

Calves provide a relished lifestyle change

Natalie Campbell

A converted broiler shed has been given a new lease of life, but instead of a home for thousands of chickens it is home to hundreds of calves.

Rangitikei farmers Dennis and Viv Welsh rear between 500-600 spring born Friesian bull calves annually.

All the calves are hand picked by Viv who complete with HT licence will travel to Taranaki several times a day during the peak of calving to collect the calves and ensure they get the best possible care.

And it is going the extra mile that makes the Welshs' successful calf rears.

Included in their recipe for success is a herd of 30 milked cows, (this means calves are reared on a calf milk replacer fortified with whole milk), a strict selection criteria, undertaking their own cartage and even a purpose built disinfectant system for calf pens.

The calves are reared to 100kg when they are sold, mostly through private sales. This method of farming has been chosen for the 121ha property because its heavy clay soils make breeding stock too heavy causing pasture damage.

Welsh describes their policy as cattle trading, and their main stay is calf rearing. Incorporated in the farm is a milking herd of 30 cows. The cows began calving last month and will be milked until Christmas. This milk is used to feed the calves.

In the past the Welshs have also reared a selection of Livestock Improvement identified heifer calves and sold them in calf. However that policy is being dropped to make way for about 100 Friesian bulls to be finished at 18 months old and the final in-calf heifers are for sale now.

Those heifer calves have been bought from dairy farmers with high production worth (PW) and breeding worth (BW). They have also reared Jersey bull calves to sell privately, they too have high BW and breeding records.

Viv says the move to calves was a lifestyle change for them, after rearing broiler chickens for Tegal for 20 years. She described that as a full time job with commitment needed around the clock.

Neighbour Christine Procter who is employed to help rear calves and on the farm says the calves have a quicker turnover than other types of stock.

"They come in as four day olds and sold as 100kg weaners. The last of them are gone in January," she says.

Selection of the calves is left to Viv who will travel to Taranaki twice a week to buy calves either through a stock agent or privately. Some days she will make the trip twice.

Her selection criteria is firm. She looks for the five white points, a dry navel, warm mouth, ears up and alert, shiny coat and weighing more than 40kg (gauged by sight) are also priorities. The calves are inspected for soundness and Viv says if she suspects a calf hasn't had colostrum she won't take it. The shed conditions the calves are leaving is a good indication of their care and future health.

However she says she doesn't always get it right, although her eye for soundness has developed in the past six years.

Many of the calves they source have come from farmers they have been loyal to for several years.

The care of the calves starts at collection. She and son Scott, 14, who is home schooled, use a tail lift on the truck to make loading stress free for the calves and Viv.



Hygiene, care and an eye for detail are the basic principles behind calf rearing on the Marton property of Viv and Dennis Welsh pictured with staff member Christine Procter, right.

She says the calves are well protected during transport with rubber mats and a clean deck. The truck is disinfected between loads and there is wind protection. She says the calves don't stay on the truck for longer than necessary.

The truck is capable of carting 40

calves, but Viv keeps the number carried to 35. She says the reason they do their own pick up is to protect the calves and it provides the opportunity to reject unfit calves.

Once a load arrives home the calves are unloaded and left to settle overnight with fresh water and electrolytes. They

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Calf hygiene a top priority

Rangitikei calf rearers Dennis and Viv say it is important for calf rearers to have a good relationship with their vet.

Dennis says their vet Mark Gilmour from Southern Rangitikei Veterinary Services visits them at the start of each season to talk about any issues the couple may have and solutions.

Although Dennis says last season was the exception to their nearly impeccable run of healthy calves.

Until then they have only had the odd scour outbreak and pneumonia, but "nothing to write home about". The mortality rate is typically about 2.5%.

But last year they changed to a whey based CMR and the calves were struck by Rotovirus, Cryptosporidia and Coronavirus. The Welshs believe using a whey-based powder contributed to the calves not being as tolerant of the viruses and not having enough energy to combat their effects.

"I've never seen anything like it," recalls Dennis.

Viv says as soon as they changed CMRs there was an instant improvement in the health of the calves.

In hindsight Dennis says the bugs were probably present but the calves couldn't defend



A good relationship with your vet is an important part of successful calf rearing.

themselves as efficiently.

The Welshs say because of their experience last year they are anxious about this season and will be treating everything carefully.

Viv says calf rearers should never be afraid to call their vet despite the value of the calf and Dennis agrees.

"If you have one sick, get the vet out before you have 20 sick calves," he says.

All the calves are vaccinated for Pink Eye as a precaution and receive a five in one twice.

The hospital and isolation pen is about 150m away from the main calf sheds and calves relocated to the hospital pens are never returned to the main shed.

The Welshs are very conscious of hygiene and calf stress levels so they do all they can to prevent infection. They have gumboots to wear in the calf sheds only and disinfect the second pair of gumboots, they also discourage visitors to the sheds during rearing. The hygiene standards start when the calves are collected with the truck disinfected between loads and Viv disinfects her gumboots between farms.

Viv says calf rearing is a 24-hour job and you have to care for the animals.

Dennis agrees. "You have got to remember they are infants and learning. You have to persevere and get them to suck properly."

The Welshs work to an estimated margin in \$100/calf, with which they are happy.

Last year they paid about \$70/calf and rearing cost \$125/calf and the profit about \$100/animal.

The couple agree they can't cut costs and believe if they did they would get poorer results.

Dennis says this year they want to keep 100 bull calves for themselves to sell as 18-months-old and 120 weaner steers for cash flow. They also hope to finish 500 lambs to even out the cash flow peaks and troughs.

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