

Rearing lessons in first season

Sarah McVerry

Wanganui calf rearer Sara Deroles is hoping to rear 600 calves in her second season.

Sara is a field officer for LandBased Training in Wanganui, but was keen to develop her own business on the farm, where she lives with her family and husband Grant. Grant is a technician with Wanganui Veterinary Services and works part-time on the farm. After helping her father-in-law John Deroles rear up to 250 calves a season on his Brunswick property she suggested they expand the operation.

The calf shed is modelled on Mike Morahan's design with the same overlapping plastic roof design for maximum aeration and a central race but different sized pens, with 15 calves per pen on one side and 12 per pen on the other. John Deroles built the shed using pine from the property for the internal pens. All of the pens can be dismantled and removed to allow the bedding to be cleaned out and replaced and the wood to dry out.

"All the gates and pens are taken

out and dried out over summer, that sunlight is the best treatment against bacteria."

Sara Deroles says they ironed out a few gaps in their system in the first season. This year she wants to reduce the calf arrivals from a six to eight week period last year to three or four weeks. She sources the majority of the calves from dairy farms who previously supplied John around Wanganui and southern Taranaki, new contacts in Manawatu and an agent in Taranaki.

Deroles uses the Poukawa rearing system, feeding calf milk replacer (CMR) twice a day for the first five days, then reducing to once a day with higher volumes of CMR and ad lib meal and straw. She says if the calf arrivals are too spread out like last year it can be difficult to keep track of the different feeding regimes for different aged calves.

Her day at work in the rearing shed begins about 9am after she's dropped their three children to school. The pump-fed milk mixing system John Deroles devised for the shed means she can make 1000 litres at once and quickly and feeding is usually finished within three hours.



Sara Deroles prepares for the arrival of this year's calves. Sawdust and shavings have been trucked in for bedding, and pens that were outside all summer drying out are back in place.

"I always get into the pens with the calves, you need to and I think it's better if there's one person doing the feeding."

She writes on the gate of each pen the date that calves arrived and the name of the farm or agent they came from. She tries to keep the calves in their farm mobs. She uses spray to mark poorly or sick calves but has avoided using a 'sick bay' approach.

"When you're talking these numbers when do you decide to take them out of the sick bay and what milk rate do you put them on? I decided against

putting a whole lot of sick animals together to catch each other's bugs."

But Deroles says an outbreak of rotavirus in the shed last year forced her to isolate the infected mob in the nearby woolshed.

Weaning is at about six weeks, or the target liveweight of 65kg.

"We've got that weaning regime down to a fine art. The first lot we let out just hung around bellowing and not eating because of the dramatic change in environment. So when they come to weight they stay in the shed but are just fed meal and straw and

they realise they're not going to get milk."

The Deroles have two silos for calf nuts and pellets. The calves that stay on the farm for finishing are moved about 3km from the rearing shed and fed finishing nuts until about Christmas. John Deroles says the extra feed pays off. He also believes Sara's woman's touch has made a difference to the rearing system.

"I think Sara sees things that I don't, there'll be a calf with its ears down a quarter of an inch and she'll pick that up."

Contracts a leg-up for rearers

Sara Deroles followed the lead of her father-in-law John, who was one of the first farmers in the area to contract their calves and finished bulls to Riverlands. This year she hopes to sell about 350 calves on Riverlands contracts with finishers, and 250 calves to John Deroles. Under its contract system Riverlands pays the rearer \$200 at calf purchase, then from mid October a top-up to the market price when calves are ready at 100kg liveweight. Bull-beef farmers who finish the calves on contract receive a top-up payout for yearlings, then the final market price for 18 month-two year bull less the 100kg calf payout and yearling payout.

Riverlands North Island livestock manager, Kevin Bensemann says about 10% of Riverland's total beef kill is forward contracted four-day old calves.

"It's a system that has worked since the late 1980's. It gives rearers a kickstart."

John Deroles says he began calf rearing in his unused woolshed about five years ago when margins virtually disappeared between his yearling purchases and finished bulls.

"I had to eliminate that risk and so I started rearing."

John Deroles' concentrates on bull-beef and forestry on his 280ha farm at Brunswick, north west of Wanganui. He aims to finish the reared bulls to 270-295kg carcass weight in 18 months.

Continues from p42.

The roof construction is designed for maximum air circulation with the peak of one side 1metre higher than the other creating an air vent.

He is using the same design for the new shed except it will have one row of pens and a race for easy access, but the same roof design.

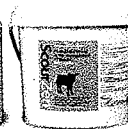
He says the new building will mean all 500 calves can be housed. It is his third season using a purpose built rearing shed and he says it has made a dramatic difference to animal health.

Last year Morahan lost four calves, which included two that never recovered from the trip to the farm.

"Our death rates have come right down since we have had this shed. It means we can spend much more time per animal and we're warm and dry too!"

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