION

Willingness to protect other farmers from the highest risk stage of calf rearing has enabled Nick and Gwen George to build a thriving 1,000 calves a year enterprise supplying suckler herd and beef finisher customers all over mid-Wales, Shropshire and surrounding counties.¹ But about three years ago, its viability was in serious question due to one of the main consequences of bearing those risks – unacceptably high pneumonia incidence.

“The first 12 weeks of life are high risk and labour intensive, so taking care of this is something other busy farmers are willing to leave in our hands, together with sourcing the animals in the first place,” says Nick. The majority of customer demand is for dairy cross Belgian Blue or Limousin, with a few Angus and Hereford crosses making up numbers. Some of the females are destined to become replacement breeding cows in suckled herds, with the majority remainder for beef finishing.

Each week, a batch of 20-25 calves is assembled for rearing at the Georges' Ty-Llo Farm near Llanidloes in Powys. Some are bought direct from dairy farms and others via livestock markets, mainly in south Wales, arriving at one to two weeks of age.



New calves at the George rearing unit are treated within three days of arrival with Rispoval® IntraNasal pneumonia vaccine.



Nick and Gwen George have built a thriving calf rearing business by protecting customers from the high risk first 12 weeks of a calf's life.

From either source, Nick George says disease threats are significant due to unknown colostrum status, mixing with calves from other farms, the stress during sale and transport, then confronting new disease pathogens at Ty-Llo, where they will spend the next three months.

The weekly routine is geared to rapid batching and minimising pneumonia risk. Calves arrive Monday to Wednesday only, then are all treated on Thursday with Rispoval® IntraNasal pneumonia vaccine for protection against the two main viral pathogens affecting baby calves, RSV and Pi3. “On odd occasions when we've left vaccination until the weekend, that group hasn't done as well as normal,” says Gwen George. “So now, we just don't let it happen.”

Before the vaccine was available, she says pneumonia was more or less ever present, with disease incidence at unacceptable and financially painful levels. In the first full year of use, she reports that mortality dropped quickly to around two to three per cent. In addition, Mrs George says they now get very few ‘poor doers’ from damaged lungs.

As a result, calves put on more than a kilo per day throughout their 12 to 14 week stay on the unit, the first half on *ad lib* high fat milk replacer, then high protein dry feed with no growth check at weaning.

Knowing that weaned calves from the Georges have been vaccinated against pneumonia is a significant part of the deal for buyers like father and son Martyn and Gruffydd Jones at Plas Onn near Welshpool.² Each autumn in batches of 50, they buy male dairy-cross calves, mostly Belgian Blue, Limousin, Simmental and Charolais in descending order.

These are castrated shortly after arrival, most then spending two summers on the farm to finish at 400kg deadweight and about 30 months of age, with a few being sold as strong stores in their second spring at Plas Onn, for cashflow and to ease head count before turnout.

Respiratory health, in particular shortly after arrival, is a critical issue for good growth rates and sound financial performance, according to Martyn Jones. “In unvaccinated calves, we often used to get ‘transit fever’ in the first week or two after arrival, with rumbling chesty coughs, runny noses and raised body temperatures,” he explains. “Then if you kept watch on these animals, they would never perform as well as healthy ones.”

1 Nick George (2012). Interview with author, notes on file. Ty-Llo, Llanidloes, Powys.

2 Martyn Jones (2012). Interview with author, notes on file. Plas Onn, Welshpool, Powys.

In contrast, he says a recently finished batch of 50 that arrived October 2011 had only seen three individuals requiring treatment with a pneumonia-specific antibiotic during their entire time at the farm. Mr Jones adds that the other 47 had no nasal discharge at any time during their time at Plas Onn, and all 50 had finished at target weight with good carcass classification results.

Overall, about 700kg/head of liveweight gain needs to be made in not many more than 750 days on farm, so a constant good growth rate is vital for this beef enterprise's success, and Martyn Jones says a pneumonia-free start is a critical ingredient in achieving this.

Otherwise, the impact of pneumonia on lifetime performance in beef cattle can be profound, according to Zoetis (formerly Pfizer Animal Health) area veterinary manager in mid-Wales David Armstrong. "A study involving 469 cattle found 78% of those treated for pneumonia had lung damage at *post mortem* examination," he says.³ "Moreover, even among group-mates that had shown no signs of disease and were untreated, an alarmingly similar 68% had damaged lungs when examined, indicating the presence of sub-clinical disease at some time.

"The study also found six per cent reduced growth associated with lung damage. So if, for example, this level of impairment was present for six months before sale, affected but apparently healthy animals would take 11 days longer than genuinely healthy ones to reach target live-weight, and feed costs alone for those extra days would be in the region of £10 to £20 per head on most farms."^{4&5}



Martyn (right) and son Gruffydd Jones allow a specialist rearer to bear the risks of rearing baby calves before arrival at Plas Onn near Welshpool.

3 Wittum TE et al, (1995). JAVMA. Vol 29 No 4: 814-818.

4 6 months = 182 days x 6% = 11 days.

5 5kg to 10kg/head/day concentrate depending on liveweight/age @ £200/tonne.