

Preparing for spring calving

Results of the AHDB Beef & Lamb Stocktake 2016 report suggest that the average lowland suckler producer is only weaning 85 calves per 100 cows or heifers put to the bull due to losses during pregnancy, at calving and pre-weaning.

This has a financial impact on the farm due to the cost of keeping non-productive cows and the reduction in the number of calves available to sell on later. Therefore minimising these losses is critical.

Heifers need to be monitored from an early age to ensure they are growing well enough to reach the correct weight for calving. They should be 65% of their adult size by the time they are put to the bull and 85% of adult size by their first calving (Table 1). They also have to grow while rearing their first calf and so their condition and management is critical.



Table 1: Example growth rates and liveweight targets for replacement heifers aiming to calve at 24 months of age

Mature cow weight	Growth rate from birth to conception	Conception (15 months of age)	Start of second breeding season	Start of third breeding season
% of mature weight		65	85	95
Target liveweights for replacement heifers (kg)				
600kg	0.80	390	510	570
650kg	0.85	423	553	618
700kg	0.90	455	595	665

Body condition

It is important to feed dry cows correctly and the focus should be to make sure they are at the correct body condition score (BCS) at calving. Ideally that means knowing calving dates and being able to group cows by BCS and feed them accordingly.

If females are over-conditioned, fat deposits will reduce the diameter of the birth canal, making birth more difficult. However, cows that are too thin may lack the stamina to calve by themselves. It is important to get the balance of energy and protein in the ration right to avoid cows laying down internal fat or calves growing too big, both of which will lead to calving problems. Body condition tends to vary throughout the year with feed supply, but it is best to avoid extreme and rapid changes.

Ration

Although nutrient requirements increase through pregnancy, gradually at first and then at an increasing rate, research has shown that feeding can be simplified by adopting a flat-rate regime.

The cow is rationed according to her liveweight and the required liveweight change at a point eight weeks before calving. So the cow will be slightly over-fed at the beginning of the winter and under-fed at the end of pregnancy.

However in systems where accurate calving dates are known, there can be merit in increasing the feeding rate slightly, or including proportionally more silage in a grass silage/straw mix, in the four to six weeks pre-calving, to minimise body condition loss and promote colostrum production. Limiting feed to reduce calf weight during the last month of pregnancy can do more harm than good.

Table 2 sets out some example dry cow diets, based on silage (30% dry matter/kg, 10.6MJ ME/kg DM), straw (6.3MJ ME/kg DM) or hay (8.5MJ ME/kg DM), fed to a 650kg spring-calving suckler cow, eight weeks from calving and losing 0.25kg/day.

Table 2: Example dry cow diets

Diet	Silage (kg)	Straw (kg)	Hay (kg)	Barley (kg)	Rapeseed meal (kg)
1	17 (restricted)	4.5	-	-	-
2	-	9.5 (to appetite)	-	1.0	1.5
3	-	-	9.5 (to appetite)	-	0.5

Calving

Once calving time arrives, it is important to ensure that management practices are in place to provide optimal care. Whether the cows are calving inside or outside, it should be a familiar environment. Cows should only be moved ten days prior to calving or once feet are showing. Moving them at any other time can upset the cow so that delivery slows down, which can again lead to calving difficulties. It also upsets feed intake and so impacts on eating and milk production post-calving.

Once calving, cows should be checked regularly, but without being disturbed, and, if delivery of the calf is not progressing correctly, intervention should take place. Cows should be showing signs of delivery progressing within two hours, with heifers taking around three hours. If this progression is not occurring then the cow should be checked by a competent person. If there is any uncertainty about the ability of the cow to deliver the calf successfully then a vet should be called. The sooner help is given the more likely there is to be a successful outcome.

Further information on managing cows around calving can be found in the BRP manual [Feeding Suckler Cows and Calves for Better Returns](#) and the BRP+ document [Minimising Calving Difficulties](#).

A webinar on calving the cow and resuscitation of the newborn calf is also available on the AHDB Beef & Lamb YouTube channel, [Beef & Lamb TV](#).