Pahiatua calf rearer Becca Hull uses coloured neck tags for quick identification of sick calves. However the Hull system is finely tuned and sick calves are not a large issue.

Vital to get basics right

Rotavirus is blamed for a lot in calf rearing according to a Pahiatua rearer.

Neal Hull says this because he feels some rearers are relaxed about it and don't take the necessary precautions.

His wife Shirley says a calf doesn't immediately die from Rotavirus and if the appropriate action is taken quickly the impacts can be reduced.

"The rehydration system (electrolytes) can make a difference." However she is aware time can be a limiting factor in some calf rearing systems.

Getting the basics right is critical also.

Virkon disinfectant spray is used twice a week to disinfect everything. It is safe to use around the calves. The Hulls keep the shed and pens as clean as possible.

Another precaution they take is spreading lime in the pen because it deactivates ammonia (found in manure) that can cause viral pneumonia.

The shed is built to allow ventilation above the calves preventing chills and the shed is warm.

"You can walk in here and it's warm on a frosty morning," says Neal.

A bonus of the ventilation above the calf pens is the bad air gets sucked out of the shed – promoting a clean and healthy environment.

The Hulls have two hospital pens – one in each shed — and rarely are there more than four calves housed in the pen at a time.

Becca says coloured neck tags are used to identify sick calves for swollen joints, naval issues and scours for example. A colour is designated to a specific health problem for quick reference.

She says if a difference in a calf is seen, it is noted and a neck tag given. Regular checks are made on that animal and any penicillin administered is noted in a book and the calf identified.

They target keeping penicillin to a minimum and once it is given calves can become more needy of it.

One of the calf rearing sheds was once used by a Rewa farmer for growing Bell Peppers. It was originally clad entirely in plastic when they bought it and except for the top of the shed at both ends it is now clad in iron.

Neal traveled to Rewa to dismantle the shed and as he did, the pieces were marked for reference for when it was re-erected on his property. He says the calf housing has been an on-going project for several years and it has been added to annually.

The first of the twin apex sheds was built in 1999 and they reared 560 calves. The second shed was built in 2000 and they reared 950 calves that year. The family reared calves before that but on a smaller scale. The floor area for calves now totals 2000m².

Since then they have averaged rearing 1100 calves.

The family farm 1012ha (including leased properties) at Pahiatua.

Most of the bull calves are sold to bull beef finishers, but some are kept. Last year 430 rising one-year-old bulls were retained. The goal of the family is to carry 1000 R1 bulls in five years.

They are keeping some of the calves because there has been some resistance to 100kg calves and they are targeting a sustainable farming system. They also graze dairy heifers and dairy cows and 3500 hoggets. They also farm 4000 of their own ewes and 100 cattle.

Son Simon and his wife Lisa are also involved in the family business on a new lease property. The goal is to lamb 120% this year and up to 150% in three years by using highly fecund genetics.

The Hulls are a sporting family and part of the reason the family business has been developed is so they can meet their sporting commitments. Becca is a Black Fern and Simon is a cross-country motorcross rider. Neal says the family structure allows them to enjoy their lives and Becca says it has provided her with opportunities that a job off the farm wouldn't.

And even though it is early days for the business expansion, Neal says they are always open to and looking for opportunities that suit the business.