

# Systems and advance planning cuts problems

Good advance planning and systems minimise the chance of problems in the large scale calf rearing operation run by the Hawke's Bay-based BEL Group.

Kristen Nikora, a partner in the BEL Group with husband Dean, and Peter and Andrea Barry, is responsible for the rearing of 600-800 heifer calves on their home property, one of seven dairy units owned by the group.

Over the past few years, Nikora has developed systems for managing the large number of heifer and bull calves which arrive at the facility each day. Having documented systems is essential when there is up to 40 people on the staff.

Successful calf rearing starts with the identification of calves in the paddock as either heifers or bulls, using pink and blue tags, and their delivery into separate areas for heifers and bulls.

The heifers are recorded to their dam and tagged by Nikora before going into rearing pens capable of handling 15-20 calves each.

"Right from the start, the focus is on looking after the calves. We label each trailer used to transport the calves back to the sheds with a maximum load," she says.

"Each calf navel is sprayed in the paddock at collection and again when it arrives at the shed. The trailers are cleaned daily and washed with disinfectant."

All bull and bobby calves are fed only colostrum. Heifer calves are fed colostrum and milk containing penicillin residues.

"For the first time this spring, we plan to feed all our newborn calves on day one and two colostrum for at least three feeds," she says.

All calves are fed twice a day for the first two to three weeks before moving to once-a-day and being moved outside into sheltered small paddocks.

As a check on ensuring calves receive sufficient colostrum, a sample of calves will also be blood tested to check their level of immunoglobulins.

Any sick calves are immediately isolated and treated. "We have a three-drug policy in our calf rearing operation, based on Intracillin, Engymycin, and Penicillin G."

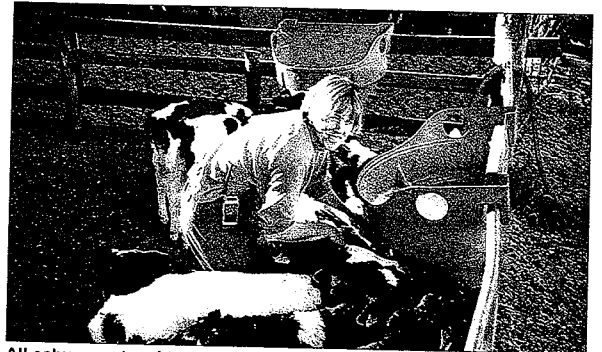
Calves are moved back on to milk as soon as possible after recovery.

Nikora says calves receive 4 litres/day of milk, fresh water and straw, and up to 1kg of meal/day at peak intake.

Calves are weaned off milk at 70kg and off meal at 100kg.

One person is employed specifically on calf rearing, and is responsible for daily feeding of bull and bobby calves, and daily feeding meal and straw to all calves.

"My role is to liaise with the farm manager to ensure there is sufficient milk for the calves and to organise farm staff for calf collection. I am also responsible for the sale of four-day-old calves across the whole company," she says.



All calves are taught to drink on McInnes 5 or 10 teat rail feeders. Once in the paddock, calves are fed on a 5 teat permanent feeder in each paddock.

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"Assuming a 100kg weaner price of \$400, the Poukawa budget would have you believe that the rearer would receive \$40,000 per 100 calves reared.

"But, in reality the rearer would receive \$34,000 for 85 calves and perhaps just \$5250 for the other 15 tail enders sold later at \$350 each making a combined return of \$39,250."

Carter says the \$750 difference represents a reduced return of \$7.50 per calf over 100 calves sold and is significant enough to be included in any budget.

Poukawa Project co-ordinator Alastair Ormond acknowledges the issues raised by Carter and says the budget published has clear reference to calf prices being based on a "best guess".

The notes alongside the budget also make reference to "likely" costs rather than absolute costs. Ormond says the budget published in the newsletter was also produced before the bobby calf schedule had been set and he has since revised down the calf price cost.

Ormond says he always urges calf rearers to do their own budget, taking into consideration local factors, death rate and weight gain history.

Carter says for the five to six weeks that calves eat grass before they reach 100kg liveweight, they consume at least 1.2kg/day on average making around 50kg in total. "With good spring grass worth at least 20 cents/kg, calves are consuming around \$10 worth each and this should also be included in any meaningful calf-rearing budget."

Carter says there is also no provision in the Poukawa budget for buying or maintaining plant purchased such as milk feeders, meal troughs, and hayracks.

He also disputes the rearer margin in the Poukawa budget. "A more accurate description would be labour and rearer margin to alert rearers that it represents payment for the labour used in rearing a calf, not pure profit."