

## Managing dry cows

AHDB Beef & Lamb recently funded a study in order to review the information available on pre-calving nutrition of beef cows, looking at its effects on the cow's chance of survival and the subsequent performance of the calf.

The focus of feeding dry cows should be to enable them to reach the correct Body Condition Score (BCS) at calving.

Ideally, that would mean knowing the calving date and being able to group cows by BCS and feed them accordingly.

Research suggests that during the dry period, rations should:

- Satisfy the cows appetite – 1.5-2% of liveweight
- Provide sufficient trace elements and minerals
- Manage cows to reach target BCS at calving.

Findings show that thin cows which lack their own body reserves may benefit from additional protein, but this is dependent on the forage available to them. It is important to feed according to condition and start planning in plenty of time before calving. Table 1 shows the target BCS for cows and heifers throughout the production cycle.



|                 | Spring calving herds                 | Autumn calving herds |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Calving         | 2.5 (3 for first and second calvers) | 3                    |
| Service         | 2.5                                  | 2.5                  |
| Housing/weaning | 3-3.5                                | 2.5-3                |

Table 1: Target BCS for cows and heifers

Cows that are in good condition, with a BCS above 3.5, have reserves to use and need to have feed restricted to avoid them becoming too fat. However, adequate rumen protein should always be fed as research has shown that severely undersupplying protein by feeding straw alone in the last few weeks pre-calving reduces colostrum quality and thus prevents the calf getting sufficient immunity via colostrum.

The review also found that analysing forage is essential to dry cow management. If the basal forage is poor and there is not enough energy and protein for the cow to make enough microbial protein, then supplementing with a high protein source may be advisable. Table 2 shows the nutrient guidelines for a mature 650kg suckler cow are shown below.

|          | Dry Matter Intake (kg/day) | Energy (ME MJ/day) | Crude Protein (CP % in dry matter) |
|----------|----------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Dry cows | 10                         | 75-80              | 9                                  |

Table 2: Nutrient guidelines for a mature 650kg suckler cow

Table 1 provides a general guide only and the exact diet specification required will depend on many factors such as cow condition, weight loss allowed, date of turnout in relation to bulling, etc.

For more information see the Better Returns Programme manual,  
[Feeding suckler cows and calves for Better Returns](#)