



St David's September 2008

Farm Newsletter



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Stale cows; how to break the cycle?

Most of you will know that the group of cows causing most of the problems on a dairy farm are the fresh cows.

Udder oedema, difficult calving, milk-fever, ketosis, fatty liver, mastitis, retained placenta (cleansings), displaced abomasums (stomach), underperformance, laminitis (lameness), metritis (uterus infection) and poor fertility are just a few problems associated with this specific stage of lactation.

Most of you will also know that a lot of these issues can be prevented or at least reduced through good management in the dry period:

- Stop milking abruptly at drying off. Follow the instructions for dry cow

therapy thoroughly. If cows are giving a lot of milk, administer an antibiotic tube with 72 hour withdrawal when milking stops, and then the dry cow tubes 3-4 days later without further milking out.

- Consider use of teat seals as well as dry cow antibiotic tubes.
- Cows should be dried off and calf in the right body condition (2.5-3).
- Even though body condition doesn't change, the cow should gain weight (as the calf grows inside of the cow) in the dry period.
- The diet should contain protein concentrates containing a high DUP (protein, not used by the microbes in the rumen), because protein requirements of the developing calf increase in the last 60 days of gestation.
- From drying off to four weeks before calving it is important to feed bulky forage to keep the rumen expanded and working.

- During the last four weeks of the dry period, many changes are needed in the nutrition and management of the dry cow. It is important that the rumen bugs and rumen papillae in these cows are adapted to the feedstuffs being fed to milking cows.
- Due to the change in DMI (Dry Matter Intake), the diet nutrient density must be adjusted in the last two weeks to maintain nutrient intake.
- Provide free access to general purpose dry cow minerals in the early weeks of the dry period or mix minerals with the conserved forage on offer if practical.
- Feeding anionic salts such as chlorides and sulphates in the pre-calving period can help reduce milk fevers. Typical UK diets are high in potassium, (a cation or positively charged ion). Calcium and magnesium, both essential for strong muscle contractions, are also cations. Their uptake and utilisation can be affected by high potassium. This is like grass staggers where high levels of potassium reduce magnesium uptake on lush pasture.



Even on farms where the dry cow management is considered "ideal", there will be problems with fresh cows. Very often these individual animals causing problems are the same that caused problems the year before. Why is that and how do we break through that negative spiral?

The answer to the question why, is not that difficult. The question of how to break through that negative spiral is more challenging.

To illustrate this, a short story about a pregnant heifer becoming a problem heifer becoming a problem stale cow.

Our heifer has a few minor problems around calving; her calf is too big and she needs help to get it out. Because of this she develops minor nerve problems and becomes a downer cow for a few days. In this period she develops mastitis. Also because of the assisted calving she holds on to her cleansing for a few days and develops a metritis.

Even though she received the best possible treatment for the mastitis and metritis she feels poor for a few days and has a reduced appetite. Because of this reduced appetite, her DMI drops and she develops an LDA (Left Displaced Abomasum) and is also a bit ketotic for a few days.



After the successful LDA operation and the endless drenching with energy liquids she recovers. One hundred days after she calved, our “Problem heifer” finally starts to cycle. Unfortunately she developed a chronic metritis and only gets pregnant after the 7th service. This will result in a calving interval of at least 500 days.

On this farm all the cows are fed the same basic ration for 20 kg of milk and fed concentrates in the parlour above this production. From 350 days after

calving, our “problem heifer” drops below the 20 kg milk production, she is still on the same basic ration for 20 Kg. She should not get any concentrates, but is very difficult to get her in the parlour without, so she gets some extra cake on top of the basic ration.

Result: “problem heifer” will be overfed for about 100 days before she is dried off. Her condition at this stage is about 4.5 BCS and she is getting fatter every day.

Because of the “ideal” dry cow management on this farm, in which the cows should not gain or lose any condition in the dry period, our heifer calves in the same fat condition as she was dried off in. When “problem heifer” calves for the second time there are problems again. Her “good” condition

results in a narrow birth canal and an oversized calf. Oversized calves come from:

- Over feeding in the 7-8th month of pregnancy (not the last month)
- The potential size of the dam which for heifers not fully grown is bigger than their actual size **and**
- Extended pregnancy length, which is the sire’s fault.

