

Heifer weights all-important



Kate Foxcroft of Riverside Vets discusses heifer target weights at the Ma Taua Focus Farm day.

Ongoing replacement growth rates would be monitored, focusing sooner rather than later on those falling below target.

Richard Rennie

Neglecting heifer liveweights is only setting replacements up to fail as they begin their first lactation, and increasing the odds they will not make it through to their second.

Farmers attending the Ma Taua Focus Farm day in Canterbury in early December were told by Riverside Vets veterinarian, and accredited InCalf consultant, Kate Foxcroft that analysis of the farm's non-cyclers revealed 20 percent of them were first-calvers. Their older sisters as second-calvers were the second most common group, forming 16 percent.

"You can appreciate then what an impact this is having on the herd's reproductive performance," she said.

"These are late-mating, late-calving cows – are they going to be able to contribute their high genetic value to the herd?"

Well-grown heifers will compete better, particularly in larger Canterbury herds, getting in-calf earlier and remaining in the herd for longer. Over recent years, the average liveweight of New Zealand dairy cows has risen from 478kg to 503kg, but there's been no corresponding adjustment in heifer liveweight targets in that time.

Failing to get heifers to the correct liveweights meant that animals dropped into "survival mode" after calving.

"You can have a heifer in good condition, not stressed, but once she faces competition, and the stress of lactation she can lose that condition, fail to cycle and

fail to produce the milk she should," Kate said.

Recent years had seen greater numbers of "short, fat, shiny" heifers, with condition disguising an inherent lack of good, full-frame development and early growth. They would shed that condition within days of calving as lactation stress began.

Development up to the 15-month target was critical for ensuring the animal had a fully developed frame and size. But simply weighing and setting targets based on this target wasn't enough. Too often, an average weight was used, which meant half the mob was below average.

Heifer weighing needed to be three-monthly, and even then the data had to be used, not put in a folder and forgotten about. Regular weighing allowed those tail-enders to be identified sooner, and action taken to improve their growth rates.

Kate cautioned that simply taking the industry standard target weights for 15-month heifers based on their mature cow liveweight was not enough.

"You need to consider the heifer's liveweight breeding value [BV] and adjust the mature cow weight to that."

For example, if a line of heifers have a BV liveweight of +30kg, then the mature cow liveweight target became 533kg, and the monthly targets can be adjusted.

She urged more farmers to include 15-month liveweight targets in their grazing contracts, or in their own targets if managing themselves. With a 30kg gap

between 15-month heifers weighing in at an average of 270kg, but required to be at 300kg, there was a loss of \$18,900 to that mob. This came from poorer in-calf rates, higher empty rates and compromised production. On top of this there was a \$19,000/year annual economic benefit to the whole herd to be gained from having the higher body weights.

For Ma Taua, the mature cow liveweight was 525kg, and target weight at 13 months was 270kg, versus the actual weight of 255kg. This gap amounted to a \$11,500 loss to this group, on top of a \$12,000 potential annual economic "whole herd" benefit of achieving those weights.

Kate encouraged farmers to examine the InCalf Fertility Focus report to find how their first-calvers had performed, and aim for 75 percent of heifers calved before week three, and 95 percent by week six.

The three-week submission rates in the same report should also indicate how the first-calvers performed in the herd, and should be over 90 percent. She is working with Ma Taua management to get as many heifers to target weights as possible, beginning by working from this year's calf BVs.

Ma Taua staff were also being encouraged to improve calf-rearing practices, with regular vet visits to survey calf health. Ongoing replacement growth rates would be monitored, focusing sooner rather than later on those falling below target.