

Management of an autumn calving suckler herd

Ian Willison operates an autumn-calving system on his 200acre farm in Nottinghamshire Here he shares the benefits of his operation.

Ian's suckler herd consists of 80 purebred and crossbred Simmental cows which calve between the months of July and October. Bull calves are taken through to finishing at around 13 months old and heifers which are not retained for breeding are sold for replacements at 18 months old.



The benefits of autumn calving

Ian favours an autumn calving system because he feels it is more aligned to the market, with heifers being ready to bull in the spring when they are 18 months old and bulls being finished before Christmas when often beef is in demand. Autumn calving also provides the additional benefit that the cows are housed indoors during the breeding season, allowing Ian to use artificial insemination.

Cow management system

Cows graze from April-October, with a short period spent indoors in August when they calve. During the winter months the cows are fed a 50/50 *ad libitum* ration of grass silage and maize silage. The analysis for the two forage types are shown in Table 1. Ian aims to minimise large changes in cow body condition score throughout the year.

Table 1: Analysis of grass silage & maize silage produced harvest 2014

	Grass Silage	Maize silage
Dry matter (%)	27	30
Crude protein (% in DM)	11	8.8
ME (MJ/kg DM)	10	11.4

Calving management

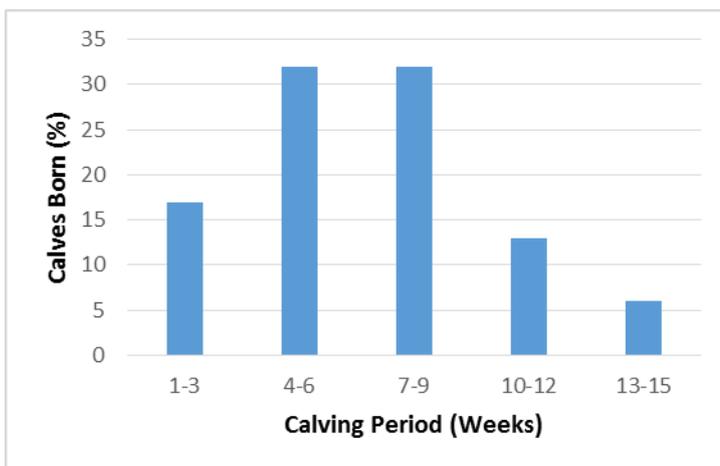


Figure 1: Calving period 2014

In 2014 the calving period extended over fourteen weeks, with only 17% of cows and heifers calving within the first three weeks. Ian hopes to reduce the calving period to nine weeks over the next couple of years.

To do this he has implemented a strict culling policy whereby cows which have had a difficult calving, or have failed to conceive before the end of the breeding season, are culled. Replacement heifers are homebred and calve for the first time at around two years old.

Artificial Insemination (AI)

Ian chooses AI because of the choice and flexibility of genetics available. Furthermore, the process provides accurate calving dates which can aid management at calving. Cows are inseminated over a period of six weeks before the sweeper bull is introduced for three weeks.

Youngstock management

Calves are housed along with their mothers in same sex groups throughout winter. Bull calves are offered a rearing pellet from one month old to weaning, after this time they are gradually introduced to the finishing ration. The 2014-born bull calves consumed 208kg/head of creep feed from birth to weaning.

In contrast, heifer calves are managed differently. They have access to creep feed until Christmas and thereafter are only provided with the maize and grass silage diet fed to the suckler cows. They are then turned out with their mothers to graze before being weaned at around ten months old. The 2014-born heifer calves consumed 72kg/head of creep feed from birth to Christmas.

	Bull Calves	Heifer Calves
Age at weaning (days)	235	294
Weight at weaning (kg)	380	366
Daily liveweight gain (kg)	1.4	1.05

Table 2: Performance of 2014 born calves from birth to weaning

Finishing

Bulls are intensively finished on a maize silage and concentrate blend at 13 months old, weighing around 650kg liveweight at slaughter. The finishing ration contains crimped barley, a protein blend, maize silage, yeast and urea. Ian has calculated that on average last year the finishing ration cost £296/head for bulls born in autumn 2013 and finished in autumn 2014.

Table 3: Cost/head of finishing bull ration

Ration	Tonnes/head (t)	Cost/tonne (£)	Contract costs/tonne (£)	Total cost/head (£)
Crimped barley*	1.8	70	22	166
Protein blend	0.43	235	-	101
Yeast and urea	0.01	1283	-	13
Maize silage	1	10	6	16

* Nutritional analysis crimped barley: 60% DM, 13% CP, 13 MJ ME/kg DM

Ian's top tips for improving efficiency

- Focus on EBV's to find the best genetics to suit the farm
- AI helps tailor management
- Prioritise forage quality rather than quantity
- Creep feed bull calves to promote liveweight gains