

The upstart reckons he was right

How to obtain summer/autumn grazing for recently weaned replacement calves?

The problem came under discussion at the November management meeting on the Stratford Demonstration Farm – the previous year's arrangement having fallen through.

The practice of grazing off calves over the December-May period is one that has been adopted only relatively recently. That's not really surprising when looked at in the context of the long history of the acceptance of grazing off as a useful management function.

But I well remember as a young Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) adviser being placed quite firmly in the then-popular category of the young, purely academic and totally im-

practical upstart for producing an economic analysis to prove net income could be increased by grazing off heifers and replacing them with milking cows.

In those days, no genuine, proper farmer and stockman would have dreamed of allowing anyone else to raise their

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precious replacement stock, and to have the temerity to suggest this should be done was rank heresy.

Over the years this attitude has gradually changed, so now the grazing off of dry stock is much more of the rule rather than the exception.

Cowboys gone

Probably the biggest factor would be the general elimina-

tion of the cowboys from the system, and the rise of the skilled and professional specialist grazier so farmers can be completely confident that their stock are doing at least as well or, dare I say it – even better – than they would have been if kept at home.

That the young growing weaner over November to May was the last class of dry stock to be considered for grazing off is not really surprising. This is probably the most critical period in the rearing timespan of the animal and a good and sustained start is critical.

In a classic piece of research at Ruakura, Dr C. P. McMeekan obtained from cows, that had been well-reared calves, production averages of 140kg of milkfat as two-year-olds, 156kg as three-year-olds and 167kg as mature cows. By contrast, cows that had been poorly reared as calves, but treated exactly the

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same, produced only 117kg, 139kg and 151kg.

So it's highly probable that if, during the early rearing stages, reasonable target liveweights are not met, the adult cow will perform below potential for the rest of its life. Farmers should want to be quite sure calves are doing well and keep them home to make sure this is the case. It's a one-way street – any slip ups and there's no second chances.

Net surplus

There's also the fact that on most dairy farms, in the average year, November to May is a time of net surpluses. Over the whole timeframe, the pastures produce more dry matter (DM) than the stock require so there's less incentive to get the calves off and free up more feed.

Coupled with this is the third factor, the general perception that calves don't eat much anyway compared with a milking cow. Which means a whole lot of calves would have to go to be replaced by any meaningful number of cows.

I think that generally this argument is overstated and calves, especially once over the 100kg liveweight (LWT) mark and weaned onto a solely pasture diet, will consume far more DM than is generally realised.

On the other side of the ledger, there's a big positive which is that a lot of time and effort has to go into the calves over this time. Regular drenching for both internal and external parasites is a must. Vaccination programmes have to be undertaken. Other animal health problems such as facial eczema may require attention. Regular shifting onto quality pasture will be required. This latter point also favours grazing off, as while feed quantity may be plentiful, quality is liable to be much more suspect, as stalk and seed head become predominant.

Leafy pasture

To maximise growth rates, the weaners will require fresh, leafy pasture. The cows have exactly the same requirement if they are to continually maximise milk production. So while their total feed demand is much smaller, the calves will still be in direct competition with the cows for quality

feed. Freeing up a bit more of this could well have a beneficial effect on milk production.

It's now the demonstration farm's policy to graze off replacement calves from December to May. The major imperative proviso is that the grazing has to be of top quality to ensure satisfactory growth rates. Without these, the whole-of-life future production of the adult cow will likely be compromised.

To do this, our target LWT to be met is: November (four months old) 75kg, January 90kg, May 150kg and July 170kg as a minimum for all calves individually, not a mob average. But bear in mind these are Jersey calves, and for Friesians LWT in November should be 100kg, by January 125kg, May 200kg and by July 225kg.

Targets achievable

With good feeding and management, these targets should be quite capable of being met.

I can just sense the farmer commenting: "All very well, but has he looked at the cost of grazing lately?"

Yes, I have, and it's a very confused and volatile situation. There's no doubt grazing costs in general have risen dramatically over the past two years, fuelled by the much higher payouts, the big expansion of dairying and last year's major and widespread drought and follow-on effects.

Undoubtedly the drop in the payout this season will mean the economic gains to be made from grazing off will be less.

This means I should recapture some of my youthful enthusiasm and attempt an analysis of the economics and profitability of grazing off weaners from December to May, I hope to a more receptive and open-minded audience. Generally any management change that results in more of the total annual pasture grown being converted directly into milk by the grazing cow, will likely be in the top echelon of profitable management options. **D**



Brian Hockings is vice-chairman of the Stratford Demonstration Farm.