

Inexpensive but effective systems create profit

Amy Bielski

Kiwi ingenuity and a get stuck in attitude is the success of Jack Baker and Jill Woolley's calf rearing operation.

The couple have been rearing Friesian bull calves for the past nine years on Jack's 283ha of leased family land just over the Rangitikei River from Ohingaiti.

In 2005 they reared 350, which was down from the maximum of 500 that they found was too many for the farm to handle.

They carry 280 calves through to sell on the store market the following June or for finishing before the second winter and the concentration of internal parasites from 500 calves was too high.

Calf rearing has been an interesting sideline career for the couple, especially in the earlier years when a series of makeshift housing arrangements for the calves presented their own challenges.

Their back door served the purpose for the first six calves they ever reared. This progressed to makeshift huts, empty tanks, an open pigsty and sheep yards.

One year a hut actually blew away while there were calves in it leaving one calf with a corrugated iron-shaped body. He soon recovered.

A four-wheel drive vehicle was also often required to get access to the various calf sheds around the property and these episodes prompted them to upgrade to a Redpath shed six years ago.

Jack says it paid for itself in the first year with the added bonus of making

the operation a "breeze".

The shed has been decked out with cheap but effective systems such as an \$80 cordless drill that can put iron up round the bottom third of the shed within 15 minutes and attach a paint mixer from Mitre 10 for mixing the milk powder in 1200L drums.

A \$20 light system, pump system from the milk shed into the calf shed and a spring water system activated by a long hose with a trigger activated gun for filling buckets are also used.

The pens are dug out and bark laid to 40-50cm deep with wood peelings or sawdust on top.

In the past year they tried a cheaper general disinfectant than they would normally use and found the results to be as good.

It is a well-aerated and light shed with a plastic roof. A laneway down the middle with pens either side makes managing milk and water easy. The plywood for the laneway and doors was sourced in Gisborne and took Jack and a mate one and a half hours to put up.

The lack of flashy gear doesn't have any impact on the quality of care the calves get. Jill manages the calves in the shed for the first two weeks and Jack takes over once they are outside.

Jill loves rearing calves and says she would like to do it all year round if she could. She first started rearing for a local farmer.

"It was hard work for the income and I thought I could make more than that by doing it for Jack in return for running a few head of cattle," says Jill.

Their calf losses are minimal and were the highest in the past year when a scours outbreak rocked the shed. They lost six out of 350 calves.

Most of the scours were treatable but Jill says it is a set back for the calves. They make regular use of the local Hunterville Vet Club's services that have proved very helpful.

"Last year when we had the outbreak of scours they tested the calves for colostrum and the results were low so it was recommended we treat them all with antibiotics," says Jack.

It paid off and minimised the losses and it highlighted a reoccurring point in the dairy industry. The standard of facilities, calf treatment and presentation varies considerably and many farmers don't understand or prioritise giving newborn calves colostrum within 12 hours.

"As long as they get colostrum they can fight off most things and a lack of colostrum was the main reason why we had an outbreak of scours last year," says Jill.

For the price of four-day-old calves they say all calves should have had adequate amounts of colostrum.

"There was a lot of sleepless nights though, calf rearing can be quite stressful at times," says Jack.

But the return is worth it for the couple that believe rearing calves is the "cheapest way of getting bulls on the ground".

In the past year they averaged \$243/reared calf in costs including \$120/head for calves.

Jack refuses to pay above \$150/head



Jack Baker and Jill Woolley have been rearing calves for up to nine years at Ohingaiti. Jill rears the young calves in the shed and Jack finishes them once they get to 100kg LW.

for a calf that is under three weeks old and prefers to purchase 10-day old calves because "by this stage they are over the ten-day blues and tend to bloom."

He can also negotiate on price because he finishes a proportion of the bulls himself.

"Colour is not important to us, we don't mind if they have a bit of white because we are flexible enough to carry through and finish them.

"We are happy to take what they have got. To some in regard to colour we say we will pay \$150 for 10 calves out of 30 or \$120 for the 30. If we have to pay top price we get picky on the calves we buy," says Jack.

Friesian bull calves are preferred over Jerseys for their continuous growth rates, and straight Friesian genetics are preferred because the quality of beef bulls used over dairy herds is variable.

About 280 bulls are carried through to either sell store as yearlings or finish at 18-months.

They are wintered on greed fed oats through until the end of docking when they are moved out onto pasture. One mob to be finished will be used to clean up over the spring summer period.

The weights of the store cattle vary between 400-450kg LW but the last of them were 431kg this year. These cattle are sold direct to a local finisher and livestock agents may also purchase some to sell on.

Jack says there is no set policy as to what proportion are sold store or finished as it varies according to market and feed conditions.

In terms of management the Friesian bulls are more difficult to manage than beef-reared stock.

One particular hazard on the farm is a creek out the back despite Jack fencing and clearing it out with a digger to make it safe.

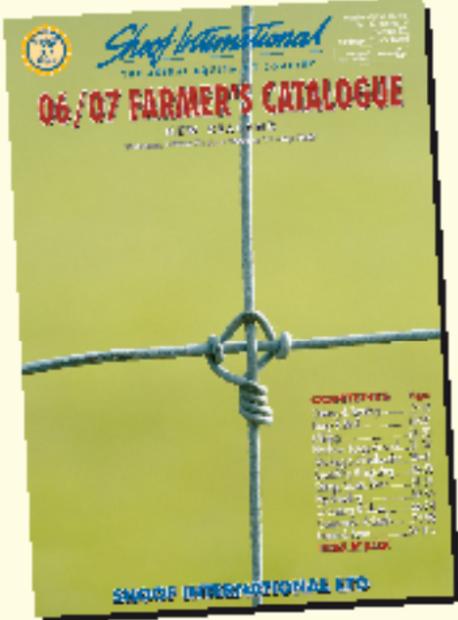
"Friesians have no brains, they have no mother to show them the tricks or to watch out for hazards.

"It is also an age thing. Their curiosity gets the better of them and they don't last long if they get stuck in a creek or dam, maybe an hour."

For this reason Jill believes there are more worries of cattle losses once they get out on the farm than there is here in the shed.

The farm also carries 1500 ewes, 500 hoggets, 150 odds and sods plus 35 breeding cows.

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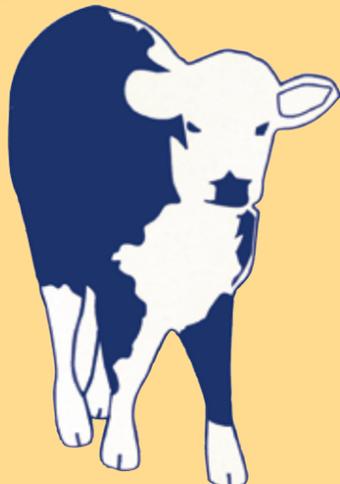
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Jack with one of his tools of the trade, a cordless drill that serves as a milk mixer using a paint mixing attachment purchased from Mitre 10.

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