

Focusing on Efficient Beef Suckler Production in 2015...

"If it was easy everyone would be doing it..." We are rounding off another tough year, particularly in both the UK beef and dairy sectors, with finished cattle prices recovering at 186p/kg LW and 355p/kg DW but remaining well adrift of 2012-13 markets and many milk producers experiencing greater than 6-8ppl cuts. There may be respite on the horizon for beef suckler enterprises in the knowledge that UK beef and veal production is predicted to fall by up to 2% next year which will likely force farmgate prices in a positive direction.

The key driver of suckler profitability remains **'kg beef sold off farm'** reinforcing the quest for **high fertility** coupled with **low calf mortality** and fuelled by **exceptional growth rates** - targeting the highest number of heaviest youngstock. Nutrition acts as a common denominator linking the efficiency in each of these areas and remains fundamental in importance for optimal dam and calf performance whilst also intricate to on-farm budgeting as a leading expenditure.

Despite its importance however, suckler feeding can be frequently overlooked on some units, rarely being addressed in a quantitative or qualitative manner. A simple approach encompassing **WHO**, **WHAT** and **HOW** you are feeding a diet can be successful in employing a structured approach to ration formulation and delivery. This may create benefits through minimising poor conception rates, improving lactational yield and minimising metabolic and periparturient diseases such as retained cleansing, metritis, milk fever, prolapse etc.

WHO are you feeding? – What are her nutritional requirements, basic metabolic demands i.e. energy/protein demands for lactation, growth or gestation +/- trace element status, Body Condition Score (BCS).

WHAT are you feeding? – Quality and quantity of the ration, analysis of constituents, palatability, secondary fermentation of forages? Do you have your silage analysed? If so do you formulate specific rations for your herd?

HOW are you feeding it? – The physical manner in which the ration is presented/fed i.e. total mixed ration, feed space allowance can have a dramatic impact upon 'how much the cow can eat' or her 'Dry Matter Intake' (DMI) etc.

At this time of year, most spring calvers have relatively low metabolic demands and there can be a tendency to 'overfeed' predisposing to metabolic disease(s) and difficulty calving in addition to wasting valuable feed resources. Consider that the daily energy requirements for a typical 600kg suckler, BCS 3, immediately post weaning and due to calve in March are likely to be **65-70MJ** and DMI approximately 10-12kg. If we feed her big bale grass silage *ad libitum* only with an energy content of 9.5 ME MJ/Kg/DM, whilst very simplistic the animal could potentially be receiving 1.5-1.75 times her daily energy requirements in the range **95-114MJ/day**.

Ensuring all cows have also been 'pregnancy diagnosed' is also a useful way of optimising feeding and managing stocking densities in cattle housing effectively, in order to identify any barren animals, which can then be given a fattening ration – Have your cattle been scanned yet? This can easily be tied in with a TB test or blood sampling session for infectious disease.

Nutritional consideration is now commonplace in many herd health plans and can often act as a pivotal 'talking point' for multiple areas of the suckler enterprise. Whilst there are implications to overfeeding cattle I have no personal concerns regarding excessive mince pie consumption during the festive period and we all wish you a very Merry Christmas & a Happy New Year!

For further information please contact our Heathfield practice on 01435 869047.

Alex Walters BVSC MBIAC Cert AVP (CHP) MRCVS
Regional Director & Senior Veterinary Surgeon – Westpoint Veterinary Group

