

## Fertility targets

Keeping livestock is an expensive business, but there are ways in which to reduce costs and improve profits. Whether you have a dairy or suckler unit, the aim of the game is to get your cows in calf every year so it is important to know how your herd is performing. Keeping a record of key fertility targets will allow you to compare year on year and whether changes are required. Poor fertility will reduce profit therefore it is important to be aware, particularly when the average UK dairy fertility figures are decreasing. In separate studies, researchers at the Universities of Nottingham and Reading revealed UK first service pregnancy rates were averaging 40-42%. This compares with 55% in the early 1980s (DairyCo PD+, Nov 12).

It is estimated that an average suckler herd rearing 87% calves with a moderate calving spread, could gain an additional £35 per cow or £3,500 per year for a 100 cow herd, by rearing an extra seven calves. Rearing the extra seven calves and compacting the calving period, could improve income by £86/cow or £8,600 (QMS – A guide to improving suckler herd fertility, 2011).

The average loss from poor fertility in dairy cows in the UK is around £180 per cow or 3p/litre ([www.nadis.org.uk](http://www.nadis.org.uk)).

There are lots of different ways to record information and lots of different targets that can be used, but the most important thing is finding a way of recording that you can work with and concentrating on a few key areas that will give you the most useful information. It is very easy to get bogged down in lots of data, particularly with all the different computer software available now.

There are several key targets that are commonly used.

For suckler herds they are:

- Calves born per 100 cows/heifers put to the bull >95%
- Calves weaned per 100 cows/heifers put to the bull >94%
- Cows calving within first 3 week period >65% ([www.eblex.org.uk](http://www.eblex.org.uk))

For dairy, all year round they are:

- Days calving to conception = 160
- Submission rate >70%
- Conception rate (3 month av.) >35%
- Pregnancy rate >25%

For dairy, block calvers they are:

- Submission rate 1st 3 weeks 90%
- Conception rate 1st 3 weeks 55%
- 1st 3 weeks in-calf rate 50%
- Mid-point of calving 14d (Westpoint Herd Health Plan templates)

To achieve these targets it is important to be pro-active about herd health, especially as there are lots of factors that can negatively impact on fertility. These include:

- Nutrition/energy balance with body condition score

- Management of replacement heifers
- Reducing dystocia and calf losses, try to establish causes and rectify them
- Control infectious diseases; especially BVD, leptospirosis and IBR, although many others can cause fertility problems
- Make use of bull fertility testing to ensure they are performing

Once you have started to record these figures you can build up a year on year picture which can be used to assess whether changes made are effective, if something may have slipped or actually the herd is performing well. Some changes can be simple, for example using tail paint to increase heat detection and others may take a bit more time and investment but generally will be worthwhile.

**Louise White BVSc MRCVS**