

MOOSLETTER

DECEMBER 2009



Keeping heifers on target

Heifers are the future of your herd and livelihood so it is imperative that they are managed well so that they may grow to reach their potential.

Unfortunately in our busy times the heifers can be forgotten about and lapses in growth rates may occur. All dairy farmers should have target weights for their heifers and heifers should be weighed at least every three months to ensure the entire mob is reaching the target weights. This is also very important where replacement heifers are contract reared on agistment. Actively weighing stock is the **only accurate way** to ensure heifers are reaching targets; simply observing animals is not good enough. Once weights have been assessed all animals below target can be separated and receive preferential treatment.

Farm based studies and experiences have shown that;

Heifers **below** target weight:

- Reduced pregnancy rates
- Increased calving difficulties
- Reduced lifetime milk yield
- Difficulty getting back in calf (a heifer which doesn't make it's second lactation will have cost you money!!)

Heifers at or **above** target weight:

- Get in calf easier
- Produce more milk in their lifetime
- Reduced calving problems
- Cope better with herd competition



InCalf's rule of thumb for heifer target weights is:

Holsteins: age (months) x 20 + 40 = today's target weight in kg

Jerseys: age (months) x 15 + 35 = today's target weight in kg

In general to reach target weight at joining heifers will require supplementary feeding for at least six months of the year. This cost of supplementing will be well and truly outweighed by the benefits which ultimately result in higher lifetime production and milkers that remain in the herd for many lactations.

Why won't my cows cycle?

Hopefully many of the issues raised in this item are obvious and well known to you. However even if there is only one reminder of something you have forgotten then we will be happy.

Let's assume your cows have been calved for a long enough period. 'Normal' cows have their first ovulation at about 15 days after calving, but most of them do not show signs of heat – that is they have a silent heat.

Cows that have been calved for more than 40 days should be having heat periods at regular 3 week intervals. If they are not, then this is abnormal. Why does this happen? Well there are plenty of possible reasons, and an understanding and acceptance of these reasons is the first step in minimizing the problem.

The first and most obvious and important reason for non-cycling cows is energy balance. The reproductive system requires energy, and if most of the energy is directed to body maintenance and milk production, then reproduction will shut down. Heifers can be a particular problem, because they have just spent 2 years just looking after themselves and are suddenly required to produce 20 to 30 litres of milk each day, at the lower end of the pecking order.

Disease, both clinical and subclinical, is also an important cause of not cycling. The common diseases include mastitis, lameness and parasitism. Diseases of the reproductive tract play a major role in non-cyclers, the most important and common being metritis and cystic ovary disease.

As a vet, one of the frustrating things about examining non-cycling cows is that many of them have in fact had a recent heat period which has not been detected. Much of this is due to silent heats – the cow actually has a heat which is not expressed. The reasons for silent heats are many and varied, but include:

- behavior. The cow (or heifer) is at the low end of the pecking order.
- extreme weather can suppress heat expression.
- The diseases mentioned above can also suppress expression of heat.

Of course some cows that do come into heat are missed, and this comes back to heat detection. It is important to have more than 1 or 2 strings to your bow when it comes to heat detection. For example we often see cows with heat mount detectors that are not touched but have really obvious rub marks. This indicates a faulty device or wrong placement, but more importantly it is a message to use all your powers of observation in heat detection. Look for mounting (and mounted) cows, but not in the laneway, and all the other signs of heat.

Wandering around the cows for 15 minutes about 2 hours after milking is quite instructive about who is on heat, or coming on heat. Don't forget to take your notebook.

Finally don't forget that very few pregnant cows show signs of heat. Don't forget to pregnancy test your carry-overs.

What can I do about non-cycling cows?

There are various ways of working out the theoretical cost of an empty or late cow. Whatever way you use, the answer is usually the same – expensive! Active remedial work to fix the problem is cost-effective management.

Assuming that the nutritional and disease problems are being worked on, what we have is usually a real hard core of cows that need decisive action, otherwise they will be late to conceive, or even remain empty.

When we examine non-cycling cows we find they fall into the following groups:

- metritis which need to be irrigated
- cystic ovaries, which need treating with hormones
- strong evidence of a recent heat, and prostaglandin can be used
- gross disease such as peritonitis or cancer, generally not treatable
- pregnancy
- the vast majority have normal reproductive tracts, but with no evidence of cycling, and these need treating with CIDR's

A couple of years ago some marketing issues meant we had to change the way we use CIDR's. CIDR's are now used with prostaglandin and Gonabreed, and a 'set-time' insemination. We have found the new program generally as good as the original system.

If you need further information about non-cycling cows please contact us.

Christmas Wishes



Well 2009 has been another tough year, we would like to thank you all for your support throughout the year and wish you a safe and happy Christmas, from all the staff at Tatura Veterinary Clinic.

