



In only his second year dairy farming Andrew Aitken and his wife Sonya are rearing 100 calves a year as variable order sharemilkers.

Calf rearing an avenue for building up equity

An Otago couple are using calf rearing to help achieve their dream of farm ownership. Sonya and Andrew Aitken are variable lower order sharemilkers on his parents, Denis and Judy Aitken's dairy farm at Outram, near Dunedin.

While Andrew works on the farm Sonya is a relief teacher and feeds the calves before and after school. The Aitkens see rearing calves as the quickest way to build up their equity.

Last season was their first year sharemilking and they reared 100 heifer calves, which are now grazing on the run-off at Middlemarch.

They will be mated at 16 months in the spring, calved then leased out until the 26-year-olds can reach their goal of a 50-50 sharemilking contract or an equity partnership after three years.

About 100 calves will be reared again this year and Andrew's parents also rear 200 heifer calves and another 40, which will be reared as bulls, some of which are used for the run-off at Middlemarch, sold or leased. All the cows are mated by AI.

Winter calves are preferred as they are earlier but last year the Aitkens had problems sourcing them.

When choosing calves to rear the couple look for as much Friesian as possible and a dry navel.

By mid-June there are already about 40 mixed-aged calves in the pens and Sonya feeds them with milk from the farm, plus protein pellets and straw.

Calves are sourced from the farm and local farmers. The previous sharemilkers raised up to 240 calves one season but calves were everywhere.

About 100 is more manageable and fits in with the Aitkens other commitments.

Though Andrew was brought up on the dairy farm,

the 26-year-old decided to get a trade first and became a mechanic.

It is only his second year working on a dairy farm, though he did work on the farm as a boy during the school holidays, so he's not a complete novice.

Andrew and Sonya had thought of rearing calves to sell as heifers for export but the market was too up and down at the time.

It also required three-quarter Friesian which were quite difficult to source as calves last year as everyone was hanging on to them for export. His father Denis sold 50 yearlings to Mexico.

The home dairy farm is 200ha and the run-off at Middlemarch, a former sheep, beef and deer farm is 280ha.

Working dogs do not usually feature on a dairy farm but they do on the Aitken's. Andrew worked on a sheep station for eight months before starting his motor mechanic apprenticeship.

The dogs come in handy, especially the huntaway, when the cows are reluctant to move along a stony track and a bit of noise is needed. The heading dog is useful for drafting cows out of a herd in the paddock.

Motors were initially preferred to cows because Andrew wanted to have a trade to fall back on. However it wasn't easy working inside on a hot summer's day when he could be out on the farm.

He also realised it would take a long time and a lot of saving to own his own business as a mechanic.

It made him appreciate the farming lifestyle and realise that he could build up equity a lot faster milking cows than working for a wage.

Saving on milk possible

Over two thirds of dairy farmers don't know how much it costs to rear their calves, and for those that do there is plenty of room to cut back on the costs.

Calf rearing expert Dr Paul Muir released the results of a survey he conducted on heifer calf rearing practices among dairy farmers across the country. Carried out in October last year 297 managers and calf rearers were surveyed.

The average estimate for rearing was \$134/head, with a massive range from \$35 to \$400/head.

Based on 35c a litre for milk and 65c/kg for meal, Dr Muir estimates the cost to feed a dairy heifer is \$149/head, \$45/head more than calves reared under early rumen systems.

Adding in power, fuel, labour and tagging, the cost to get it to three months is therefore a total of \$275/head.

With 40% of rearers not knowing how much milk they fed their calves, opportunities exist for dairy farmers to save considerably on the amount of milk they are feeding.

Dr Muir estimates the availability of a plentiful milk supply makes farmers less concerned about the volumes going into their calves.

Those that did know how much they fed their calves were averaging 4L for the first four weeks and 5L/day after that.

On average a replacement heifer receives 316L of milk and colostrum,

compared to the early rumen rearing systems where calves get 150 - 160L/calf.

"Average weaning time is 9.7 weeks, and this is later than for bull beef calves weaned between five to six weeks."

He believes there is plenty of opportunity for dairy farm rearers to save on labour and milk by switching to once a day systems.

Perhaps surprisingly, his survey showed only 36% of calves were reared by women. Almost 80% of rearers still opted for twice-a-day feeding, 15% once a day and the remainder ad-lib.

Dr Muir's research has also shown farmers have to be extra aware of getting colostrum into calves on collection.

He told farmers he approved of every day calf collection, but often the calves picked up would not have received any colostrum in the paddock.

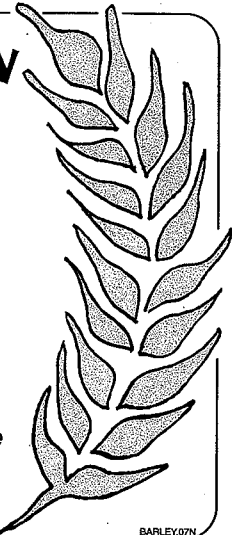
"Only 21% of farmers feed their calves colostrum on arrival at the shed, and we know 25% of calves don't get enough colostrum at their first feed."

These figures are of concern. Dr Muir estimates 8% of calves are not getting colostrum within the vital 24 hours after birth and this compromises their performance.

His research has shown a 40% mortality rate in calves that received no colostrum, compared to only 1.5% for calves receiving high immunoglobulin colostrum.

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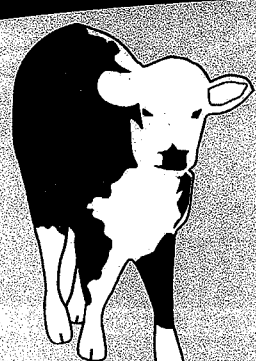


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