

# Security of finishing contract imperative

Sandra Taylor

A large-scale calf rearing operation provides an Amberley couple with most of their annual on-farm income in four hard working months.

Kevin and Barb Chapman have been rearing calves on their 25ha property for the past four years. Last year they reared 1000 Friesian bull calves and this year they are hoping to lift it to around 1200, depending on the availability of calves.

The calves are bought in at a cost of around \$100; a price based roughly on the North Island bobby calf market. They are then carried through to a saleable weight of 100kg.

When *Country-Wide* visited the Chapmans in mid-July Barb and Kevin were looking at contracts from North Island bull finishers, the Chapman's target market.

Kevin says they simply could not raise that many calves without the security of contracts, even if, as Barb explains, they may be selling the calves for a slightly lower price than what they would be getting on the spot market.

To fulfil the contracts the Chapmans need to comply with specific requirements laid down by the bull finishers.

The calves must have five white points (four white legs and white markings on the tail), as this supposedly indicates they are pure bred Holstein

Friesian, they must have an ear tag, have been de-horned, have received a five-in-one vaccine and a drench and must weigh a minimum of 100kgs.

The Chapmans say purebred Holstein Friesian calves are becoming more and more difficult to source as commercial dairy farmers move toward a more cross-bred type herd.

Not all Holstein Friesian calves have five white points, and Kevin says they are often turning down really good calves simply because they have one black leg.

The couple aim to grow their calves to the target weight of 100kg in no more than 12 weeks, although the good calves will get to this weight in just 10 weeks.

Ideally they would like to have all the calves on their farm by the end of August and aim to have the vast majority gone by November 15 to meet the requirements of the bull finishers.

Kevin and Barb source calves from within a 90km radius of their farm, this takes in the Culverden basin through to dairy farms on the outskirts of Christchurch.

Kevin collects the calves using a crate on the back of his truck and a horse float.

The Chapmans are loath to buy calves any younger than four days old and prefer them to be six days old. In this way there is a better chance the calves have had several feeds of colostrum and are drinking well before

they leave the dairy farm.

"We buy them in at five or six days old and that's where it needs to be.

"I don't mind paying a premium for them, those extra days make all the difference."

Although most of the dairy farmers the Chapmans deal with are willing to ensure the calves get enough colostrum and take steps to prevent navel infection, Kevin believes there are still dairy farmers who see bull calves as a by-product.

"There are still too many very young calves going into the sale yards."

From an animal welfare point of view Kevin is vehemently opposed to trading very young calves and would like to see this country following the European lead and legislating against trading calves under a certain age.

Taking a long-term view, Kevin and Barb are working to build relationships with dairy farmers, so the farmers know they have a guaranteed market for their appropriately marked bull calves and the Chapmans know they are buying calves that have been well cared for in those vital first few days.

Upon arrival at the Chapmans farm the calves are allocated a pen, which will be their home for four weeks, given an initial feed of warm electrolytes and ear-tagged.

The calves are raised on warm casein-based milk replacer, pellets and straw, roughly following systems developed by On-Farm Research at Poukawa under the guidance of Dr Paul Muir. The calves are encouraged to eat the 20% protein pellets from day one, changing to 16% protein pellets when the calves are four weeks old.

"Pellets are the cheapest form of protein so the quicker you can get them onto pellets the better."

Initially a highly palatable crumble form of the pellets is put into the mouths of the calves to encourage them to eat the pellets, which they have ad-lib access to.

The Chapmans have no brand loyalty when it comes to pellets, so long as they are nutritionally balanced, cost effective and most importantly palatable.

Milk is fed to the calves through a compartmentalised feeder to ensure every calf gets its daily ration of 2.5L of concentrated milk. Initially the calves receive two feeds of milk a day, this is



Kevin and Barb Chapman are hoping to rear 1200 calves this year and to be successful rearing that number they take a long-term view to marketing. Building relationships with dairy farmers and finishers for quality calves is their focus.

reduced to one feed a day after the first week.

One of the Chapman's tricks is to add around a teaspoon of cider vinegar to every milk feed. This helps the milk to curdle and assists in maintaining the pH of the rumen.

Good quality barley straw and fresh water is freely available to calves at all times.

Kevin says straw is important for rumen development, and they monitor the calves progress based on their straw consumption.

"When they are belting into the straw then they are ready to go out."

The calves are moved out onto pasture at four weeks of age, running in mobs of 40 calves to every two-hectare paddock. Once outside the calves are given a once a day feed of milk via a mobile feeder until they are six weeks old.

After weaning the calves are boxed up into mobs of 80 and fed pellets at a daily rate of 1.5kg/calf.

Over the past summer and autumn the old pastures on the farm were renewed with what Barb describes as calf friendly pastures based on AR1 ryegrasses and clover.

Kevin says it can be difficult to manage pastures in September and October as the calves just wont eat the pasture when the grass gets too long and rank.

To help overcome this problem the Chapmans intend sub-dividing the farm's two-hectare blocks in half. They are also going to try growing two paddocks of lucerne for the calves.

In theory the lucerne should provide a high protein feed for the calves before being cut for supplementary feed later in the season.

As the calves near their optimum weight of 100kg, (the Chapmans sample weigh the bulls as they look to be nearing the goal weight) pellets are cut out of their diet but they still receive roughage in the form of straw or ryegrass hay.



The Chapman's have a system in place that means their calves achieve 100kg liveweight in just ten weeks.

## Vaccinating for rotavirus effective

Rotavirus scours is an ever-present threat to calves in both dairy and beef herds.

Calves are especially vulnerable in the first three weeks of their lives, and the results are often fatal.

In many areas rotavirus is consistently the biggest cause of calf scours each season but fortunately it can be prevented.

Veterinarians from Southern Rangitikei Veterinary Services say vaccination of cows four and 12 weeks prior to calving with Rotavec has been very beneficial on many dairy and beef properties.

By vaccinating the cows protective antibodies are passed on to the calves in the colostrum.

For the programme to be successful it is important that calves get sufficient colostrum in that first 8-12 hours and the colostrum is stored well.

Known later calvers should be vaccinated later so they too are vaccinated in the 4-12 weeks before calving.

Rotavec is an intramuscular vaccine and because it contains oil self-injection must be avoided as it can cause reactions in people.

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