

Central Hawke's Bay couple a template for calf rearing

O nga Onga calf rearers Kevin and Joy Murphy are a template for the rearing industry says scientist Paul Muir.

Muir, with On-Farm Research in Hawke's Bay, says they are taking risk out of the process because they contract their calves to finishers.

At the East Coast Beef Council's seminar on the business of calf rearing in early July, Kevin Murphy explained how they contracted all their calves.

The couple have reared up to 1250 calves a year, and don't rear any unless they know where they are going.

Murphy explains they work with forward-thinking finishers, and get them to pay for their four-day-old calves on delivery.

"I am very appreciative of my clients, I can't speak highly enough of them, and they help us within our business. It enables me to buy better calves."

"I can't afford to rear taking 100% of the risk. I am not out there on this level to get cleaned out."

"It will not be until technosystems are empty or semi-empty that we as calf rearers have a little bit more negotiating strength. I think finishers should be tying up with calf rearers."

He also suggests rearers could, as a means of guaranteeing their supply of quality calves, provide semen straws to dairy farmers or supply them with a pedigree bull. "It is a win-win situation."

He also talks about how farmers will be able to sex semen in a few years. That will help because farmers will breed female replacements and the rest will get a male calf.

Murphy, the last speaker at the seminar, was hugely entertaining. He thought all finishers should have to rear 300 calves for themselves to find out what rearers faced.

There were a few things every calf rearer needed, he says, reaching into a bag: the first was a calculator. "On November 15 you'll need a pair of binoculars

to find the buyers. And if it is dry in Hawke's Bay then you'll need a telescope to see the buyers. At this stage all the company reps who told you to rear calves become invisible."

He says the beef industry is facing a major shortage of animals to finish.

"In 2001 700,000 calves were reared in the industry, in 2002 530,000, and in 2003 only 380,000. Some of the guys with technosystems won't be able to fill them with Friesian bulls as they are not there."

Later, he pulled out some rose tinted glasses. "You need them when you go to a sale."

His advice to the rearers at the seminar was to budget carefully to ensure that they remained in as profitable a position as possible.

"The worst disease that affects my calf rearing prices is a weak seller such as someone selling calves in the Waikato for \$280. If you are rearing for yourself, buy the best possible calves you can."

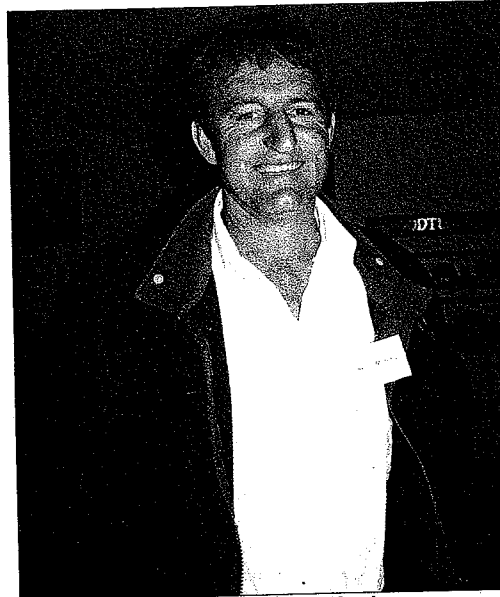
Rearers often felt squeezed between the dairy farmer supplier and the finisher, who demanded calves by November 15. Murphy didn't agree with having November 15 as a cut-off date.

"I would be more worried about how old my calf was when it reached 100kg than the date of the 15th."

He also warns rearers about potential problems when buying four-day calves off a bobby calf truck or freezing company. "You could be buying problems."

These calves may not be of very good quality if the dairy farmer has put them on the bobby truck, nor may they have had colostrum.

Muir says 25% of calves do not get colostrum before being sold or trucked. This can be a problem particularly on large scale dairy farms. "Sometimes they are just packed in a pen, and they don't get fed until the next day. It is too late. Colostrum absorption decreases dramatically in 24 hours. It is a fact of life on these big properties."



Central Hawke's Bay calf rearer Kevin Murphy.

"The benefits of colostrum are through the antibodies. In the calf the gut closes over after 24 hours and it can no longer absorb antibodies."

The test to see if calves have been fed colostrum cost \$10 and took about four days to get a result.

Murphy says many rearers do not like buying out of big herds unless they know the management systems for these calves. "I believe that rotavirus and a few other problems we get in calves are triggered by stress."

The industry also had to face the issue of crossbred calves, as more and more calves were likely to be crossbreds. "We are told they grow as fast as other calves, but why do finishers not want these calves that grow as fast as the others?"

"Crossbred calves are probably lighter coming in, and to get them to 100kg will cost more."

More Friesian semen is said to be used in the dairy industry, but Murphy puts it down to dairy

farmers breeding their crossbred cows back towards the Friesians. This will not result in more straight Friesian bulls available to rear.

Muir says crossbred calves with good frames are worth finishing, but there is finisher prejudice against coat colour.

Kevin Murphy has had crossbreds "with legs thicker than mine" and which weighed 120 to 130kg after 12 weeks, but finishers did not want them.

Finishers prefer the more tradeable Friesian bulls and may take the risk of crossbreds but "get hammered 20 to 30 cents per kilogram," one finisher says.

Waikato calf rearer Helen Piddock says they check very carefully the backgrounds of calves said to come from Angus bulls. "If the farmer can't name the stud he came from, or if it came from a stock leasing person, we leave it."

Otherwise, she is more than happy to buy every Angus calf she can lay her hands on.



Steve Drake.

Best profit from feeding calves

Calf rearing is the most profitable form of farming per hectare says Hastings calf rearer Steve Drake.

He was the first speaker at the East Coast Council's calf rearing seminar in early July.

"Drake started rearing calves in 1981, and he sold his weaners through Stortford Lodge, was utter of laughter through the crowd." Friesian bulls are the most profitable form of farming.

He says the biggest issue facing the industry of us are on the high side of 40," he says, referring to the audience of more than 100 people at the seminar.

This year he thinks prices for calves delivered Hawke's Bay will be around \$130 because of lifting beef schedule.

"The last time the schedule was at this level delivered calves at \$137." He reported some calves paying \$160 to \$180 for four-day-old calves and an agent paying \$160 for on-farm calves.

Last year he delivered calves into the Bay which included \$25 for cartage and commission. He sources calves from 160 herds throughout Waikato.

Last year he reared 470 calves, but this year doubling production to 1000. The calves start a from July 24-28 and the last calf comes September 25.

"Everything is out the gate in 12 weeks, a emphasis is on fresh grass of high ME value of them. Grass is our cheapest feed. Regrettably certainly pays."

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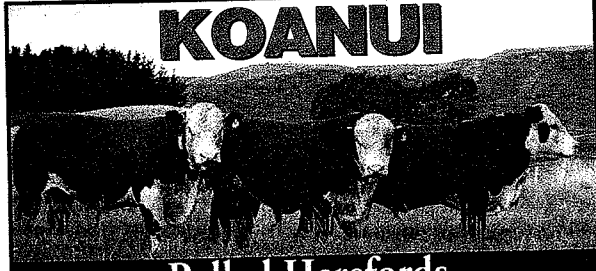
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All those who came and help make our 2004 annual on-farm bull sale a success.



Special Thanks to all of our many purchasers and new clients, undert and agents.

Our congratulations and thanks to our purchasers:

Drayton Charolais, Rakaia; Bulls Charolais, Dittmer Charolais, Taumarunui

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