



In spite of the increase in rearing costs this season, calves are a good option for Hawke's Bay farmers restocking their properties after the drought.

Rearing calves option for Bay

Marie Taylor

Hawke's Bay farmers down on stock numbers could replace them by rearing calves this spring, says Paul Muir.

The On-Farm Research scientist, who is something of an expert in calf rearing, told 100 farmers at the recent Poukawa field day that rearing calves was one option for them as store cattle will be fully priced this spring.

"We started rearing calves in 1996, when the beef price was \$1.60/kg, and it looked like calves weren't going to be reared. We promoted simple calf rearing systems and following the 1998 drought in Hawke's Bay many farmers turned to rearing calves in their sheds and haybarns.

"The early rumen development system that we promote is so we can rear a calf as economically as possible. We ad-lib feed pellets at the same time from day one, and reduce labour inputs by feeding once a day."

Key features of the feeding method include:

- using compartment feeders so each calf can get its own fair share of milk – this is important when calves are being fed a restricted milk supply
- ad-lib pellets or meal from day one
- ad-lib hay or straw
- clean water.

Calves drink 4.5 litres of water per day by four weeks of age

"We can get by without a weaning check and get most of them off milk at five weeks of age. The calves are then out on grass from five weeks and queuing up for pellets each day. We keep feeding them pellets up to 12 weeks of age."

The costs of rearing calves have gone up \$25 on last year because of higher milk powder and meal prices, with the average price now \$265. The \$265 includes a rearer margin of \$80, so excluding the labour cost takes the figure back to \$185. Of these costs, \$130 are for the meal and milk powder. These figures don't include the cost and cartage of the four-day old calf.

"You can raise calves in your haybarn – and in Hawke's Bay there will be plenty of empty haybarns."

He suggested buying the biggest calves possible because they grow faster and have less animal health issues.

"Start them off on curdling milk powders. Non curdling whey powders are cheaper but they are a risk with young calves."

Weigh calves on arrival and at weaning. We found that those rearers who weighed their calves finished up feeding their calves for a week less than those who used their eyeball to decide the calves were ready to wean. And this meant an additional \$15 spent on milk powder.

Keep calves housed as long as possible because they do better out of the rain and wind. Don't try to cut costs by feeding crushed barley or palm kernel to young calves.

The biggest difficulty with young calves in Hawke's Bay is keeping up their intakes through summer. It's relatively easy to get them to the 100kg target in November, but sometimes after that if pastures dry off it becomes difficult as they don't yet have the rumen capacity to handle low quality feed.

Calves fed on Hawke's Bay summer pasture or a silage supplement typically grow at 600g/day, even though they are capable of growing at more than double this rate.

Even in a very dry Hawke's Bay summer, silage and 1kg of palm kernel and 1kg of crushed barley can result in growth rates of 900g/day, at a total cost of \$1.68/kg of liveweight gain. "It is expensive."

However a brassica crop provides a low cost summer feeding option. Once they adapted to the brassica crop, calves can be rotationally grazed, he says. On Winfred rape, calves achieved growth rates of 1kg/day provided they were not forced to graze into the stems.

Assuming a crop cost \$300/ha to establish and which produces 5t DM/ha, and could be grazed after 85 days, then 10 calves could be rotationally grazed on each ha.

Over 12 weeks, this worked out at a cost of 40c/kg liveweight gain. This assumes there is suitable land which needs re-grassing and which can be put into brassicas.

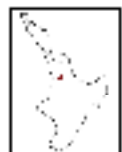
"This is still a lot cheaper than other supplementary feeding options."

This is a Meat & Wool NZ project, and more information about calf rearing is available from On-Farm Research on (06) 874 8757.

Piquet Hill Rams

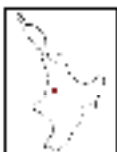
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