

# Rotovirus hits calves, cashflow



Rod Nicholas – convinced about rotovirus vaccination.

Tokoroa dairy farmer Rod Nicholas learned from his lower-order sharemilker six years ago about the effects rotovirus could have on a dairy herd.

His sharemilker and his wife had been through an outbreak on their previous farm, and Rod learned from their experience.

“They had a terrible time,” he said.

“Calving is an incredibly busy time of the year anyway, and there just isn’t time to deal with sick calves on top of everything else.”

Another friend who farms dairy cattle in Southland also left a strong impression on Rod, convincing him he didn’t want to go through the same thing. So after speaking to his vet, he started a vaccination programme with Rotavec Corona the following year. He still maintains it and so far the disease has not appeared on his 170ha farm.

Rod milks 530 Friesians on the main block, where he’s been farming since 1978. He uses the vaccination strategically, excluding the heifers and late calvers. About 60 percent of the cows receive their annual shot between 12 and three weeks

before calving. Antibodies against rotavirus are then passed on to calves through their dams’ colostrum.

Rod plans colostrum management very carefully to maximise both its economic and animal health value.

“We collect enough colostrum milk from the cows to give each calf what they need,” he said.

**... the calves get first pick – we don’t compromise on their health.**

“On their first day they get a two-and-a-half litre feed after they’ve had a feed off mum, and they get two more feeds of the same size on day two.

“Surplus colostrum from the first two days’ milking is sold, but all of the colostrum from days three and four is kept for the calves, before the cows join the milking herd. Within our system, the calves get first pick – we don’t compromise

on their health.”

Intervet/Schering-Plough animal health veterinary adviser Peter Blaikie said the vaccination timing can be flexible but needed to be planned. Outside the nine-week span, the colostrum antibodies will be markedly reduced.

Good colostrum feeding is vital. For best result, calves should receive 2-2.5 litres of immediate post-calving colostrum from the vaccinated cow within six to 12 hours of birth, while intestinal absorption is at its best and colostrum antibodies are at their highest.

They then need 2.5-3 litres of stored or fresh colostrum daily during the first two to three weeks, or longer if possible to provide the crucial localised protection at gut level.

“Colostrum from the first three or four milkings contains by far the most antibodies, and rotavirus antibodies courtesy of the vaccination, so it makes sense to ensure newborn calves get fed this colostrum.”

For further information contact Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health, phone 04 439 1900.