

Draw up a wish list and

Check list for 'auto

Whether it be to save on labour or improve calf growth rates to push heifer performance to 'the next level', what should producers look out for when investing in automatic calf feeders? Here a vet, a tech specialist and a calf rearer tell us more.

text **Rachael Porter**

When clients say that they're thinking of investing in an automatic calf milk feeding system, typically to save on labour, it's music to vet Sarah Caldwell's ears. And during the past few years she's certainly seen a lot more of her Cornwall-based practice's dairy and beef herds installing milk feeders. "They are growing in popularity and the technology – and it's potential to improve calf growth and health – is great.

"My only caveat is that producers should make sure that the time they free up from not having to hand-feed calves is spent on other calf rearing husbandry tasks and not just used as 'free time' or diverted away from young stock."

Hygiene and monitoring growth are areas where most producers could improve in terms of calf rearing. Improving hygiene can have a massive impact on calf health and daily live weight gains. "So if less time spent feeding calves means more time spent mucking out and pressure washing calf pens and/or assessing stock and closely monitoring growth with weigh bands, that's fine by me."

Close attention

Miss Caldwell, a specialist in calf and heifer rearing at Calweton Veterinary Group, says that alarm bells only ring if a producer talks about installing an automatic feeding system as if it will be the answer to all their calf-rearing woes. "It won't be – it could even make things worse if management isn't already good. It's not a 'fix all' solution. But it can free up time, providing the system suits the calf-rearing set up.

"Many systems will feed whole milk as well as calf milk replacer so it's important to check. And the automatic feeder should also be managed well."

What she's driving at here is that the feeders also require close attention – regular cleaning, as well as calibration and maintenance. "Teats and tubes need to be checked and cleaned. Some systems have teats that are automatically cleaned between calf



automatic' investment



feeds, and I think that's a good idea for hygiene and calf health reasons," she says. Teats should also be changed regularly. "If they're worn, the calf will 'gulping down' milk too fast and this can cause digestive upset. There's a risk that milk could end up in the calf's rumen. So check teats regularly and replace when worn."

Data recording

What about 'add ons'? "If the system has a weighing platform – I love that! I know it can be a little extra maintenance for the producer – to make sure it's free from straw or other debris that can stop it from working – but in terms of monitoring calf-growth rates, it doesn't come any simpler. The work's done for you." But Miss Caldwell says that producers should think about what they'll actually use, in terms of tech and data, when buying a system. "It's a bit like buying a fancy mobile phone with lots of extra functions, but not actually knowing how to use them. So do your homework, look at what's on offer and what you think will be useful.

"If the system records data on intakes, feeding frequency, weight gain or other health or growth parameters, will you actually use it? I'd rather see a producer investing in a basic system, that they maintain and use well, if they're not so good at handling the tech and data from a more sophisticated system.

"After all, using an automatic feeding system will free up time to weight and measure calves manually. So monitoring growth rates and overall management should improve, whatever system is installed."

She says that where she's seen them in action, calf health and heifer rearing targets have certainly improved. "There's no doubt that for many herds and calf-rearing set ups – particularly the larger ones with significant group sizes to feed – automatic



Sarah Caldwell: "More time should be spent on calf husbandry"



David Ball: "Draw up a 'shopping list' before you invest in an automatic system"



Milk replacer 'concentration' reminder

Whether producers are hand feeding calves or using an automatic system, Sarah Caldwell is urging them to check that they're feeding the correct concentration of milk replacer. "Check what's actually being fed to the calf. All too often I'm seeing calves that are not gaining weight as they should be, only to discover that their milk is being over diluted."

"Make sure you measure the water that you add to powder, up to the required volume.

And avoid adding powder to water – this is how dilution occurs. Put the powder in a jug or mixing bucket and add water up to the litre mark, for example. Don't add powder to a litre of water – the concentration will be too low."

systems offer huge benefits to staff and livestock. And I think they're a key area of interest at the moment, even though the industry is only just emerging from a prolonged period of low milk prices, because producers know they'll see a return on their investment."

AHDB Dairy's technical manager David Ball says that producers should draw up a 'shopping list' before investing in an automatic calf feeding system. "There are several systems, from different manufacturers, on the market. But what's key is deciding what you actually want the system to do. What are your expectations?"

"Do you want it to step up feeding as the calf grows and step it down again, gradually, to optimise weaning? Do you want it to weigh the calf, to help monitor growth rates? Do you want it to measure how many times the calf visits the feeder, how many times it feeds, how much it drinks at each feed? There's a lot to think about and the best thing to do is to speak to the manufacturers – including Volac, Lely, Holm and Laue, and Förster Technik – to see what they

offer and how 'computerised' their systems are. Some systems will even help to pick up signs of disease early by, for example, monitoring drinking speed. All that data can be gathered, but will you use it?"

Technical support

Back up is important too, particularly in the early days. And how easy is the machine to maintain and fix? Talking to producers who already use the machines is invaluable here.

That's exactly what Emma Roberts did before she invested in a Holm & Laue system in 2004. And the system worked so well on her calf-rearing unit that she's since invested in two more. She rears 220-head of calves at any one time at Uphampton Farm, near Leominster, buying two to three week olds calves from local dairy herds and rearing them, for beef, to liveweights of 140kg.

"We looked at four different systems and, at the time, the Holm & Laue had the highest spec.

"We saw it in action on a unit in Yorkshire. And we particularly liked the

fact that there was no milk left in the pipelines between feeds. It flushed everything through after each visit."

The system also has quite a bit of tech – producing reports on which calves haven't fed and which are due to feed. "That's a good way to spot, early on, if any calves are off colour or ill. Or if they've escaped to another pen!"

She can also programme in up to five different 'growth curves' – handy when rearing heifers and bulls, and different breeds.

"This helps us to hit growth targets. We can slow some calves down a little and we can also increase the feed of those that may have suffered a growth check. It's a great management tool."

That said, growth is uniform now among all calves – thanks to using the automatic feeding system. "We rarely have to intervene – health and growth rates are good.

"The system certainly met our expectations – that's why we invested in two more. They have more than paid for themselves and the quality of our calves has definitely improved." |