

Management of late calving beef sucklers

One of the costliest problems in beef production is late calving cows and their reproduction management.

The target for length of bulling period in UK beef cows is 9 weeks (1). The primary cause for late calving cows is keeping the bull with the cows and heifers for more than the ideal period of nine weeks to serve the late calving cows; thus stretching the calving period above the desired 10 week target and potentiating the problem.

For maximum efficiency and profitability, a beef cow needs to calve once every 365 days to produce the maximal weight of calf weaned per cow bulled – the best measure of output in a beef herd. It is known that a beef cow needs at least 45 days for her uterus to involute and be ready again to conceive, which leaves only another 40 days or 2-3 cycles for her to get in calf (gestation 280 days plus 45 days involution plus 40 days breeding, 21 day cycles). If a cow calves late in an extended calving period (over 10 weeks) this will mean that she may only have 2 – 3 weeks before the bulls are put back in, and will not yet be cycling again. In addition to this, the first cycle has low conception rates, so many late calvers have only one true cycle with the bull, thus leading to a higher percentage of empty cows in your herd at the pregnancy diagnosis (2).

It's been shown that an empty cow costs on average more than £2 per day (~£720/year) when only considering feed costs. Even if you choose to cull barren cows after autumn pregnancy diagnosis, the prices for meat carcass are often low in that period so, whether kept or culled, the late calvers cause considerable economic losses to the farmer.

We can reduce the problems described above by oestrus synchronisation of these late calving animals before the bulls are put in for the next breeding period. Oestrus synchronisation in beef cattle consists of identifying the animals at risk (i.e. those that have calved beyond the recommended 10 week period or those in poor body condition score) and putting them on a hormonal treatment programme. One favoured approach is the use of an intravaginal device and intramuscular injections administered according to a strict time protocol. The medicines cost approximately £25 per animal (www.farmacy.co.uk), making this a viable economical solution. There are programmes that can be used with both animals that have yet to run with the bull but also ones that do not pose any risk to those with early pregnancies as only the non-pregnant animals will come into oestrus.

For more information regarding breeding strategies and synchronisation of beef cows please contact Westpoint Farm Vets and we will happily respond to any question you might have.....

- (1) **Riddell, I., Caldow G.** Improving Suckler Herd Fertility: Make more money and save labour on your beef enterprise. **Quality Meat Scotland.** www.qmscotland.co.uk
- (2) **Caldow, G., Lowman, B., Riddell, I.** (2005) Veterinary Intervention in the reproductive management of beef cow herds. **In Practice 27 (8):** p406.

Tonia Simms BVSc MRCVS & Molly McKay BVetMed BVSc (hons) MRCVS