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TORCH FARM VETS

Calf tracking service

THE Torch Farm Vets Calf Tracker service is helping North Devon dairy farmers benchmark weight gain in pre-weaned calves and improve their overall youngstock management.

According to vet Kiera Moynihan, calf weight gain during the first two months of life is crucial to lifetime production performance, so Torch Farm Vets is now helping local milk producers collect this crucial data and monitor other important calf performance parameters.

"In addition to daily weight gain, we also assess calf immunity – and monitor disease incidence and losses. The anonymised data we have collected so far shows growth rates varying from just over 200g a day to over a 1kg a day," she says.

This highlights the significant opportunity to improve performance on many units and Kiera says unlocking this youngstock potential will earn milk producers extra cash.

"For a dairy farmer, rearing replacements is the second largest production cost after feed. An AHDB Dairy study from 2014 found that the average cost of rearing a heifer is £1,819, but it often costs farmers more than £3,000. Economic calculations suggest the optimum age at first calving should be between 23 and 25 months and to achieve this goal calves need to be growing at 750g per day. Any reduction in growth rates due to inadequate nutrition or disease will definitely compromise future production potential, so we always look

to target management improvements in these crucial areas."

Consequently, Torch Farm Vets is helping dairy farmers improve youngstock health and cut rearing costs by carrying out calf blood tests to assess colostrum antibody transfer.

"On some farms the blood tests have definitely highlighted opportunities to improve the colostrum feeding protocol," Kiera says. And when discussing colostrum feeding, the Torch Farm Vets youngstock team always highlights the importance of 'quantity' and 'quickly'.

"It's important to give a first feed of four litres or 10 per cent of body weight to newborn dairy calves, followed by a second feed of a further two litres of colostrum within 12 hours of birth. Colostrum quality can vary considerably between individual cows with one in three animals likely to produce poor or lower quality standard colostrum."

Assessing and improving the colostrum management protocol is at the heart of the Torch Farm Vets youngstock service, but the vets also talk about the 'Five Cs' of calf rearing: Colostrum, Cleanliness, Calories, Consistency and Comfort.

The service package also includes a youngstock rearing cost assessment, performance monitoring, calf blood tests and access to discounted diagnostic sampling for key calf diseases such as pneumonia and scours.

To hear more about this service, please call Torch Farm Vets on 01271 879516.