

Easy calving, easier care

Avoiding difficult calvings is vital to protect herd health and productivity

Calving ease should be close to the top – if not at the top – of producers' bull selection criteria. And it's producers who will benefit if they pass calving ease data on test bulls back to their owners. We spoke to a geneticist, a vet and a producer to find out why.

"Calving ease should certainly be high on the bull selection criteria list," says Genus' breeding programme manager Andy Rutter.

"It's certainly something that's always been important to us and the national score that should be available later this year is eagerly anticipated," he says.

"But it's something that should be of even greater importance to our customers. It's producers, their herds and their business' that bear the brunt of difficult calvings – in both the short and long term."

A bad calving basically means that the cow or heifer gets off to a bad start. And this 'bad start' has a knock-on effect on subsequent cow health, fertility and milk yield.

Increased risk

Vet Den Leonard of Cheshire-based practice Lambert Leonard and May says that intervention at calving is associated with an increased risk of problems such as retained placentas, displace abomasums and infertility, as well as diseases and infections, including metritis and mastitis.

"All these can be linked to difficult calvings and have associated costs – in terms of cow health and welfare, and milk production.

"So producers should be focusing on milk production – not on producing a large beef cross calf to command a top price in the sale ring – and looking to use sires that are likely to result in an easy and smooth calving.

"The cost of a difficult calving will, without doubt, be far greater than the value of even the largest calf at market," he adds.

"The worst-case scenario could result in a dead calf and/or a dead cow or heifer. But even if both survive, the economic and welfare implications of a bad calving are costly and go much further than the walls of the calving pen."

It's a cost that's difficult to measure, since there are so many problems that a bad calving can cause.

"If the result is a dead cow or heifer and calf, you're looking at a loss of upwards of £2,500," says Mr Rutter.

"More likely is a retained cleansing and its related costs due to problems such as infections and mastitis – around £700 per case. The cost of endometritis is in the region of £300, based on a 5% loss of milk yield and a 20-day increase in calving interval."

He adds that the cost of a caesarean – vet and drugs – can be up to £250. And a producer-assisted calving costs the equivalent of farm labour, plus any lost milk production and subsequent poor fertility.

"I think an average figure for difficult calvings, taking all these figures into account, would be around £500."

Survey form

And this is why Genus, NMR and Cogent are encouraging producers to fill out the calving ease survey form that's automatically generated by NMR and sent out to them when cows and heifers served with young bull semen calve.

"It's vital that producers fill in the form and help us to compile valuable data on calving ease," adds Mr Rutter. "There's been a shift in Holstein Friesian breeding towards the fitness traits, of which calving ease is key, and it's within these traits



that dairy productivity and profitability truly lie."

He says that many larger herds have already recognised this and tend to look more closely at calving ease when making breeding decisions.

"They put more emphasis on it when selecting bulls as they simply don't have the time or labour to handle a large number of difficult calvings. It's a similar trend to that seen in large Californian herds – it's the first thing that those breeders look at.

"They're looking to breed cows and heifers that can look after themselves. The kind of animal that they don't even notice within the herd as it gives them so little trouble. And that's increasingly what UK producers are looking for."

It's certainly what Derbyshire-based producer Eric Easom is looking for. "There's no value in a dead calf, or a dead heifer or cow come to that," he says.

"So looking at calving ease data when selecting a bull to use on my maiden heifers, for example, gives me a degree of confidence that I won't see to many problems at calving. I can make an informed decision."

'Self sufficiency'

Eric is part of a family partnership that runs the 330-cow pedigree Broomhouse herd, and 300 young stock, at Oakerthorpe. One of his main responsibilities is breeding.

"It's great to see good cows and heifers milking in the herd – and in the sale ring. We do sell quite a lot of surplus stock," he says.

And a great cow or heifer is one that's robust and able to look after herself. And part of that essential 'self sufficiency' is being able to calve unassisted.

In the recent past he's used Picston Shottle and Zenith on maiden heifers. He's using O Man at the moment.

Heifers calve at between 23 and 24 months of age – quite young compared to some units. And Eric says that it's vital not to let them get too fat prior to calving,

although in his experience this seems to be more of a problem when calving heifers that are closer to three years of age.

"Heifers need to get off to a gentle start when they calve, even more so than cows. And they're the animals in the herd with the highest genetic merit – they're an investment I want to protect. I don't want to be pulling a calf out of her and risk damaging her potential in any way – either in terms of fertility or production."

Informed decision

Eric's selection criteria are what he describes as balanced. "We tend to go for the highest genetic merit bulls possible, without compromising on calving ease.

"I'd never select a bull with more than 9% of calving difficulty on the maiden heifers and tend to go for a sire closer to 6% as a rule, just to be sure.

"And sires selected for cows are rarely more than 10% for calving difficulty. It depends very much on the individual cow."

For him, it's all about minimising the risk of a difficult calving and all the problems that can be associated with that. "And in order to make an informed decision there has to be plenty of accurate bull data on calving ease, which is why I always fill out the calving ease surveys I receive for any test bulls that I've used on the herd.

"I'm the one who will ultimately benefit from the information, just like any other dairy producer in the country. And without our input, calving ease data on bulls would be, at best, limited and, at worst, non-existent.

"And I'd be in the dark when serving my maiden heifers and unable to make the best choices to protect my investment and their health and fertility.

"So taking a few minutes to fill out the simply survey form is certainly time very well spent."

Rachael Porter