

the vet

A Balancing Act

Three things that happened today

1. The radio this morning announced Arnold Schwarzenegger was telling us all to become part time vegetarians in order to save the planet from global warming.
2. I was teaching a Farmskills Calving Class to a group of farmers and one of the first things we agreed was that the goal of beef suckler production was one live calf per cow per year
3. I totalled up the percentage of barren beef cows amongst those we have been scanning recently and it came out at 7.5%

So there we have it, a celebrity taking a swipe at animal produce and coming up with his easy remedy to save the world, farmers who know that efficient production is what they need to aim for, and the statistical reality that barren rates could be better.

In a way it reflects the ongoing search for the balance between: Food – Welfare-Environment. With food production we want a sustainable and profitable model that secures the needs of an ever-increasing world population whilst looking after the welfare of the animals involved. The effects of this on the environment in terms of climate change, biodiversity, land degradation etc also need to be taken into account. It seems strange to me that proponents of these three different aspects often seem to be at loggerheads. In reality



improved welfare always leads to increased productivity, which in turn mitigates the carbon footprint per litre or kilo of food produced. So it should be win, win, win.

Figures banded about for livestock on a global scale always make interesting reading. It is claimed that 30% of the planets land surface is used for livestock production and that livestock produce 18% of green house gases (GHG) globally. When it comes to GHG produced by ruminants it is methane that is the main culprit. Methane is twenty five times as potent a GHG as carbon dioxide. So it is no surprise then that looking for ways to help reduce production of methane in the animal is another focus area. Where does this methane come from? Well, the fermentation process in the rumen produces hydrogen, it then combines with carbon dioxide to produce water and methane – the latter being burped out into the atmosphere. The composition of the diet can have a big effect on the fermentation. It has been shown that the forage:concentrate ratio can be important. Increased concentrate reduces rumen pH and makes it more difficult for the methane producing bugs to survive. The downside of this is that an acidic rumen isn't a healthy place for the cow to be generally – Sub Acute Ruminant Acidosis (SARA) being the outcome. Again a balance needs to be found. Other areas of investigation to reduce methane production are food additives, oil supplements and vaccinations against the bugs that produce the methane.

So there may be magical methane cures around the corner but in the meantime I'm happier helping my clients improve productivity in order to mitigate carbon footprints. That takes me back to the calving class today – one live calf per cow per year – and why does calving have a bearing on that? Well bad calvings or dystokias are responsible for 65% of



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calve losses in the first few days of life and those calves that survive a difficult birth are more than twice as likely to succumb to disease in the first six weeks of life. So if we are to target where losses occur then calving should be a priority. A good practical knowledge helps not only deal with events at the birth itself but also getting the preparation right in terms of breed, age, condition, disease status, handling facilities, calving pens etc etc

The beginning of the process is of course getting your cows pregnant in the first place so fertility is the other area where attention can be focused. Coming back to our carbon footprint we want to decrease the overhead of non-productive or low producing animals and that's where scanning comes in, to identify these barren cows. In a year that has been difficult for farming we have done a lot more scanning of beef herds after housing as farmers realize the benefits of culling the non producing "overheads". The barren rate at 7.5% is probably better than we expected given the year it has been.

The Paris UN Climate Conference will no doubt encourage the press to come up with sensational headlines helped along by the likes of big Arnie. However the underlying problems of expanding human population, the ever-increasing need for food and its environmental aspects won't be going away. Getting the balance right will be an ongoing and difficult challenge.

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