

Observation invaluable tool for rearers

Observation is the key to successful calf rearing, says large scale Waikato calf rearer Helen Pidduck.

At a calf rearing seminar organised by the Mid-Northern Beef Council, she outlined some of the tricks of the trade she had learnt over the past 12 years.

One of the most important was to monitor calves carefully for any sign of ill thrift. While this observation should be constant, a good time to check the welfare of individual animals was just after feeding. "Watch to see that they are drinking" she says. "Calves don't usually sulk after feeding and if they do, you know that something is wrong."

Sick calves on the Pidduck farm are isolated and treated with electrolytes or antibiotics. Dead calves are often autopsied to check for signs of any disease that could quickly sweep through rearing sheds.

Pidduck says viral pneumonia is potentially a major problem "and pink-eye is almost endemic in the Waikato now".

She and husband Eric take a preventative approach to animal health. Antibiotics are used only as a last resort. She says problems like scours are often stress related and can be fixed using electrolytes to replace fluids.

The Pidducks, who have already reared about 1100 autumn-born calves this season, plan to rear 4000 calves this spring.

Helen Pidduck says they reared their first set of 12 Jersey calves 42 years ago but didn't start rearing commercially until they moved to what was a run-down dairy farm at

Koromatua, on the south western outskirts of Hamilton. Calf rearing was seen as a good way to supplement income from the developing dairy unit, and 200 calves were reared in the first year.

"A lot of the equipment was designed by Eric because no suitable equipment for commercial calf rearing was available at the time," she says.

Calf numbers gradually increased, peaking at 7000 a few years ago. The Pidducks stopped milking cows on the property five years ago and the calf rearing operation is now their primary focus.

They use a freephone number to advertise for calves, picking them up from all around the Waikato in a "carefully driven" purpose-built trailer or a stock truck which can hold up to 100 calves.

While they prefer to source calves privately, they also buy through saleyards to get the numbers.

They own their own milk tanker which is used to collect colostrum and milk from local farms or, as a backup, directly from the dairy factory. Factory supplied milk is more expensive than milkpowder but no mixing is required. "We have used milkpowder successfully in the past but the mixing was very time-consuming," says Pidduck.

The 40ha farm carries up to 2500 calves at the peak of the spring rearing season, which are reared on a low-milk-high meal system.

With up to 12 staff employed during the peak of the season, the rearing system, which has evolved over a number of years, is kept as simple as possible. Calves are managed in three groups - housed

feeder calves, outside feeder calves and milk-weaned calves.

Young calves are reared in a large shed with an elevated slat floor. They are run in groups of 12 per pen (although this can increase to 18 during peak season) - and have access to meal, straw and clean, fresh water from day one.

Colostrum is tube fed to any new arrivals with a dubious colostrum history. Ideally this colostrum should



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Helen Pidduck.

be 'pooled' colostrum from several different cows. Pidduck says plenty of colostrum is crucial to ensure calves get the antibodies they need to survive, particularly within the first six hours of birth.

New arrivals are fed twice a day in the first week and at about four weeks of age, when the calves are starting to ruminate, they are moved outside in batches of 80. "They've had straw and meal but by this stage they are really starting to crave grass," says Pidduck.

once a day for three days, then moved down the farm.

Meal intake is about 1.5kg a calf while they are outside and this can increase to about 2kg/calf in their first week off-milk "if needed". At 80kg liveweight, meal intake is dropped back to about 1kg.

Pidduck says a 22% protein meal is fed in the rearing shed and a 15 to 16% mix is fed to the outside calves. "We've found that by reducing the protein content in the meal we get similar growth rates and no more

problems with protein scours. It's also cheaper."

Calves are dehorned at four weeks, "when they barely feel it" and handled gently at all times.

"Bruising and stress are the young calf's greatest enemy," says Pidduck.

Calves are deloused at six weeks but don't receive an oral drench until they have been at least three weeks on grass. Pidduck says the best results are from a combination white drench.

"But because the bulk of our calves are sold at 70kg at eight weeks, most will go off the farm without having received any treatment at all."

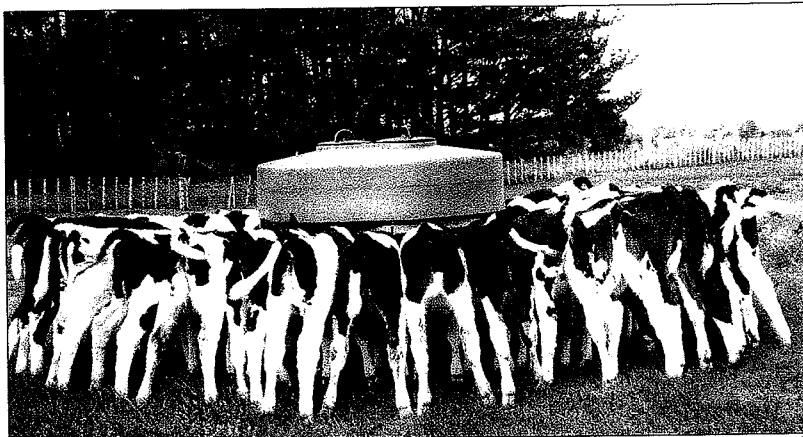
Eric Pidduck says the calf rearing rulebook says rearers should buy calves that are 40kg plus but large scale rearers can't always be so picky. "A 40kg calf is a big calf, and it's more the exception than the rule."

Time pressure during the rearing season means it isn't feasible to weigh calves at purchase - or check the sex of the supposedly male calves that are offered. "Quite often they change sex in the truck and so we end up with a small dairy herd at the end of the season."

However, the calves are tagged at pick-up. "It's always a risk buying calves when you are not sure of their history," says Eric Pidduck. "They either grow or they croak."

He makes no secret of the fact that he wouldn't mind ditching the calf rearing operation and buying a charter yacht instead. But he doubts Helen would be keen to relinquish the business.

"She doesn't rear calves, she adopts them."



Calf rearing was seen as a good way to supplement income from a developing dairy unit, now calf rearing provides the main income for Eric and Helen Pidduck.

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