

Rearing success requires time and commitment

Time is the biggest factor in calf rearing according to Jack Baker and Jill Woolley.

"All my spare time is spent looking at the calves and it does take commitment," says Jill.

She says she is always observing the calves to ensure they all get up and move around and get their share of milk, hay and water.

The time and effort involved is of no consequence to her because she enjoys it. Her natural affinity for animals is obvious, even before reaching the calf shed, three cats and her own three farm dogs.

Jack believes Jill's commitment and care of the calves in the early stages is critical to the success of their rearing operation.

"If they are going to get sick it normally occurs in the first ten days and there is no tomorrow with calves because tomorrow they might be dead," says Jack.

Their experience in rearing has been through trial and error, no courses, no field days, no books, just practical hands-on learning and natural instinct.

They have acquired a good understanding of the calves rumen development and requirements for growth over the years, through listening and observing those that get good results and by working with the Hunterville Vet Clinic.

Many methods of rearing have been trialed including milking 50 cows morning and night in a makeshift dairy shed run by a petrol motor.

"It was very lucrative when we were milking cows because you would buy in an old dairy cow for little money and the calves would do really well on a 50:50 mix of milk and powder."

"We like to get them out into the natural environment as quickly as possible. I think they are happier outside."

Milking the cows once a day in the morning, leaving the calves on them for the day and locking them up at night also worked well.

Running seven or eight cows up a race and letting 25-30 calves loose to suck from the sides was another suggestion they tried but didn't last long because it was too hard on the cows.

But these methods proved very time consuming and when Jill started another job locally during the day they switched to a more easy-care system.

"Using a bag of milk powder means you aren't having to chase cattle round a paddock or shift breaks, it is time consuming and the powder is very convenient," says Jack.

The young calves are fed 2L milk twice a day until they are eating pellets and hay. This might take up to two weeks for some calves.

"We encourage them onto pellets by minimising their milk intake," says Jill.

While they are in the shed the calves are in mobs of 12-20. The slow drinking and sick calves are identified and put into a separate mob to ensure they get their required amount of milk and treatment.

Once each calf is eating pellets they are mobbed into groups of 40 and let outside into sheltered holding paddocks. They are trained on a 50-teat calffateria for their daily milk ration (2L) plus pellets, fresh clean spring water and hay.

"We like to get them out into the natural environment as quickly as possible. I think they are happier outside and they are exposed to less shed pollution," says Jill.

This worked especially well when many of them had the scours because they could move outside into the sunshine and this ensured less bugs were concentrated in one area.

The shed only handles about 150 calves at a time so the system works well when rearing as many calves as they do. However 70 calves is the typical number of calves in the shed at one time.

Jack also believes many shed-reared calves can go downhill once hitting a finisher's farm.

"A guy buys our 18-month bulls and has been back for the third year in a row because he appears to be happy with them," says Jack.

If the weather turns bad the outside calves in the holding paddocks are given access back into the shed or woolshed.

"Because they are on a minimal feeding regime they are more vulnerable to the cold and have less constitution," says Jill.

The calves are eating about 1kg/day of pellets through until they reach about 100kg LW and there is the odd time a calf is pulled back into the shed because it is not doing well.

"The pellets are cheaper than milk powder and they have the required nutritional components. We would rather give them extra pellets than cut them short so we are happy to spend money on pellets. The grass is kept very short so they are encouraged to eat pellets when they are first moved from the shed," says Jack.

As the calves reach 100kg LW, which is estimated by Jack who also takes into account their age, look and pasture availability, they are weaned onto pasture on the farm.



Jack can roll up the sides of the calf-rearing shed within seconds, which is essential for air circulation. The calves are left warm by a barrier of tin around the base of the shed.

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