

Beef producers were offered tips on suckler heifer management at a recent Eblex organised meeting held at Thirsk, North Yorkshire. Age at calving and feeding to maximise fertility were two of the key topics vets and farmers discussed. **Wendy Short** reports.

Tips on breeding replacements for suckler heifers

Financial benefits to calving at two

Condition scoring an important tool

SUCKLER herd producers who breed replacements should choose females born in the first six weeks of the calving period as these are likely to be the most fertile breeders.

Vet Jonathan Statham said these females would also have the highest growth rate potential, with their calves having the best chance of achieving above-average weaning weights.

There were other reasons why heifers should be calved ahead of the main group.

Mr Statham said: "It is common to find heifer colostrum is slightly inferior in quality, so it makes sense for them to have access to the calving pens early in the season. This will reduce the risk of younger animals being exposed to infectious pathogens which can build up over the calving season."

Producers stood to gain a number of benefits by calving heifers at two years, he said.

"Anyone who has traditionally calved heifers at three years



The best results will only be achieved by this type of attention

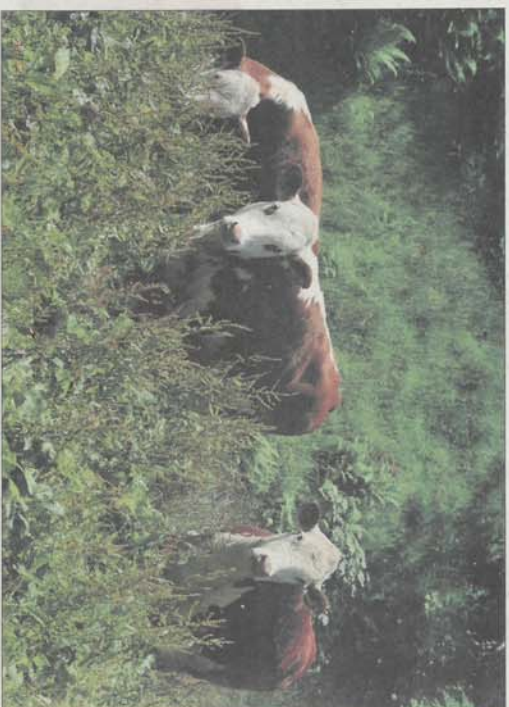
JONATHAN STATHAM

might want to review their policy in light of recent research. To justify calving at three, every cow in the herd would have to produce two more calves over its lifetime, compared with those calving at two.

Output

"Early calving is also estimated to increase financial output by about £25 per cow per year, as well as speeding up the herd's genetic progress."

Mr Statham said the belief calving heifers later would reduce the incidence of dystocia was not borne out by science.



Calving heifers later was not proven to reduce dystocia incidence, said vet Jonathan Statham.

"Obviously the pelvis should be roomy, both vertically and horizontally. In some heifers the pelvis might appear adequate in size but is shaped awkwardly. These cases should be rejected as breeders."

Once the first calf has passed through the pelvis it was often easier for the animal to calve the next time, although this factor was also influenced by the genetics of the sire, he said.

Risk

In addition, a heifer which required a caesarean was at greater risk of needing assistance the next time she calved.

In order to calve successfully at two, replacement heifers should fall within a mid-range condition score; those carrying too much or too little fat would be the least fertile in the group, said Mr Statham.

Feeding newly-calved heifers

Mr Statham offered the following tips on feeding newly-calved heifers:

- First calvers may benefit from priority feeding if they are to cycle normally and get back in-calf without disrupting the calving pattern
- Their reproductive system is low on the list of priorities, when it comes to using feed
- Heifer diets after calving are especially important in herds

Regular weighing was useful and the aim should be for each heifer to reach 65 per cent of its mature body weight at first service, with a body condition score of five. By the time of calving, a heifer should have reached 85 per cent of its projected weight as a mature cow.

"These figures are precise, but the best results will only be achieved by this type of attention to detail, he stressed.

"For heifers to reach their target weight, they need at-lib, good quality forage and a concentrate ration of about 1-2kg/head/day over their first winter. The average daily liveweight gain in a herd of

Diet

"Rations must be specifically formulated for replacement heifers. It is not appropriate to feed a finishing diet, as these are generally too high in starch and sugars and too low in protein.

"Suitable ingredients to lift proteins in breeding heifer diets would include soya, protected rapeseed and distillers' grains."

Secure Windbreaks

- Improve ventilation
- Weather & bird barrier
- Excellent light transmission

