

Keep close eye on your sucklers during hot spells

By Jeremy Hunt

Summer can be the least “hands on” time for managing suckler cows, but careful monitoring is essential when temperatures soar.

And with above average temperatures predicted to return, suckler herd owners are being urged to keep a close eye on cows, calves and even bulls for telltale signs of heat stress.

Even if temperatures don't reach the same highs, farmers need to be aware of the damage that may have already been done, such as more empty cows.

North East vet Andrew Sawyer of Alnthumbria Veterinary Group says it's essential to have a regular routine of checking cattle in the coolness of early morning and again in the evening because missed symptoms can prove very costly.

“We've just had a client's cow that died with mastitis because it hadn't been spotted early enough.”



Farmers are advised to make regular checks for signs of heat stress in their cattle and be aware of the risk of empty cows resulting from the heatwave.

He, along with other vets, warns that summer mastitis is more widespread in sucklers this year and is urging farmers to be vigilant in checking their cows.

“If a cow does have a swollen teat

and a farmer is concerned, the cow does need to be treated quickly,” says Mr Sawyer.

“But farmers need to be very careful too. We've recently had a case where someone was badly

kicked by a suckler cow while being treated for mastitis.”

Fertility can also suffer. “Even though it's a worry that some bulls are more reluctant to work in hot weather there's more to be concerned about where bulls are regularly seen serving cows,” he warns.

“If that's the case, it suggests there's a high number of cows still coming into season and indicates a problem,” says Mr Sawyer.

An increase in body temperature during hot weather can have an adverse effect on oestrus behaviour and can impact on sperm quality and embryo viability too.

While most cows should now be settled in calf by this stage of the summer, Gavin Hill, beef specialist with Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), says it's still important to check that bulls aren't suffering from heat stress or sunburn.

“Pale-coloured bulls – and even cows – can get sunburn on their noses which can become infected if

CUMBRIAN PERSPECTIVE

‘Check every cow on farm every day’

★ Cumbria farmers Ken and Mandy Pears and their son Chris of Fellside House, Caldbeck, run about 55 sucklers and have been keeping a close eye on their cattle during the hot weather.

“We've plenty of shade and places for the cows and calves to get out of the direct sun but we've been checking them closely for any signs of heatstroke. Even the younger heifers need watching,” says Chris.

Stephen Lord, farm manager with the Levens Hall Farming Partnership in south Cumbria, says he makes sure he checks every cow every day.

“When the weather is as hot as it has been things can go wrong very quickly if you don't look at stock regularly.”

“We check every cow on the farm every day so that we can be on top of a problem before it gets hold. And we always make sure water troughs

are working.

“We're just coming to the end of calving so we're making sure calves are sucking on all four teats.

“In the sort of weather we've been having summer mastitis is a bigger risk and it can happen very quickly.”

Vets also advise farmers to check bull calves where rubber rings have been used to make sure there are no problems if flies strike in the hot weather.

rubbed and left untreated.”

Fly-strike in hot weather is always made worse because cows often move into shady areas which attracts large numbers of flies.

“In certain areas there have been huge increases in cases of fly-strike and teat damage in hot weather, but some farmers with autumn-calving cows will leave the calves on their dams up to two to three weeks before calving.

“They feel their cows are at less risk than they would be if they were allowed to go dry.”

Heat stress increases a cow's respiration rate. When the body temperature is above 39C (102.5F) and the respiratory rate is above 80 breaths/minute it's a clear indication that the animal is suffering.

Clive Brown of Eblex highlights that there are distinct signs in the way cattle are behaving that shows

if they are affected by heat stress.

“Cattle may be reluctant to lie down in an effort to maintain the biggest surface area of their body for heat loss or they may even huddle together.”

Also be aware of how much water is available when natural supplies are relied on for drinking water.

“Cows suckling calves need 50-100 litres of water/day and bulls need more than 80 litres,” he says.