

Health and hygiene vital for top results

Vicki McLean says being a vet has advantages, especially when it comes to calf health.

While starting out on a large scale she has been using her contacts as a vet in and around the Matamata district to source calves and has approached farmers who have a sound reputation for calf and colostrum management.

Ideally she would like to source her calves from one source, but in reality this is not always possible. A stock agent is also helping her find suppliers.

"I will select them on breed, farmer reputation and management and will collect and transport them myself."

When multiple calf sources are unavoidable she recommends penning those calves together and not mixing them with calves from different properties.

Calves weighing no less than 35kg would be ideal because her target is to grow the calves to 100kg in about 12 weeks.

She recommends calves with swollen joints and scouring be avoided.

"You want healthy calves. Try not to buy problems."

The calves will be fed a warm electrolyte solution and weighed when they arrive and fed with warm milk after that.

However she says it is not always possible to feed warm milk, but the warmth provides improved feed efficiency.

A set of scales will be used to regularly weigh a cross section of calves every two weeks. This will help gauge calf growth rates.

The shed has 12 pens and Vicki plans to allow at least 2m²/calf and they will be housed in mobs of about 25.

She encourages calf rearers to work hard at getting their calves over the three-week hump which gives their immune system time to develop and they are able to handle stress slightly better than younger calves.

Vicki believes hygiene is vital when rearing calves, especially indoors.

She says in the United States, calf rearers dedicate themselves entirely to that role for the season.

"They won't go off and milk cows the same day for example," says Vicki.

Her suggestion is to have buckets of disinfectant to dip boots into before entering and when leaving the calf shed or dedicate a pair of boots for wearing in the shed only.

She uses a water soluble disinfectant powder for boots, spraying the calf shed (before the calves arrive), spraying shavings in the calf pens and rinsing calferterias and her vat.

Disinfecting of gear used between calf mobs will occur daily and she says even though it is labour intensive it will pay off. Particular attention should be paid to disinfecting equipment used in the hospital pen. And she urged rearers to look for a disinfectant safe to use around calves. Disinfectant solutions should be changed regularly – they become inefficient when dirty.

Her hospital pen will be within the well ventilated rearing shed, but kept separate.

"I have picked a draught free corner, one that is warmer, but it's not a cold shed."

That pen will be mucked out daily and calves might be fed up to four times a day until better.

The calves will also be treated with a five in one vaccine and booster four weeks later and dewormed at least once and she'll have scour tablets handy too.

"You should talk to your local vet to see what you should have on hand when rearing calves," says Vicki.

An additional tool she will use is a thermometer. "If a calf looks off colour it is quick and easy to see what its temperature is."

The ideal calf body temperature should be between 38-39degC, depending on housing and air temperature.

Her calves will be identified either with tags or a colour mark. She does this so behaviour changes can be noted and written on a white board – a useful tool if someone is helping with the feeding.

A stomach tube will also be on standby, but she

suggests having some training in using one if it is an unfamiliar tool. A stomach tube can be invaluable for getting electrolytes into calves that are sick or won't suckle.

Before launching a calf-rearing scheme Vicki urges thoroughly doing your homework (including the economics) and that could even involve rearing calves on a small scale first.

"And study your end market, there is a lot of information out there."

"Remember they are babies and hygiene is very important and talk to your vet for what you should have on standby."

