



Heifers Thriving or Surviving

The very high cost of replacement heifers, either reared or bought in, does not allow for “practice lactations”, they must perform immediately. The most limiting factor in first lactation heifers is simply size. Holstein heifers under 600 kgs live weight at calving will not perform in either milk production or reproduction.

Our heifer’s productive life potential begins about eight weeks before being born. The dam’s Body Condition Score at dry-off and subsequent stable weight during the dry spell, then the effectiveness of her lead feeding/transition program have dramatic effects on the new born calf for whole of life. Ease of calving and the lack of dystocia is heavily influence by lead feeding.

Colostrum quality, determined by protein content of the lead feed, then, administration of 4 litres in the first twelve hours of life has immediate impact on survival initially, but more important, on longevity of the heifer’s productive life. A subject I wrote on in detail last autumn.

Two years of sound nutrition producing a steady weight gain of around 0.9kgs/day will have our heifer calving at 600 kgs, and well able to compete with mature cows socially and obviously for feed. Achieving this weight gain over twenty four months requires feed management changes according to seasons. I really believe putting heifers out on agistment is a thing of the past. The current economic climate in which we are operating, high milk price/high cost, is too high risk for ‘hope management’. If heifers cannot be reared at home or close enough for daily feed management, contract heifer rearing should be considered.

I encourage all my clients to feed one kg of grain per heifer while pasture is not limited, then two kgs over summer to further supplement energy for growth while silage or hay is the main forage source. A grain mix designed for optimum health and productivity for the milking herd will serve admirably to produce excellent growth and mineral nutrition to our growing heifer. In fact, I recommend the dairy mix used by my clients be offered to calves from the day of birth to first calving.

