



Grass-based, block-calving systems offer efficient milk production, particularly since they make use of the cheapest feed available. But there's more to their success than grazing management. Breeding also plays a key role in reducing costs and keeping things simple.

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"For every business that I've seen make the switch to a block-calved, grass-based system, there have been financial benefits." A bold statement from the Farm Consultancy Group's farm management consultant Ian Browne, but it's one he's prepared to stand by.

All producers make the change after a lengthy and considered look at their options, and after drawing up a strong business plan to ensure that the figures stack up. It is, after all, quite a big change for any business and can require considerable investment – not least in infrastructure. It's not for the faint hearted.

"For others who I've seen make the move, it was a case of 'if we don't do this then we'll have to go out of milk'," says Mr Browne. "These producers are disheartened, they're often losing money and they have no quality of life. I guess they have nothing to lose by making the switch."

Key incentive

Indeed it is 'the numbers' – the financial benefits – that are the driving force behind most grass-based block-calving systems. Life style or, as many of Mr Browne's clients have put it, 'getting your life back' is another key incentive. Producers who make the change often feel as if they're taking control of their own lives again. That said, it's hard work and

A better lifestyle and more profit

Block-calving benefits

There are financial, as well as practical, benefits to running a herd on a grass-based block-calving system. Little wonder that many producers have 'seen the light' and made the switch.

It's not for everyone, but those that do decide to change their management system are rarely disappointed with the results.

text **Rachael Porter**



A sire for all dairy management systems



Marchel Fire Macca

Producers looking to breed cows to suit a grass-based system should take a close look at New Zealand Holstein Friesian sire Marchel Fire Macca (Firenze x Skelton x Vic Kai), according to CRV Avoncroft's David Matthews.

"With an almost flawless type and

production profile, as well as an excellent first-crop production reliability based on 825 daughters, he is suitable for use across a wide range of dairying systems, including grass based. "On the current RAS list (New Zealand's Ranking of Active Sires) he weighs in as a top-20 Holstein Friesian, scoring 247 for breeding worth." Available from CRV Avoncroft, Macca is by the highly respected CRV Ambreed bull Telesis Euon Firenze – the sire of no fewer than 10 of the current top 50 Holstein Friesians available in New Zealand – and a Secret Skelton dam.

"Macca daughters have great functional type. With 65 TOP-inspected daughters, he will sire modest-sized cattle with outstanding udders great capacity and ideal rump structure that are ideal for grazing," he says.



Macca daughter Marchel Macca Eva

"He also has a good total longevity score of 267 and a negative SCC score. High milk production, with lots of extra fat and protein and high percentages, coupled with sound health traits and high fertility make Macca a highly desirable all-round bull."

requires full dedication, with at least two extremely busy periods each year. It also needs resourcing properly at busy times and that typically means more staff, for example, at insemination and calving times.

"My clients meet the busy period head on and deal with it. It is what it is – a 10-week block of calving. So that's three months of intensive work, including calf rearing, but then it eases off.

"If you're getting up in the middle of the night to calve one cow, you may as well be up calving a dozen. And you're focusing on one job at that time. You're not worrying about heat detection or AI – just calving. You may be busy, but it's a simple system and there's no juggling."

Cross breeding

Still not convinced? Then let's look at costs. Feed cost savings are considerable as grass is, after all, the cheapest feed. Mr Browne says that a move from all-year-round to block calving will save about 2.5ppl on costs.

"And if you move from autumn to spring block calving you can save between 1ppl and 1.5ppl in addition to that."

Producers who've made the switch – which can take between two and three years – find that life does get considerably easier. "Fertility and calving interval also improve, by default, and that usually adds at least another 1ppl in terms of cost savings."

So, how do you make the switch? "I

recommend that producers start by aiming to have a two- or three-month period with no calving. So say nothing in November, December and January.

"They can start in February and we'd try to build on that, ideally by front loading with heifers to speed things up a little. Get them calving early in the block should help you get a tight start to your pattern."

Even though it may take a while, Mr Browne says that producers will see a financial benefit pretty quickly, not least due to reduced feed costs.

"If the herd is being managed as one group, then they're being fed as one cow. If it's spring calving, winter feed costs will be considerably reduced because the cows are dry.

"Producers won't need to make as much silage and there won't be as much slurry to handle either. These both represent considerable cost savings. There's no magic to it. By saving on feed and other overhead costs, you're saving money."

A close look at genetics, and possibly cross breeding, is the next logical step for some producers. They want cows that are more robust and suited to a grazing system.

"There may be a yield sacrifice with cross breeding, but hybrid vigour offers improved health and fertility. What producers do often comes down to what kind of milk contract they're on – they have to produce enough milk, and of the right quality, to satisfy their buyer."

Mr Browne says that, in his experience,

spring calving herds are almost 100% cross bred.

"These herds will average between 4,750 and 6,000 litres and are also so much easier to manage on a grass-based system. Autumn block-calved herds will produce between 6,000 and 7,500 litres."

Mr or Mrs Average

He also believes that anyone can run a grass-based system, if they want to. "Managing your herd in a way that will utilise more grass and, indeed, getting to grips with grassland management are all skills that can be learned.

"Mr or Mrs Average grows just as much grass as many producers managing grass-based systems. They just doesn't use it as well," says Mr Browne.

He adds that the producers that he has seen change to a grass-based system have, just three or four years later, businesses that have changed out of all recognition.

"These producers have no regrets whatsoever. Some have said that if they did it again then they'd just sell their existing herd and buy cows and heifers back in to block calve, to save the year or two of tightening the calving pattern."

It's these businesses' bottom lines that say the most about moving to a grass-based system.

"I'm pretty bloody minded when it comes to what matters in terms of herd performance. It's not average yield or herd size. It's the bottom line – profit and cash. You can't live off a lactation record book." |