

Planning – and heifer rearing – for the future of dairying in Ireland

# No quota? No problem

Forget the 2012 Olympics, producers in the Republic of Ireland will be forgiven for being more focused on 2015 when milk quota will be eradicated. We spoke to the regional winner of a national calf rearing competition to find out how their plans for a quota-free future are shaping up.

text **Allison Matthews**

**W**ith an estimated cost of £1,377 to rear heifers to calving at 24 months, with £732 coming from total variable costs and £645 from fixed costs, the financial impact of rearing heifers to join the herd each year is huge. Economics aside, Hillsborough's Agri-food and Bioscience Institute has shown that properly grown (good body frame but not fat) heifers, when calved at between 23 and 25 months of age,

have a greater lifetime yield and better subsequent fertility than larger heifers. In 2015 milk quotas will be removed in the Republic of Ireland, so how does a producer prepare for the inevitable situation where expansion will be rapid and investment continual?

## Heifer rearing

There are two ways to reduce the replacement costs per litre of milk

*A pasteuriser has prevented milk wastage as quota levels are exceeded*



*Nial Tallon and Stephen Agnew have the background of Tallon's farm*

produced – either by increasing the lifetime yield of the cow or reducing the costs of rearing. With ambitions to bring 100 heifers into the herd each year as replacements, producer Nial Tallon,



*From day five to 14, calves are fed pasteurised milk twice a day*

from Ardcah in County Meath, explains the strategy for achieving a sustainable future for the family business.

“With the goal of increasing cows numbers from today's 470 to 500 head by the end of 2012, the aim is to get heifers calving at 24 months old at a target weight of between 580 and 600kg. This challenge has been embraced during the past three years with the introduction of once-a-day milk replacer, and more recently the investment in a pasteurisation system for cows' milk.

“This has allowed excess milk to be fed to calves due to the over-quota situation we have in the Republic of Ireland. We're selling 7,100 litres per cow each year, with 525kg of milk solids, at the moment and are aiming to increase production to 7,500 litres with 570kg of milk solids,” he adds.

## Nutritional assistance

Dry cow nutrition must be considered before calving and particularly within the final 60 days of gestation, according to Nial. “Easier calving and the birth of healthier calves are the basis to getting calves off to a good start and onto our calf rearing system. Our current practice of feeding calves has proved essential in reducing the labour requirements at farm level.

“Calves are fed three litres of their mother's colostrum within the initial six hours of birth and a further three litres within 12 hours. Up until day four, calves are fed their mother's pasteurised milk twice a day. From day five to 14,

calves are fed pasteurised milk twice a day.”

At this point calves are moved onto a once-a-day feeding system where they receive four litres of milk. This is a combination of pasteurised milk and once-a-day milk replacer added at a rate of 50g per litre. This additional supplementation ensures the calves nutritional requirements are met under a once-a-day feeding system.

## Rumen development

Calves are allowed free access to calf starter pellets from four days old and are then moved onto calf weaner pellets at three weeks old. Nutritionist Stephen Agnew explains the impact of these nutritional decisions.

“This is crucial as the starch, fibre and protein sources available in these compounds will allow for the stimulation of rumen micro-organisms and fermentation to occur. These factors help to enhance rumen development and consequently weaning weights, improving a heifer's chance of calving down at 24 months.”

Weaning is carried out at between 56 and 60 days old. Calf weaner pellets are fed until three months, at which point heifer rearing nuts are introduced at a rate of 3kg per day, plus ad-lib straw. This year straw has been replaced with maize silage, which has been well received by the calves so far.

With calving taking place from January 1 to May 30, and September 1 to November 30, it is essential that an

adequate number of heifers are calving down at 24 months to fit this robust spring- and autumn-calving system.

“Targets of 0.7kg per day live weight gain pre-weaning and then 0.8kg from weaning to calving need to be achieved to fit this system,” says Nial. “We have recently made breeding decisions that have improved longevity. The intention is to bring 100 heifers into the herd as replacements each year. Excess heifers, including those not calving in synchrony with the rest of the herd, will be sold to generate more income,” he adds.

## The future

“The aim of our business is to be as flexible as possible post 2015 as milk price will be market driven. Volatility will be a major issue as milk prices are likely to boom and bottom out as markets change.

“Market pressure has led to the restructuring of milk sales, with the business now being paid for kilogrammes of milk solids. Having the ability to supply a better quality product with improved traceability and hygiene will be paramount to future progression,” says Nial.

“The ability to adapt the business rapidly to economic changes is vital. Either by maximising production through increased feed rates in the parlour, or conversely by utilising grazed grass when the milk price is poor.

“When this is combined with potential heifer sales we have the opportunity to continue and build on our success.”

