

# Nurse cows

On-Farm  
Research

## Key Points

1. Staff need patience and a high level of management and stockmanship.
2. Plan ahead and ensure suitable facilities are available.
3. Good calf weights can be achieved with a relatively low cost system.
4. Cows can be bought as budget in-calf cows and some people breed their own self-replacing nurse cow herd.
5. Can successfully raise 3-4 calves per batch and 2-3 batches per season. A total of 10 calves per cow.
6. There are various methods of mothering on foster calves. All involve time, patience and monitoring.



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Calf Rearing Fact Sheet 3.8

## Staff

- Staff must be patient and enjoy the challenge of mothering on (difficult) calves.
- Staff must be committed with a high level of management skill to be successful. Without the right staff this system will fail.

## General

- Mothering on and multiple suckling of calves on cows is a low cost way to rear calves and calves reared on nurse cows normally grow very well.
- However, nurse cow reared heifers have had less contact with people and are often more difficult to train to be milked.
- A high producing, well fed Friesian cow, can raise 3-4 calves at a time and then rear another 2 or 3 sets of calves during the season. Alternatively, the first set of calves can be left on and weaned at 200+ kg at the end of summer.
- The cow and her calves require plenty of high quality feed (20 kg DM/ cow/day).
- Need suitable facilities for mothering on and shelter for calves while they are very young.

## Obtaining cows

- Friesian cows are usually preferred if planning on retaining for the next season as a Jersey cow's own calf is not usually of high value.
- Purchase in-calf cull cows.
- Arrange to take on carry over cows that are still producing well. These may raise fewer calves than a cow purchased in early lactation.
- Three calves on a cow at a time and three sets of calves over a season can often be raised. e.g. Autumn calves, end of July and again early October although the last group may be hard to procure.

## Mothering on

- It is possible to raise 2-4 calves on one cow depending on her milk supply.
- Remove the cow's own calf and place this calf with the foster calves together in a covered pen. Ideally keep each "calf set" together.
- When choosing foster groups, aim to group similar calves together—same weight, temperament, age.
- Run cow in night and morning initially, allow each calf to suckle for 10-15 minutes ensuring all calves get adequately fed.
- Once the cow is relatively accepting of her new family they can be left together and placed by themselves in a slightly larger enclosure for the cow to access some feed and water. DO NOT over feed cows at this stage.

Poukawa Research  
Foundation

Funded by



Agriculture & Investment Services

Ministry for Primary Industries  
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## More keys to success

7. Calves can very quickly go down with scours from over feeding. Do not overfeed cows in the early stages.
8. Only mob up with other cows and calves when well bonded.
9. Calves weaned too early will suffer from a check as the rumen is insufficiently developed.
10. A cow with 3-4 calves will need to be fed as a fully lactating cow. At least 20 kg DM/cow/day.
11. DO NOT forget about these cows and calves once the mothering on is finished.



## Mothering on

- Closely monitor your cows and calves. OBSERVE often.
- Once let out of the shed the cow's own calf may overfeed, resulting in scours.
- Increase intake of cows gradually. Very high intakes too soon can result in calves overfeeding, resulting in scours. Calves with scours can go down very quickly. Treat for dehydration promptly.
- Once cow and her foster family are bonded they may be joined to a larger group.
- In large mobs, cross suckling often occurs. Watch for tail-enders.

## Growing and weaning

- A cow raising four calves will require at least 20 kg DM/day as these cows are producing large quantities of milk.
- Nurse cow reared calves cannot be weaned early as the rumen is insufficiently developed.
- Calves can normally be weaned at 10 weeks when another batch of young calves can be mothered on.
- Transitioning the weaned calves onto *ad libitum* meal prior to weaning is beneficial to minimise post weaning check.
- If pastures dry out, 1-2 calves per cow can be weaned to reduce the feed demand of the cows with remaining calves.
- Monitor cow live weight and take appropriate action if live weight is dropping.

## Summer management

- Calves on nurse cows, grazing adequate high quality pasture maintain good growth rates over summer. Weight gains of 1 kg/calf/day are achievable.
- Ensure all normal animal health procedures are carried out and mineral status is adequate.
- DO NOT forget to monitor these cows and calves! Water and shade are important.

