

Call for beef industry to 'credit' rearers



Waikato calf rearers Helen and Eric Pidduck expect strong competition for feeder calves this season.

Mike Bland

With rising calf prices likely to put the squeeze on calf rearing margins this season, Waikato calf rearer Eric Pidduck reckons its time the calf rearing industry got more credit for its role as a vital link between dairy farmers and beef finishers.

He believes more co-operation between dairy farmers, calf rearers, beef finishers and meat processors will be beneficial for all.

At a Mid-Northern Beef Council calf rearing seminar held on the Koromatua farm he runs with wife Helen, Pidduck puts his views to an audience of more than 100 current and intending calf rearers.

"Calf rearing is very, very easy because it makes a lot of people so happy," he says, listing a string of individuals and companies that gain from the calf rearer's business. These include the dairy farmers who sell calves to rearers, stock agents, feed merchants, vets, animal health companies, beef farmers and bank managers.

Pidduck says calf rearers take all the risks while gaining little recognition. "About 63% of beef calves come out of dairy cows and a large percentage of those calves are reared by rearers."

But rearing margins are being squeezed by increasing competition for a dwindling number of

Friesian and Friesian-cross bull calves, rising feed costs and increased demand for factory colostrum. Despite this, dairy farmers still expect top dollar for feeder calves.

Increasing South Island calf production also poses a threat to North Island rearers, as weaners produced by the South's expanding dairy herds could be shipped north for minimal cost and sold on the same market.

As a result, Pidduck believes many calf rearing operations will struggle to make a margin this season.

"In a good year, you're smiling; in a middling year, you are surviving, and in a bad year it's a nightmare," he says.

Looking at the future through "rose-coloured spectacles", he says he would like to see the day when everybody in the beef supply 'chain' appreciated the needs of everyone else.

The enlightened dairy farmer will be talking to the beef bull breeder about getting superior bulls that give a short gestation period, low calf birth weight and fast growth rates. The dairy farmer will produce a fit and vigorous calf that will get the early colostrum and then be taken into good housing facilities," he says.

"The enlightened dairy farmer will also be talking to the rearer about what sort of calves they need, and the calf rearer will be talking to the beef finishers about what they want. They, in turn, will be talking to the meat companies about their requirements."

While admitting this view was optimistic, Pidduck says there are signs these things are starting to happen.

But in the short-term, calf rearers face a number of challenges - not least of which is the declining production of Friesian dairy beef calves caused by the rising popularity of crossbred cows.

Pidduck says less than half of the country's Friesian herd is mated to Friesian bulls and this decreasing supply is pushing the price of Friesian bull calves up to a level where it is barely economic for calf rearers.

"So we have to come up with ways to get beef calves out of these cows."

Helen Pidduck says it's a fact of life that more Friesian-Jersey cross calves will be reared in future. While these crossbred calves aren't favoured by beef breeders, some had sound potential for rearing.

"A lot of these calves are being wasted at the moment but some of our best calves are Friesian-Jersey," she says.

Calf inductions also shrink the pool of available calves and if this practice is stopped, a large number of good, late calves will be available for rearing, says Eric Pidduck.

Most dairy farmers, as one farmer at the seminar pointed out, just want to get cows in-calf and then offload male and surplus heifer calves as quickly as possible.

In response to this, Helen Pidduck says rearers had to get used to the fact that they were effectively buying a waste product of the dairy industry.

But she and Eric believe dairy farmers would be encouraged to look after surplus calves better if the calves were worth more.

She says adequate housing and a good feed of colostrum in the first six hours were crucial to calf survival and growth.

"There are still some pretty rough facilities out there. Many dairy farms have grown in size but the rearing facilities haven't grown with them."

Eric Pidduck says housing calves in a nice, warm north-facing barn with about 10 pens will result in better health and growth. The extra money generated by heavier calves should pay the interest bill on the shed.

He says more farmers are starting to recognise this, and a lot of new barns are going in.

He would also like to see calves kept on the dairy farm for up to seven days, rather than being sent out the gate as quickly as possible. "If a calf is looked after and kept on the farm for a week, it is going to grow a lot better."

A 'stay alive' clause is something that could be looked at in future to encourage the good care of young calves. Dairy farmers could sell calves with some form of guarantee that feeder calves will survive for a certain period after leaving the dairy farm. In return they would receive a premium for these animals.

"If we can convince dairy farmers to add value, we'd pay for it," says Pidduck.

He also offered a tip for discouraging feed merchants from constantly calling calf rearers. "We find the best way is to say, 'yes, we will trial your product. Drop off a tonne and we will try it.'"

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