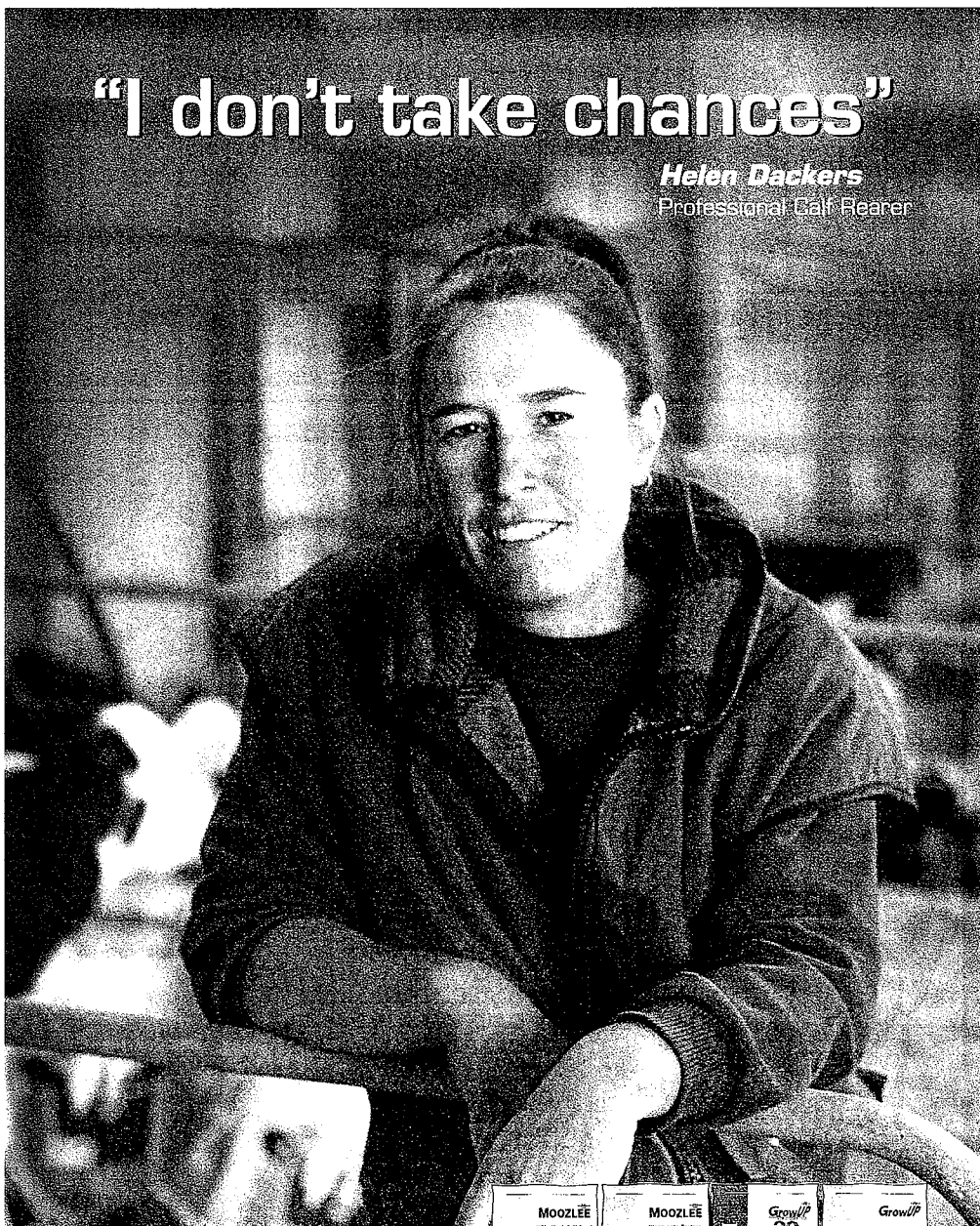
Having a nurturing instinct and plenty of patience helps to make a successful calf rearer.



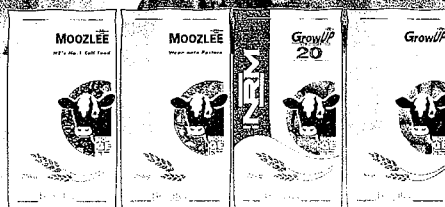
Vicki McLean recommends doing plenty of research and even rearing a small number of calves before tackling large numbers.

"I don't take chances"

Helen Dackers
Professional Calf Rearer



When it comes to successful calf rearing, there is little room for error. So I make it my business to get my calves growing fast on the feeds that are proven and cost effective.



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