

Managing fertility and getting cows in calf

Woodhead Climate Change Focus Farm

Notes from the fourth meeting on 7 September 2015

The fourth meeting of the Climate Change Focus Farm discussion group at Woodhead focused on improving herd performance through managing fertility and getting cows in calf.

Key points:

- Get home grown forage analysed - it may be better (or worse) than you think
- Use analyses to make up a targeted ration for each feeding group - making the most of bought in feeds
- Keep a record of any health or calving issues; these may affect future fertility and help to inform cull decisions.
- Record & review reasons for culling
- Improving the environment in the calf house can increase performance and reduce calf losses

The dairy industry has changed considerably since Woodhead Farm volunteered as a focus farm, with milk prices dropping dramatically. The aim of this meeting was to help dairy farmers continue to identify efficiencies whilst maintaining both fertility and performance.

Here we highlight some of the topics covered by guest speakers SRUC's Senior Dairy Consultant David Keiley, vet Helen Carty and nutritionists Donald Brown and Harbro's Matt Palmer at the meeting.



How much does your ration cost?

Matt Palmer considered the cost effective supplementation of winter dairy diets, stressing the importance of getting silage analysed and knowing the cost of your ration. Without silage analyses it will be difficult to reduce costs and still maintain herd fertility.

Matt discussed cereal and protein markets, looking at the most effective sources in terms of both performance and cost. For 2015 soya and rape are currently the cheapest source of protein, with barley being the most cost effective in terms of energy. A properly balanced ration is critical to herd performance and will help you make the best use of home produced feed. The group discussed the importance of targeting high energy rations to early lactation cows to optimise fertility.



Fertility

The management of dry, calving and freshly calved cows all require a different approach and if mismanaged, could compromise future fertility, explained David Keiley. Rumen fill, milk yield, rectal temperature and feed intake should be monitored - a vet check carried out 10 to 15 days after calving will ensure cows are properly cleaned, increasing the chances of conception at first service.

The team at Woodhead use a whiteboard to record all incidences of milk fever, retained foetal membranes, displaced abomasum, assisted calvings and calves born dead. Photographs are taken of the whiteboard using a mobile phone and the data recorded for future reference. This information has proved useful when thinking about future breeding decisions. On most occasions, cows that are challenging to get in calf, are also listed at least once on the whiteboard, which helps to inform future cull decisions.



Objective culling policy

How many cows do you cull each year? What are they culled for? Correctly recording and reviewing culling is essential to enable benchmarking and improve performance. Deaths and reasons for deaths should also be recorded in a bid to reduce outright losses.

Update on calf housing

A number of small but cost effective improvements were put in place in the calf house, prompted by ideas from Helen and Livestock Housing Specialist Jamie Robertson. Measures included:

- Lining the calf house with stock board - these can be easily removed for pressure washing on both sides.
- Keeping bedding away from around the feeder and putting down sawdust - can be routinely scraped out (see photo). This will reduce bacteria in this area - a good strategy keep the numbers of scour bugs down
- A fan has been installed to improve air flow.

Other structural alterations, plus a move to igloos, are proposed once the economic situation improves. These and other small tweaks to current practice have led to an ongoing improvement in calf health; Helen complemented the team at Woodhead on just how good the calves were looking.



There are nine climate change focus farms in Scotland. Keep up to date with their activities at



www.farmingforabetterclimate.org

Meetings are free to attend and all farmers are welcome.

For Woodhead, contact farm facilitator Robert Ramsay on 01292 525252 or via email at Robert.ramsay@sac.co.uk for more information.

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