

Replacement heifer sourcing and management

By Mark Jelley

For any suckler herd, replacement heifers provide the key to the future productivity and efficiency of the herd. It doesn't matter whether the strategy is to buy in replacements or breed them yourself, what does matter is that they provide a foundation of superior genetics so that next year's cows are better than last years. Strong maternal genetics that develop into cows that will rear heavy calves and fertility and robustness that means they will do this repeatedly year after year.



Mark Jelley maximises cow numbers by buying in replacement heifers on his 450 acre mixed farm in Northamptonshire. As such he only needs to buy terminal sires for use in the cow herd and reduces the number of different groups of cattle he is managing.

The importance of health

Finding an even batch of suitable replacement dairy cross heifers of the breed type, age, weight and health status that he requires is a constant challenge. For the 2015 breeding season Mark has sourced a batch of Meuse Rhine Issel x Hereford and Angus heifers from a dairy herd in Sussex. These heifers arrived on farm in December 2014, having been isolated and tested for BVD and other health risks on arrival. Mark strongly believes in the need to know the health status of any incoming cattle as bringing in a disease like BVD could be a disaster for his suckler herd. He has always vaccinated his cattle but this alone does not fully protect the herd and annual testing is carried out. The heifers are also weighed and treated for worms and fluke on arrival.

Having measured the live weight of the heifers, Mark then plans the level of growth rate and ration required to achieve target bulling weights of 65 per cent for the start of the breeding season in May. Due to the variety of genetics coming into the herd it is not easy to estimate what the mature weight will be. Weighing cows at weaning has shown considerable variation in mature weights, with some as heavy as 700kg. Mark aims for a minimum bulling weight of 400kg liveweight. More heifers than are required are purchased each year to allow for those that don't hold to service within the restricted nine week service period. If a replacement heifer fails to hold to service she is finished along with the finishing heifers. A strict policy on the health status and fertility of the heifers joining the herd means that his 90 cow herd calves over a 10 week period with a replacement rate of 15-22 per cent.

Take a look at [BRP beef diseases directory](#) for more information on prevention, control and treatment of significant diseases within the beef industry