

A modern operation

NICK Keenlyside maintains a firm handle on his beef operation on the outskirts of Newcastle, running a closed suckler herd and maximising the use of land while minimising input costs. Pushing the boundaries at Mason Farm, Seaton Burn, to make a profit on his beef enterprise, experimenting – and not always achieving – the desired outcome.

He works closely with his vet Andrew Stayer at the Al-northumbria Group and Philip Sharman, Carrs Billing-ton's Hexham-based regional branch manager. Trying to maximise the potential from his 300 acres of established grassland, Nick also consulted the late David Long, Barenbrug's well-respected grass expert, who died in October last year after a short illness.

The suckler herd initially

SUCKLER HERD

Nick Keenlyside runs a closed suckler herd at Mason Farm, near Newcastle. Jennifer MacKenzie visited to find out how he minimises his input costs

was bought in Continental cross cattle, but there were fertility problems with campylobacter. Restrictions on the

use of AI during 2001's foot-and-mouth epidemic led Nick to use a stock bull and breed his own heifer replacements, which were weighed earlier in the month, averaged 670kg. We don't have an issue with size per condition of the cattle," said Nick.

"However, we have started with the vet to measure the internal size of the heifer's pelvis pre-bulling at 11 to 13 months old. Any that are less than 140sq cm at 13 months old are sold store and this may be only one out of a batch of 20.

"I haven't calved a cow this year, which might be the result of a number of factors, but it costs very little for the vet to do the measurement and it's a peace of mind and saves a lot if there had to be a Caesarian.

The cows are PDed between 30 and 50 days and they are then removed from the batch and replaced with others due to be bulled.

The herd calves all the year round, which Nick believes creates fewer disease problems and it also helps cash flow throughout the year with batches of up to ten calves sold at a time.

The herd has a calving index of only 353 days and one female calves within 302 days. Nick believes that calving the cows in batches drags the calving index down.

With a handful of cows aborting and tests not conclusive on the cause, Nick tried Crystalyx Cattle Booster tubs, which have been shown to improve conception and growth rates and he will continue to use them to improve the health status. The high energy feed lick also contains generous levels of all essential minerals and trace elements sufficient to correct all likely mineral deficiencies and imbalances found in grass.

Another considered change of policy on the advice of Carrs' Cliff Lister is to sell second-calved cows at over 36 months old, rather than older cows which will continue to produce calves after four or five years old. Currently, the

average age of the herd is five and a half years old.

Nick is also looking closely at herd efficiency, while maintaining a cow size which is not too big and heavy. Over the past eight years, average weights have increased from about 350kg to more than 700kg and some up to 900kg.

Each bull serves about 62 cows and as a result the bull cost has been halved. New stock bulls are tested for dis-

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Nick Keenlyside farms

ease and are kept in isolation with a bunch of ten heifer which, if they are not in calf after three months, are all sold in the summer, calves are kept on their dams until the cow produces another calf, which causes less stress on the old calf. Out at grass, creep feeders are erected to allow the young stock to access the better grass in the neighbouring paddock ahead of the cows.

The bullcows are fed a concentrate with yeast and a batch of 15 received only 20kg head over four months

In the winter, the calves are weaned at about seven months old and the cows are fed straw, with some Ezi-Fi Sweetmix liquid feed on top and a big bale is put out over three days.

All the calves not retain for breeding are sold still and Nick reckons that rather than attempting to finish calf himself, he is better to increase breeding cattle numbers.

During the winter, she are sold store at seven to eight months old to a private but weighing an average 560kg. In the summer, they can be sold at up to 12 months old wet weighing 440-450kg.

The cattle are grazed over three acre paddocks for about 14 days with Nick mearns the grass with a plate metre

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Leaves little to chance



BEEF ENTERPRISE: Beef suckler herd with numbers increasing to more than 200 – Pictures: Jennifer Mackenzie

estimate 1,200 to 1,500kg dry matter/ha post grazing.

The farm also runs a DIY 20 horse livery and they follow the cattle on 17 acres of the paddocks.

A plan is to keep 100 big bales of silage for buffer feeding, if necessary, during the early summer. "I'm planning to cut back my specific forage ground to 50 per cent and take a late cut of haylage when

there is always plenty of grass to even the feeding out," said Nick.

Managing the grassland has been a challenge, as much of the farm was reclaimed some years ago.

To maximise production with the increased stocking, attention was paid to soil sampling and grass varieties with the assistance of David Long. Protected phosphate and rel-

evant levels of potash have to be applied to crop removal levels, which ensures that applied nitrogen is then optimised.

Applied sulphur is also key to maximise nitrogen and help with grass quality.

Nick also applies a unique form of selenium with his fertiliser, sourced from Carrs Billington. This has shown increased forage levels of selenium.



CLOSED HERD: Nick Keenlyside, of Mason Farm, near Newcastle, with Philip Sharman, of Carrs Billington

The forage land receives four bags to the acre of New Choice 20.5.12 with the grazing ground applied with half the amount.

Last year, the fertiliser bill was doubled with 21 tonnes of calcium based 20.5.12 the

equivalent of 160 units of nitrogen.

Nick looked at grassland management closely with David Long who said that despite the long-established leys, they were averaging more than 50 per cent rye grass.

The rotational grazing has improved the grazing as has clearing out the drainage ditches with a mini digger.

The land is wet at 60 metres above sea level. It is former coal mining land and is subject to subsidence and pit falls.