

Tackling post-calving problems by targeting dry-cow nutrition has improved performance

New focus on dry-cow nutrition

Attending a technical meeting inspired one producer to revise his dry-cow management, resulting in a drop of 20% in post-calving health issues. We spoke to him to find out more.

text **James Marshall**

An increased frequency of retained cleansings, and a growing number of cows struggling to get back in calf, prompted Carmarthen-based producer

Euros Davies to reassess his approach to dry-cow nutrition. This has not only led to a reduction in post-calving problems, but also resulted in more consistent

milk yields and lower vet bills. Euros runs the 140-cow herd at Tirwaun Farm, in Croesyceiliog, in partnership with his mother, Gwyneth.

Despite heavy ground conditions, Euros aims to graze the all-year-round calving herd as much as possible, with milkers turned out to grass in April and then rehoused in October.

Dry-cow nutrition

The herd's average yields stand at 7,800 litres, with 2,500 litres produced from forage. The business owns 69 hectares, a further 40 hectares are rented, and all ground is used for grazing or silage.

"During the grazing season we supplement the cows with compound feed in the parlour and the herd is fed a TMR of grass silage plus a blend during the winter. Concentrate is fed to yield through the parlour," explains Euros.

Three years ago he was prompted to reassess his approach to dry-cow nutrition in response to an increasing number of post-calving issues.

Winter ration: milkers are fed a TMR of grass silage, plus a blend, at Tirwaun Farm



"In winter 2015, we reached the point where around 30% of all calvings were resulting in some kind of problem," says Euros. "This was a mix of retained cleansings, milk fever, and failure to get back in-calf easily. I wasn't happy with the situation rumbling along like this, so we started to examine our approach to dry-cow nutrition in order to get things back under control."

Flying herd

He has been gradually expanding the Tirwaun herd during the past few years, taking numbers from 110 head to the today's herd size of 140.

With limited housing available on the unit and labour in short supply, Euros has been buying in replacements, rather than rearing his own young stock.

"We buy in a mixture of heifers, in-calf heifers, and young cows," says Euros. "The goal is to source animals that are good quality, offer value for money, and will maintain herd productivity."

Two Limousin bulls are run on the unit and Euros is pleased with the calves they produce. "They're high value calves," he says.

"Calves stay with their dam for the first few hours of life and during this time we aim to feed the calf 10% of its bodyweight in colostrum, to give them the best start in life. We then move the calves to the calf shed and feed them milk powder.

"We sell all our beef-cross calves off the farm, at five weeks of age. We don't rear our own dairy heifers because the economics don't stack up.

"I simply don't have the space to house them past this five-week stage or the time that is required to rear a high-quality heifer."

With increasing post-calving problems, Euros knew that he needed to adapt his approach to dry-cow management and set about learning more about the technical side of dry-cow nutrition.

Euros Davies: "We changed our approach to dry-cow nutrition to take back control"



Close-up period: dry cows are housed three-weeks prior to calving

"Post-calving issues were reducing milk production and resulting in some sizeable vet bills," he says.

"I was drying off cows and then letting them get on with things, with minimal intervention up until their next round of calving. Clearly this approach wasn't working."

As luck would have it, there were several 'transition cow' producer group meetings that Euros was able to attend, including one that was run by ForFarmers.

"ForFarmers' Edwards Jones knew that I was having some post-calving problems and suggested that I attend the meeting, despite not being a customer at the time. The meeting was a real eye-opener and I realised that I needed to be much more switched on when it came to managing dry-cow nutrition in the run up to calving."

New approach

Euros identified the likely source of his cows post-calving problems and made the appropriate management changes to his system to tackle them.

"I realised that because my cows are out at grass for so long that, at certain times of the year, dry cows had access to too much good grass and were putting on too much condition and 'locking up' too much calcium at the wrong time. "My dry cows were looking after themselves a little bit too much, rather than their growing calf.

"So I decided to keep the dry cows a little tighter on the grass. With less grazing in

front of them during the spring and summer, I supplement them with hay. During the housed period, far-off dry cows are fed big-bale silage."

Euros was also aware that in the close-up period his dry cows needed a nutritional boost to help prepare them for the demands of calving.

"Following Edward's recommendation, I decided to try supplementing my dry cows with TRANSLAC Advance, adding this at a rate of 2kg per head per day, as soon as dry cows are moved inside, three weeks prior to calving."

This supplement is a high protein, concentrate feed that has been formulated to encourage tissue repair and maximise colostrum production. It also controls excess calcium, via a binding action, to help reduce the risk of milk fever.

Promising results

Euros has been feeding TRANSLAC to his dry cows for the past two years and is pleased with the results.

"We are now only experiencing post-calving problems around 10% of the time, which is a marked improvement from the 30% we had in 2015.

"This feed and our renewed focus on dry-cow nutrition have helped to stabilise milk yields, cows seem to get back in calf more easily, and vet bills have fallen.

"All in all, we've seen good results and I hope they will continue to improve in the future." |