

Focusing on the dry period has resulted in multiple benefits

Fresh approach to the transition period

Taking a more holistic approach to the transition period has led to significant improvements for one Dorset-based herd. Changes to management and feeding mean that cows and heifers now have a better start to their lactation.

text **Lauren Goringe**

From the moment his cows and heifers are confirmed in calf, one Dorset-based producer is working to ensure that they are in the right condition to calve down. With 290 cows calving all year round on John Baggs' family-run farm, based at Worgret Manor near Wareham,

he has spent the past three years honing transition management and is seeing results.

The herd grazes on the 325-hectare unit during the summer and is fed a ration comprising maize and grass silage in the winter. All young stock is reared on-site,

either as replacements or beef stores. The herd is split across two dairy units, with early and mid-lactation cows milked at one and late-lactation cows at the other. The 'fresh' cow dairy was fitted with out-of-parlour feeders three years ago and it was at this time that John became more involved in the management of the cows.

Body condition

"By splitting the cows up in this way, we can feed a flat rate in the parlour and then feed the earlier lactation cows to yield through the out-of-parlour feeders," John explains.

"I body condition score regularly to track individual condition so we can adjust feed accordingly. For me, as soon

Calves at John Baggs' Wareham-based unit



as a cow is PD positive, I am thinking about how we are going to manage her into the next lactation.

“Prior to this, our protocols for drying off weren’t clear. We didn’t have set time frames for dry periods and were feeding hay, grass and standard dry-cow rolls. We were seeing many cases of milk fever, as well as toxic mastitis, and other issues such as retained cleansings and metritis.

“As a result, we tended to keep a cow in with her calf for 48 hours before we milked her to reduce the risk of her going down in the yard. This was, in turn, then impacting on colostrum quality and calf health, and we realised that it was time to change our approach to tackle the root of the issues rather than trying to manage the problems once they had occurred.”

Working with ‘Dave Hunt, John focused on improving late-lactation body condition and protocols for the dry period. “Cows are now dried off at 60 days and stay in a far-off group kept on rough grazing in the summer and silage in the winter,” explains Dave. Three weeks before calving they move into the transition group and are fed a dry-cow nut (Translac Extra) together with maize and straw. This high-protein (26%) concentrate is formulated to encourage tissue repair and maximise colostrum quality. It also produces a milk DCAB effect, which helps to control the risk of milk fever and associated problems. “And it contains high levels of vitamin E, plus bio-available selenium and zinc, to enhance cow immunity and health,” he adds.

Longevity benefits

The heifers receive the same feed and are kept with the cows, although they are given slightly longer to transition – between three and four weeks – to allow them to get used to socialising with the older animals and eating concentrate again. Conditioning the rumen at this stage is crucial because when they start in-parlour feeding they could be eating as much as 10kg of concentrate per day. “I’m particularly pleased with heifer performance in the new system,” says John. “They are certainly popping calves out more easily and by mixing them with the rest of the herd in a safe, less-crowded straw yard they seem to do better. Heifers would typically be in the final few lines to come into the parlour for milking, but now it’s not uncommon for half of the first two lines to be



ForFarmers’ Dave Hunt (left) and John Baggs

heifers. Three years on, we have also reduced the age at first calving to 26 months, down from between 30 and 32.” The benefits of longevity are also starting to creep in, with surplus heifers providing a welcome stream of additional income and allowing John to cull cows based on health. This has reduced the herd’s Johne’s rate from 10% to 2%. “We now have 40% of the herd made up of heifers and haven’t dropped back on our average yield of 8,100 litres. So, in this instance, standing still has probably been progress. As our heifers move into subsequent lactations, we hope yields will increase further.” Health performance is also better, with milk fever down from an average of seven cases per 100 cows to just two. And assisted calvings are down from 18 to 10 per 100 cows. Ketosis cases are down to 3%, metritis to 2%, retained cleansings to 3%, and displaced abomasums to 2%. With fewer milk fevers, cows are milked within 24 hours of calving and this, in turn, has increased colostrum quality from around 17% on a Brix refractometer to around 30% for some cows.

Healthier calves

Calves are also healthier with fewer cases of scours and John attributes this to the better-quality colostrum they are receiving and the fact that they move into the hygienic environment of the calf house sooner. “We are now feeding calves two three-litre feeds of colostrum.

So we need to get cows milked as soon as possible to get the quantity and quality of colostrum back to the calf, to give them the best possible start. Yields have also improved with the best cows now reaching around 55 litres at peak yield compared to 45 litres previously. It really is one big cycle,” says John.

Proactive management

“The time that we take proactively managing the transition period certainly saves us time further down the line. With around 850 head of stock on the farm, time is precious and even one sick animal or difficult calving can really stretch us – we can’t afford to have lots of health problems.”

“For me, the dry period really is the most important period to get right,” adds Dave. “We know that milk fever is a gateway disease to many other issues, but when you have a lot of cases it’s difficult to see that they are interlinked. Now that we’ve reduced milk fever, the cow-health data clearly shows that the cows that do go down with it are typically the ones that have the other issues, such as older cows with difficult calvings and cows that have twins.

“The herd used to be in the ‘average’ category for health, according to Kingshay benchmarking figures. But the latest data puts it in the top 25%. John has followed recommendations to the letter and it just goes to show that a few changes to feeding and management can pay dividends in the long run.” |