

SMASH Field Day

Growing Great Heifers

Speaker: Sue Macky – Dairy Production Systems

Notes by Corrine Rushbrooke

I attended the field day, and have been asked to share Sue's ideas through the SMASH website. I have an 80 ha farm at Reporoa and graze my young stock in Taupo and Ongarue. At the end of the field day I talked with Sue and her parting comment was that:

"The first six months of a calf's life will impact on the next three lactations."

"Producing a high yielding, healthy milking cow starts right back at the beginning. How a calf is fed, housed and socialised will all ultimately influence your profit and their production outcomes, and a high incidence of anoestrus."

Calf rearing

The first 6 months begins with the newly born calf needing to receive 2 litres of the cow's "first milking" colostrums for two feeds.

After that the calf needs **warmed** milk that is at body temperature of the calf.

You can add 5-10% of hot water to warm the colostrum but don't dilute milk.

Cold milk will take energy reserves from the calf.

Feed milk for 10 – 12 weeks weaning Friesian calves at 120kg.

The aim is to increase skeletal growth. Throughout the day Sue emphasized skeletal growth, as a good size body frame is very important for growing good heifers.

(Note: On our farm we target weaning at 100 kg, with calves ranging from 100 – 120 kg, so I will be discussing this with my manager.)

Give calves access to hay or straw to develop the rumen. Allow ½kg/calf/day.

Don't feed calves fodder beet, as it is a low protein feed that doesn't promote mammary development.

Don't put 1-2 calves per paddock around the farm, as they are by nature herd animals, and won't settle back in the herd easily.

Only need to keep 15-19% replacements.

It costs \$1500 to bring a heifer into the herd.

If she produces 300 kg MS over 270 days in milk, at a cost of \$3.60/kg,

In the first lactation, at \$4 kg MS, she will only generate \$120 towards the rearing cost.

It will take several lactations to get the \$1500 back at \$3.90 payout.

Weaners have a small muzzle and a small gut, so must have food throughout the day.

Shift stock every day, as they are always looking for food.

If you want well grown stock, they must be offered **more each day**, as they are growing.

(If one day in every five they only receive maintenance feed, that is 73 days per year of no growth.)

This will mean break feeding the mob. For the first break, give a bigger area than the other breaks. Stock are not keen to eat grass they have walked over, but will return to this once the second break is eaten.

Sue likened them to teenagers – with a “can’t be bothered” attitude.

Make sure stock have adequate water, and can reach into the troughs.

This can be hindered by mud holes.

Animal Health

Keeping stock well fed will reduce parasites.

Give a copper bullet at weaning. Avoid copper sulphate as it is poisonous to stock, and contaminates the soil from the dung.

Beware of lung worm. (*I have had this problem when heifers came home from grazing*). Sue recommended once they got home in May to give Matrix, and in late August-early September to give all two and three year olds a pour-on drench.

Observe all stock for signs of underfeeding and animal health issues. If an animal has a big head in proportion to the rest of its body, and the length of the nose is out of proportion, it is being underfed.

Look at the fluff on top of heifer’s head. It should be lying flat. If the fluff is standing up (like a punk rocker!!) and the ear hair is fluffy, this is another sign of underfeeding. If the fluff is red, the animal is lacking copper, and needs a copper bullet.

Managing heifers on their return from grazing

Sue suggested feeding ad lib hay or straw 12 hours before and after transporting.

To settle the heifers in with the cows, put them in with the milkers, 10 -15 at a time. When cows are dry, leave them with the early calving cows. This helps socialisation, and gives opportunities to walk through the shed.

Feed small amount of straw two months before calving as this stretches the rumen muscles.

A heifer should be 90% of its mature liveweight at 22 months.

At Planned Start of Calving (PSC) a Friesian heifer should be 526kg, to account for calf, placenta etc.

This means liveweight on May 1st should be 470-480kg.

If heifers are small prior to calving, consider milking them once a day(OAD) until mating, then reassess.

Hopefully they will be big enough for twice a day for the rest of the season.

OAD will develop udder capacity, will get them in calf earlier, and result in a great three year old.

Thanks Sue for an excellent presentation. I got so much out of the day, and have talked with my manager about many of your ideas.