Her “good” condition will also result in a reduced “lazy” calcium metabolism with high risk for milkfever and a reduced

Dry Matter Intake with increased risk for developing displacements and ketosis. These are all ingredients to create a perfect “Problem cow” to start the cycle again and end up with a calving interval above 500.

I think a lot of farmers recognize these problems and most of you could pick out these animals in your herd.

Breaking the cycle

The second question, how to break through this negative spiral is a lot harder to answer. You can have the best TMR diet in the world and the ideal dry cow management but still end up with the same stale cows every year.

I think there are two moments during lactation where we can reduce the risk of cows becoming fat. Improve fertility in early lactation and reduce excessive weight gain at the end of lactation.

Early lactation:

Heat detection, insemination skills and quality semen and/or fertile bull are the obvious topics to look at when talking about improving fertility.

If the cow is not ready to conceive or is likely to lose a calf when she conceives, all the improvements in the obvious topics are irrelevant.

So at the cow level the aim should be to prevent the fertility issues:

- Vaccinate all the cows and heifers at the right time against BVD, Lepto and IBR. (Always in a non-closed herd and if disease is present in a closed herd)
- Keep the size of the heifer or cow in the back of your head when it comes to the choice of semen.
- Use a separate clean calving pen if possible.
- Only assist at calving when really needed.
- If assistance is needed, do this as hygienically as possible; wear gloves, use lots of lube and disinfectant, use clean calving-ropes and a clean calving-aid.
- Always use Antibiotic capsules after an assisted calving.

End of lactation

On a lot of farms, the cows are managed as one group and fed one TMR ration. In this system, the few already fat stale cows, not ready to dry off yet, will gain even more condition.

These cows need to loose condition or at least not gain condition in a safe way. This will require an extra management group, but should not be more expensive than doing nothing. This extra management group should be a pre dry off group on a very tight but fibrous ration; in here the cows should loose condition before they move to the normal dry cow group.

First of all the farmer needs to know the minimum yield that is still cost effective. All healthy cows producing below that yield are better of dried off anyway, regardless what stage of lactation they are in. Depending on their Body Condition Score, they'll go in a different group:

- The cows in poor condition need to be looked at especially for disease like Fluke and Johnes. They could stay in the main herd to gain condition.
- The cows with a Body Condition Score of 3.5 can go to the normal dry cow group.
- The fat cows should go to the pre-dry group, to loose weight until they have a BCS of 3.5 or until they are eight

weeks of calving and then go to the dry-cow group.

All healthy cows producing just above the minimum cost effective yield should be condition scored and when they are very overweight or known to cause problems during or after calving they should be pre-dried off as well, again until BCS is 3.5 or until they are eight weeks from calving.

This won't be easy in practise, but it should reduce the number of problem cows in early lactation and because of this improve the fertility on a herd level.

Abel Jan Huiges – 07921109226

Does my bum look big this year?

Milk profile payment structures continually promote level milk production. As a result, more farms have adopted an all year round calving system to enable a level profile.

Many farms running these systems have all cows in one group for ease of management and/or as there's a lack of space and facilities to do otherwise. This has been coupled with a switch to more TMR feeding systems, placing evermore (if not all) concentrates with forages in one as-fed ration. This move is widely and correctly accepted as better for the rumen health of the cow, rather than "slug feeding" concentrates in the parlour and/or out of parlour feeders.

Nutritionists and farmers alike love to look after transition cows to achieve high intakes post calving, and follow this up with a good energy-rich diet to keep those fresh cows milking well, healthy, holding their condition and holding their milk quality, all with a view to her holding back in calf when desired. Use of megalac is widespread and diets generally have a limited crude protein inclusion. Protein sources used are high in their rumen undegradable

(bypass) fraction to help retain cow condition with lower peaks in production but steadier, more persistent lactation curves. So the mindset is high intakes of an energy rich, low protein diet – sounds like a beef finishing ration doesn't it? Hardly surprising then that it also performs like one!

