



PREPARING YOUR HEIFERS RETURNING FROM GRAZING

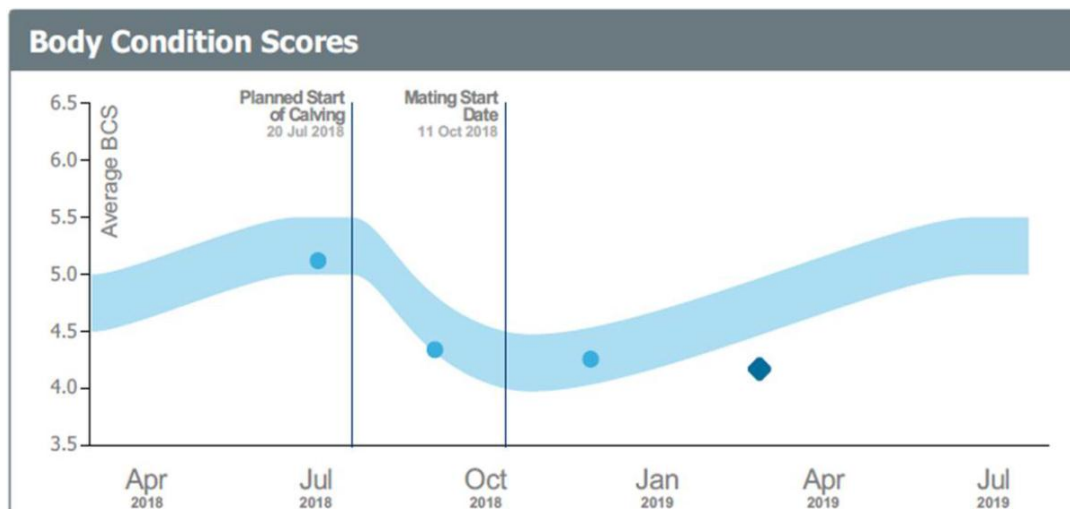
- **Biosecurity**
Ensure you keep your returning heifers separate from the herd for at least seven days upon return. Monitor closely for signs of disease.
- **Plan your feed**
Returning heifers are going to put more pressure on paddocks that have already had poor growth through the summer. It is essential that the R2s are well fed through calving - what are you going to feed them?
- **Body condition score**
Make sure you get your R2s condition scored or at least weighed upon return. You need to know if they failed to hit growth targets.

There is little time to make up for any deficiency. Heifers are your future production potential.

IS YOUR HERD GOING TO ACHIEVE CALVING CONDITION TARGETS THIS YEAR?

Unless you are regularly body condition scoring the herd, you just don't know, how much it is contributing to the Herd's reproductive performance.

The herd below has been regularly body condition scored (individually during milking) at four key times points during the season so far – at calving (so we know where we started), pre-mating (so we know how much was lost, but with time to take action on the cows that had lost too much), mid-mating (to check we were gaining condition and that the recommended strategies were working) and earlier this month to check on our situation for drying off. The recent score, as you can see from the graph, shows that the summer has been hard on these cows. Aggressive action is being taken on farm to ensure we get every cow back to where we need to be for calving, so that next season's reproductive performance is not compromised.



BROKEN AND DAMAGED TAILS



Do you have cows in your herd who look like this?

Have you ever had dislocated joints or broken bones in your fingers?

If you are familiar with the pain associated with these injuries, then you know what the cow suffers with a broken tail, and you will understand why these injuries are a welfare concern.

Tail injuries are now monitored in cows going for slaughter and feedback is given to the supplying farmers. If you have cows with broken tails you need to ask how they are occurring. Are they happening before the animals come on farm (during the rearing phase) or are they happening outside the dairy shed, during handling or on machinery and equipment? Tails should not be twisted so violently that the connections between the vertebrae break. If a cow has a new tail injury it is painful, she should receive anti-inflammatories and if there is raw skin or bone exposed she

needs veterinary attention. If you are concerned about broken tails in your herd, ask your veterinarian to help you with an assessment of the situation.

COWS FEELING THE PRESSURE?

Have you ever felt the pressure or pain of a stone stuck in your boot; right under that sensitive spot? Or cracks in your heel that cause pain every time you take a step?

When a cow has a 'normal' claw, she bears weight evenly across the sole of both claws. If or when she injures her hoof, she will attempt to reduce the pressure on the sensitive spot by taking weight off. She will walk on the back of her hoof if the front is sore and vice versa and also put more weight on the claw on the other side. This results in uneven claw growth, which then pushes the hoof in an unnatural position, creating more uneven growth. Over time, this will show as overgrown feet.

This process doesn't only occur when a cow is lame. Lay-out of the farm, walking distances, yard pressure and weather conditions can all contribute to a change in weight bearing – this is why most farms will have 20-30% of their herd with overgrown claws.

