

Bolster cows' fertility at turnout with boluses

WHILE the north of the country may have had a comparatively mild winter, I think most of us will welcome spring and the opportunity to turn out cattle that have spent five months or more inside.

Hopefully, you will have got to turnout and are now able to breathe a sigh of relief that straw and feed requirements have been met. However, while turnout heralds the end of particular problems and labour requirements, it is not without its own difficulties. Consideration of these prior to turnout will, hopefully, help to avoid these potential pitfalls.

What problems in particular should I be considering?

For some cattle, this will be their first experience of the great outdoors. These animals will have not had

TURNOUT

Claire Riddell, of Alnorthumbria Veterinary Group, advises on how to avoid problems when turning out cattle this spring

the opportunity to develop their immune system to resist worm burdens – of both gutworms and lungworms. Similarly, they will have yet to encounter liver fluke.

Therefore, planning a monitoring system and the appropriate timing and use of anti-parasitic medications for this group of animals in particular is important for their first grazing season.

In addition, while coccidiosis can be a problem in intensively-housed calves and lambs, certain fields on some farms have the tendency to see more problems with coccidiosis than others, and this should be taken into account.

Fast-growing spring grass

is notoriously high in potassium and low in calcium and magnesium, which can lead to an increased number of cases of milk fever and staggers, respectively.

Milk fever (low calcium) is often seen in freshly-calved cows. These animals have a higher requirement for calcium for milk production, but are unable to achieve sufficient amounts from diet and bone reserves. Animals identified as being at risk may benefit from a high calcium bolus at calving.

Staggers (low magnesium) is commonly seen following turnout. Spring grass has higher levels of ammonia, and fertilisers can increase the ammonia levels also. This can inhibit magnesium

uptake. Low salt and low fibre grass produced in spring will reduce the amount of magnesium that can be absorbed from the gut.

Magnesium is not stored by the body, so cattle are heavily reliant on obtaining it from their diet, and absorbing it efficiently. Supplementation may be required on farms where staggers is a high risk – via a number of different methods such as high-mag cobs, boluses or medicating feed or water supplies.

During the winter, most cattle will have had their mineral and trace elements needs met by the design of their winter ration.

Once outside, animals without additional feed will struggle to achieve the ideal balance of trace elements. The use of long-acting depot injections or trace element boluses is sometimes necessary.

Different farms will have different deficiencies – but in our practice, we find the north Northumberland pastures are often lacking in selenium.

Any specific problems for dairy cows?

Dairy cows are particularly reliant on a well-formulated ration to ensure levels of milk production and fertility are maintained. Turnout,



ADVICE: Claire Riddell, of Alnorthumbria Veterinary Group

however, is a "step into the unknown" with the dry matter content, protein and sugar levels in the spring grass changing by the day.

Milk fever, ketosis, reduced milk yield and displaced abomasum are all commonly encountered, following the change to fresh grass with high-yielders at the greatest risk.

The rumen will take about ten days to acclimatise to dietary changes. A gradual increase in the intake of

fresh grass should be the aim. Restricted access to grazing and buffer feeding will ease this transition and minimise the risk of these inter-related metabolic disorders, while also having the benefit of optimising your grass production.

It's not all bad news, though, once outside and on grass, most herds will experience an increase in milk yield, improved fertility and a reduced incidence of mastitis.

Reduce mastitis with supplementary feed

EBLEX has been funding Warwick University research into mastitis in ewes for the past five years.

Udder condition is the most common reason for culling ewes aged two to four years.

Mastitis plays a major role in reducing the productivity of ewes and increasing replacement costs.

Part of the research has focused on how teat lesions (bites, tears or grazes) can lead to reduced growth rates in lambs and an increased risk of mastitis.

Teat lesions are significantly higher in shearlings, lambing at two years, compared with six-year-old ewes.

Lambs on first-time mothers spend more time suckling,

due to the lower milk yield in younger ewes, which increases the risk of teat damage as udder development is only beginning.

One clear message has been to think more carefully about shearing ewe management.

Teat lesions, and the risk of mastitis, increase when the shearing's body condition score is less than three.

Its ability to satisfy the lamb's demand for milk is lower, leading to longer or more vigorous suckling.

Good nutritional management is crucial for optimum condition score and to reduce mastitis risks, particularly for younger ewes.

Poor grass availability (sward height less than 4cm)

or when the group has lower than ideal body condition, may require supplementary feed.

If possible, manage thin and younger ewes in a separate group, so supplementary feed can be strategically used.

The project has not looked at the impact of lambing as a ewe lamb on the risk of mastitis, but guidelines suggest that allowing them to rear only one lamb should reduce the risk of udder damage.

Lactating ewe lambs require 20 per cent more feed than mature ewes. Their lambs should be creep-fed and weaned early (from eight to nine weeks of age) to allow the ewe lamb sufficient time to continue to grow.



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