

# Calf rearing the way forward

Natalie Campbell

**C**alf rearing was the option Pahiatua farmers Ken and Steph Norman identified as a pathway to farm ownership.

With help from Steph's parents Terry and Patricia Moore and uncle John Moore, the couple have bought a small farm south-west of Pahiatua in north Wairarapa.

They rear 1000 autumn and spring born calves on 69ha and calves are ideal because of the size of the property and high soil moisture. In a typical year 200 autumn born and 800 spring born calves are reared.

And last month they bought another 80ha in their own right, in the same district. It is a flat to rolling property and this means they will be able to finish some of the bull calves they rear to 18-months old.

When they began rearing calves, the Normans milked about 18 cows and reared 200 calves on whole milk.

It proved to be a profitable venture, so they increased the numbers of calves reared and this prompted a move to using calf milk replacer (CMR) and a dedicated calf shed was built.

They both agree they can make a decent living from rearing calves on the property that was formerly a dairy farm, even though margins are constantly being squeezed.

Their budget on a rearing cost of \$140/calf, which includes deaths, electricity, shavings and feed, but not the cost of the calf. They spend \$100 on average, and are willing to pay more for top quality calves.

The Normans target a margin of \$100/head but last year it was about \$70 for the spring calves.

The 100kg calves are largely sold at the Pahiatua sale yards (and Feilding) and some contracts for direct supply off the farm are developing. Any tail-end calves are kept and wintered.

The calves are sourced from Waikato, Rotorua and Wairarapa, with some being shipped in from other areas, when needed. They are mainly Friesian or white-face cross calves.

They collect the local calves



■ One thousand autumn and spring born calves are reared by Ken and Steph Norman in this Redpath shed, which attracted a bit of attention from other farmers in the district.

themselves and where a constant supply has been developed they buy all the calves from the first to last born. An agent sources calves from further north.

Ken and Steph say they look for a big solid looking calf with bright eyes and a dry naval and rear end. They prefer bull calves.

On arrival the calves are tagged to identify where they came from, allowing the couple to monitor calf performance.

Steph says when the calves arrive they check the navels and apply an iodine spray and examine for swollen joints.

Calves are then left to rest and not fed for the first few hours. Last year the first feed was an electrolyte solution and they stopped feeding it half way through the season to see if it made a difference to calf

performance. There was no change, so electrolytes were stopped.

*“That’s another reason to get more land, so we can carry them through,” she says.*

The couple pen the calves (10-14 in a pen) according to size and they stay in those mobs until weaning. As a general rule 1.5m<sup>2</sup>/calf is allowed for.

Milk powder is mixed and carted to each pen and pumped into the calfateria. During feeding each calf is

checked over.

If an unwell calf is found it is identified with a coloured collar. Blue indicates the calf needs to be monitored, yellow the calf is fed electrolytes and red means “dire straits”.

Calves are fed one-litre twice a day until about 10 days old and feeding then drops to a once a day feed of two-and-a-half litres. Meal and straw and clean water are supplied from day one. Harvey Farms meal is fed and the Normans are feeding Denkavit calf milk replacer this year.

They have decided to feed the calves twice a day in a bid to overcome the five-day blues. They believe this could be a result of the stress of travel or being taken off their mothers, but they have found that twice a day feeds can help as it allows them to monitor the onset

of this as the first sign is loss of appetite.

“It helps us to detect it sooner,” says Steph.

The milk is mixed in 200L (44 gallon) drums with an electric drill and paint stirrer for about one-and-a-half minutes for every 200L.

The calves are moved outdoors at about four weeks and can be weaned at six weeks, depending on the volume of meal being eaten. The calves are then fed meal and grass until they reach 100kg and then sold. Meal is fed at a rate allowing 1.5kg/calf/day.

The couple is considering building another shed to keep calves indoors longer until the calves are at least seven weeks old. The calves are moved outside earlier because if kept inside the numbers needed for their business to be profitable can't be managed.

Before the calves are put onto pasture, the Normans give the calves a few hours in “training paddocks” so they don't rip up the soft ground.

The goal for the near future is to erect a second shed in conjunction with a feedpad. The pad will allow them to carry more animals through and prevent damage to the wet soils. A longer term goal could be buying more land.

If the feedpad eventuates the calves will be able to feed ad-lib from a silage stack – a benefit of high grass growth during summer months.

The history of being a dairy property also means the races can be used to stand stock off to prevent some pasture damage.

Steph feels as a medium-sized calf rearer their margins are being squeezed each year.

“That’s another reason to get more land, so we can carry them through,” she says.

The 69ha farm topography is terraced flats with steep sidings. Last year rainfall was 1625mm but typically it is 1875mm.

“During the summer we get heaps of grass,” says Steph.

“If we are dry the rest of the country is in dire straits,” says Ken.

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