Pressure can come in different forms:

- Yard pressure: movements of cows to achieve their milking order causes pushing and shoving if there is limited free space
- Track pressure: rocks, hard walking surface, congestion areas (sharp corners, underpasses, bridges), hills
- Pressure from staff: bringing cows in, backing gate use, presence on the yard at milking
- Mating (bulls)
- Pregnancy
- Milking platform: slippery
- Feed pad/herd homes: extra time on a hard surface

Some of these factors are hard to avoid, which is where management measures become important. Part of the solution is identification of problem areas, the other part is hoof care: regular trimming to maintain a healthy weight bearing surface which will increase resilience to adverse hoof events and help towards lameness prevention.

TIMELY TIPS AROUND DRY OFF TIME

Most of our clients have started drying off some cows (e.g. low BCS, early-calving, heifers, low production and high SCC cows). These early dry off groups may need a little extra thought.

Low BCS, early-calvers and heifers

Be careful not to underfeed these animals at dry off. The drying off process requires a lot of extra energy over and above maintenance requirements. Reducing feed to help drying off will just lead to BCS loss. Cows producing < 12L milk per day are very easy to dry off and need minimal feed changes (reduced protein).

Change the routine

As you approach dry off, milk them at a different time of day, switch from TAD to OAD milking and feed their supplements at different times; these all help turn off milking stimuli.

Feed pad – manage the risk

We all know that cows should be kept well away from the shed for at least 10 days following dry off to reduce the stimulation to let down and produce milk.

However, for many herds, it just isn't possible to keep cows off the feed pad (which is usually next to the shed) but you can reduce the risks:

- All animals should receive intramammary teat sealant and/or dry cow antibiotic therapy
- Keep them off the pad for as long as possible (ideally until visibly drying off)
- When they must come to the pad, bring them at different times of day to milking time and their usual feeding times during lactation
- Ensure the pad is clean before the dry cows come on
- Don't allow cows to run to the pad (have a person in front controlling their speed if necessary)
- Make sure they don't spend longer than necessary on the pad (eat and go).

Low producing cows

If possible, avoid the use of dry cow antibiotic therapy in cows producing < 5L per day. Low milk volume at dry off increases the chance of Inhibitory substitute grading after calving.

Weather

If it rains when you have planned to dry off, you (and all staff!) need to be extra vigilant about hygiene for dry cow therapy and teat sealant insertion. You may even need to tweak your drying off plans to reduce the risk of mastitis.

Rising BTSCC?

If you find the BTSCC rising before dry off, it is still worth trying to identify the cause. It could be due to lower milk volume (cows starting to dry themselves off) or increased intramammary infections (clinical or subclinical) that may need to be treated before dry off. Either way, you may need to change your approach to drying off; a phone call to your vet would be well worth while.



GRAZING CONTRACTS ESSENTIAL

“There are no friends in business”- wise words once spoken to me by a good friend. A surprising number of Kiwi farmers work on the handshake or verbal agreement when it comes to grazing calves/heifers. Intentions may be good, but have you discussed all of the details? THE FIRST OF MAY IS ALMOST HERE for your heifer grazing!

From the grazier’s point of view a contract is essential. Don’t set your heifer grazier up for failure- are your calves up to standard? Do you know how much they weigh after their first summer as calves? A grazier wants to make sure that they receive healthy, fat animals and that they have the ability to keep them healthy and fat. Your grazier doesn’t want to be incorrectly blamed for light animals at the end of the grazing period.

From the dairy farmer’s point of view a contract is also essential. Who is responsible for supplement feeding if the grazier runs out of grass? What target weights or weight gain is expected? Does the grazier have permission to call the vets for a sick animal and charge it to your account? The dairy season can be quite busy, but you don’t want to forget about your young stock. If you ignore your heifers, they will struggle with reproduction and milk production for the rest of their lives.

Should you make a contract? There are various checklists available free of charge on the DairyNZ website (search “contract grazing DairyNZ”). You can be as formal (hire a lawyer!) or informal as you like. The main concern is that you actually discuss all of the “WHAT IFS” with the other party. Your veterinarian can help you design this agreement if you like - we see all of the disagreements and misunderstandings between graziers and dairy farmers. Don’t be shy - discuss the ‘what-ifs’!

MINERALS AND TRACE ELEMENTS

As you dry cows off, don’t forget that the Facial Eczema season is still very much with us. Spore counts are rising due to the continuing warm temperatures, small amounts of rain and large amounts of dead grass in the swards. Cows need to be protected with zinc and will still require it once they are dry. Historically we have seen serious facial eczema outbreaks in dry cows whose zinc supplementation has been reduced or stopped.

Also remember that diets with high amounts of maize silage and other supplements may be short of calcium, sodium, magnesium, phosphorous and other elements important for lactation and maintenance. They need balanced appropriately. Ask your veterinarian who will be happy to advise you.

Going into the autumn it is time to think about trace elements such as copper, cobalt and selenium. These are all important for general health, growth and reproduction. Animals with low levels of these elements do not utilise their food properly and will give you a poor return for your winter feeding programme. Blood samples and liver biopsies enable an assessment of the herd mineral and trace element status, then you and your veterinarian can draw up a mineral supplementation plan for your animals.



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