

Developing grazing systems for suckler cows

Mark Jelley, Northamptonshire

Mark Jelley calves approximately 80 Friesian-cross-Hereford cows and around 20 replacement heifers, during ten weeks in the spring. He uses three Blonde bulls and finishes all offspring; the heifers are sold to a local butcher while the bulls are finished intensively.

He began trialling rotationally grazing his cows and calves in 2013 and developed three rotations on his 38 ha grazing platform which act as bulling groups. As the cows calve, they are turned out into a paddock near the sheds until there is a group of ten, when they are then moved into one of the rotations. Groups are moved around the rotation based on grass availability and field size through the grazing season. During the winter, Mark feeds his cattle a straw-based diet with supplements which means he has no requirement for silage.



He has found that, compared to 2012 when he was set stocking, he produced an extra 5.4 tonnes of weaned calf in 2015. In 2015 he produced 771 kg per ha of weaned calf, which is a big improvement on the 630 kg per ha of weaned calf he produced in 2012. This means that he reared more calves off the same area and each calf was 20 kg heavier at weaning. These gains cannot be fully attributed to the change in grazing management. He started using more nitrogen fertiliser and carried out more buffer feeding in 2015, but the introduction of rotational grazing will certainly have helped.

These results have convinced him that rotational grazing is important to drive his herd performance forward. He is planning to sub-divide some of his fields to make it easier to clean out the paddocks.

In summer 2015 Mark was caught out by a drop in grass growth which meant he had to buffer feed. His plan is to start recording grass covers to give him more information about when growth is beginning to drop. The challenge in the summer is that his arable enterprise takes priority over the suckler herd. However, measuring grass will inform his management decisions and should enable him to make changes sooner, without demanding too much time.

Cow efficiency is measured as the weight of weaned calf (adjusted to 200 days of age) divided by the cow weight. It should be used as a herd measure of efficiency, rather than for comparing individual cows. Table 1 summarises the results from the bull calves born in 2013. The results show that the average cow efficiency was 54%. The target for cow efficiency is 65%, so it important to make sure all cows are performing well.

	Average	Min	Max
Cow weight at weaning (kg)	609	470	728
Weaning weight (kg)	332	255	418
Liveweight gain (kg/day)	1.43	1.15	1.71
Age at weaning	205	153	226
200-day weight (kg)	326	270	382
Cow efficiency (%)	54.4		

Table 1: The data from Mark Jelley's for the 2013 born bull calves (assuming 40kg birthweight)

An average figure can only tell you so much. Figure 1 demonstrates the variation that exists within weaned calf weight. The aim should be to identify the reasons behind the variation to try and reduce it. The results show that there is as much variation between smaller cows as larger cows, emphasising the need to ensure all cows are performing at their best.

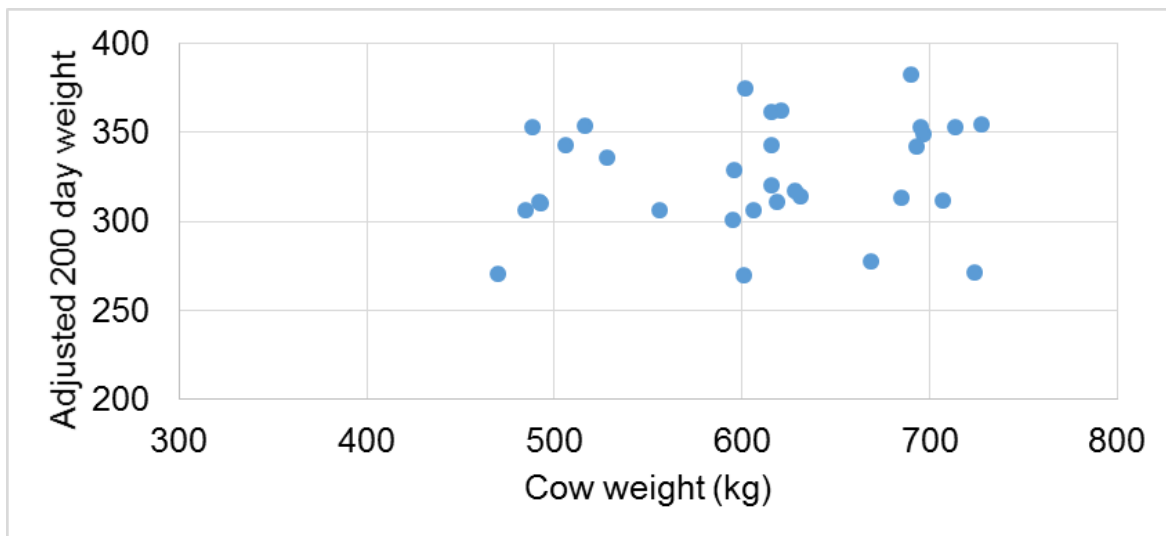


Figure 1: The relationship between adjusted 200-day weight and cow weight for Mark Jelley's cows in 2013

Mark was a member of the original Progressive Beef Group and found it extremely useful for his business. BRP has recruited for the next members of the group, which will meet for the first time in the summer.