All cows in the group end up being fed like a fresh cow as the diet is set up with their needs in mind. More persistent lactation curves will help make use of the energy rich diet into lactation, but not indefinitely. The key then is fertility. The difficulty arises when cows continue to be fed such a good diet without holding back in calf. Hence "lost time" is the devil of the one group system. The obvious knock-on is an over-fat cow at calving – low intakes thereafter, metabolic issues, fatty liver and no doubt a cow very tricky to get back in calf next time around. The vicious circle continues. As a result, fertility in these herds is being taken ever more seriously. Heat detection becomes even more critical in avoiding any of this dreaded "lost time". Hence the growing appearance of heat detection aids such as pedometers, "Heat Time" etc.

The fact is that it's very hard to manage cows in one group as individuals. Parlour and/or out of parlour feeders, where available, offer some flexibility in avoiding overweight

St David's noticeboard

BLUETONGUE WARNING

There has been a confirmed case of bluetongue in Devon. As yet it is not circulating in the county but we highly recommend vaccinating your animals if you have not already done so.

France has had over 4,000 cases and we should be very glad we have vaccinated. It is not a disease anyone wants to see in our animals.

cows as they can be targeted to yield – thus avoiding over feeding. Grouping cows has its own challenges in terms of dietary and social changes and so this isn't always the answer.

In virtually any system, there will always be overweight cows from time to time. There are "fire-fighting" options in this instance like "Lift" – a product that helps keep the liver functioning correctly in fat cows around calving. Fertility however, is the best proactive tool. Cows holding early enough will keep milking sufficiently to avoid the weight-gain problems. As always though, the theory is of course much easier than the practice. Good luck!

Charlie King – 07917203790

Raw material update

Soya – Prices have slowly moved back resting at £17p/t lower than last month, for a very brief time during August when speculators were off loading prices dipped into the £245 p/t region but only to rise again. The market feels there will be another down turn over the next few weeks, be patient stay spot if you have not yet covered.

Soya Hulls – With cereal prices falling this has helped reduced Soya hull prices, whether or not we will see further significant decreases is unlikely. At current winter prices hulls will be £20 p/t cheaper than Sugar Beet, this price difference should make them an attractive fibre source for winter diets.

Sugar Beet – Trident have had difficulty keeping their beet growers happy after last year when perhaps they released their first price a little early, I feel they are trying to make up ground for last year because the beet price should be lower due to cereal prices. Over the last couple of months

Raw material prices

	June 08	July 08	August 08
Hipro Soya	£299	£280	£263
Sugar Beet	£187	£187	£187
Soya Hulls	£169	£167	£152
Rapeseed Meal	£191	£182	£151
Wheat	£142	£132	£115
Barley	£134	£127	£109

beet prices have reduced slightly but I believe they are £10 p/t over the top when compared with other raw materials. Trading at a very big premium over hulls I think we should not see a repeat of this summers shortage next year.

Wheat and Barley – In last months letter i had predicted grain prices at harvest of £115 p/t, I also mentioned the weather was improving I think I'll leave weather forecasting to the professionals. It has been an extremely difficult harvest so far especially here in the south west, but further east the harvest has been somewhat easier with excellent yields achieved. There is no

doubt the country will have a record grain crop this year, this will apply more pressure to grain prices.

Molasses – As of yet no forward winter prices have been released, I expect them out over the next couple of weeks.

Rapeseed Meal – With Soya prices dropping a little rape for this winter is becoming attractive in the late £150s, perhaps there's still a small decrease to come but I think to take some cover now might not be a bad thing.

Steve Symons – 01884 256256
(Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays)

STOP PRESS: St David's Farm Practice will be at the Beef and Growing cattle South West Show on Thursday 18th September and The Dairy Show on Wednesday 1st October. Please contact Jayne on **01392 872934** for more details. We hope to see you there.

