

What's Up Doc?

By Jackie Davies



It has been a different February, with very hot, dry weather turning pastures brown, before periods of inconsistent rain. It has finally cooled down somewhat and time will tell if we will now grow a good crop of grass or if it will turn hot and dry again, putting even more stress on pastures.

Remember, periods of stress to grass, like drought, can cause nitrate levels to increase if it starts growing rapidly again – new annual ryegrass pasture with recent nitrogen fertiliser application is one of the common culprits for problems in cattle.

While on the subject of grass, facial eczema spore counts have been averaging at high levels across the area. In the third week of February, it rained onto browned-off paddocks, which is a definite risk for spore counts to be very high by the time you are reading this newsletter.

Face-Guard zinc boluses last in calves for six weeks, so if they were done early in your youngstock, these will be due to be repeated now.

Some calf faecal samples recently have shown large numbers of intestinal worm eggs. Make sure you keep drenching calves with Boss or Turbo Advance. Be aware that the high pasture larval challenge put out by youngstock can affect your herd too, so it can be worthwhile treating the herd as well.

With a record number of hot days in the Waikato this summer, mitigating heat stress is vital for cows and for us. Take extra care of your animals and yourself!

Also, we have seen a few dislocated hips lately, due to slippery yards from feed residues. Try to keep these areas as clean as possible.

On a different note, scanning results are averaging 11% empty – not bad!

What's happening on-farm?

- ✔ Pregnancy scanning
- ✔ Facial eczema
- ✔ Calf drenching (faecal egg counts high)
- ✔ Dry cow consults
- ✔ Autumn calving

Lastly, we wish our autumn calvers an easy calving period and we'll see our spring calvers soon for dry cow consults ahead of drying off – book in now if you haven't already.

Feeding out in dry weather

By Alvin Stanley

Rain is in short supply at the moment, and grass even shorter. Most farmers have been feeding out for a while, so here are a few things to consider as this dry period stretches.

Increasing or decreasing supplement feed

Any change in supplement feed should be done slowly. Supplement feeds by their nature are generally highly digestible, high-energy feeds, that can predispose cows to issues with acidosis.

A rapid increase in these high-energy feeds will disrupt the gut bacteria and make it more acidic, which can lead to sick cows. Likewise, rapid decreases can also lead to changes in how the gut moves. These outcomes can result in rumen impactions, especially if water consumption is low, and acidosis.



A good rule of thumb is generally no more than 2kg of dry matter change in any one day per cow and to leave a few days between changes to allow the gut biome to adapt to increases in potential acidity. Slow changes are best to avoid issues.

Ensuring enough fiber is also still an important part of the diet, as low-fiber, high-energy diets are a perfect recipe for acidosis and will actually hinder cow performance rather than helping.

Signs of acute acidosis in a cow:

- Lack of appetite,
- Drop in milk,
- Firm, dry faeces,
- A quick loss of body condition and an empty appearing abdomen,
- Preference for forage over concentrate feeds,
- Some cases may even have neurological symptoms if acute enough.

Acute acidosis will result in a very sick cow that should be easy to spot! However, it's more likely that presentations will be subacute, with acidosis affecting overall herd performance but not acutely affecting individual animals.

Signs of subacute acidosis in a herd:

- Reduced feed intake,
- Decreased milk production and lower milk fat,
- Loose faeces,
- Poor body condition scores despite adequate feed being offered,
- High rates of other health conditions in the herd.

As you can see, these signs will present very similarly to cows under pressure during dry conditions and this is why it's important to be accurate with energy levels in feed types and amounts of feed provided to cows during this time.

Monitoring cow condition

Keeping an eye on the body condition score (BCS) of your herd is a key component for ensuring success during dry summer periods.

Checks need to be done regularly – every 3-4 weeks is ideal. Cows who are rapidly decreasing in BCS should be dried off early to ensure next season's production won't be impacted. Pushing cows too far now will make it very difficult to get BCS back up to target during winter for calving and will have serious effects on the following season.

Cows that have been dried off require a lot less energy from feed, so keep that

in mind when feed gets tight. Drying off a portion of the herd early may actually be more profitable, with your better milk producers able to be given more feed, as your dried-off lower producers require less.

Looking ahead

If we do get the rain we're crying out for, it's also a good idea to be budgeting feed for those last few weeks of the season left once rain returns.

Up to half the grass would die off rapidly, as it has already decayed in the heat. Grass that does grow back quickly in this period of rain would be low in dry matter, so the majority of energy will still need to be supplied through supplement feeding.

Slowing your paddock rotation during this time will allow the grass ahead to develop a better root mass post-drought.

A reminder for youngstock

Whilst the focus here has been around feeding and monitoring our hard-working, milk-producing dairy cows during this dry weather, special consideration also needs to be given to youngstock.

BCS should also be checked often and adequate feed and access to water is a must. Setbacks at this age will affect the quality of your herd for years going forward.

This age group is also very susceptible to affects from hot weather. If you see any signs of stress or poor health amongst your calves don't hesitate to give us a ring.

Tips for reducing heat stress in cows

Water

- Cows require 100L of water each per day in summer and can drink at a rate of 20L per minute! Make sure your water troughs can keep up with demand – both the flow rate to refill troughs and the size of troughs matter for this.
- Clean water troughs to keep palatability of water up.

Cooling

- Wet down the yard surface prior to cows coming in to cool it down.
- Water sprinklers over the yard are a good idea, however they need to spray enough water to wet cows through to the skin, as a mist will just increase humidity and can make heat stress worse.

Shade

- Planting trees on northern and western edges of paddocks will help provide shade and shelter. Ideally there should be more than 5m² of shade per cow to minimise competition. Shade cloth can be used, but it needs to be thick enough to block more than 80% of light.
- Deciduous trees planted along lanes are a great long-term idea to provide shade during the long, hot walk to and from the shed.

JOIN US FOR A FARMERS BBQ

We'd like to thank you for your continued support over the last year, so food and drinks are on us! While you grab a bite to eat, have a yarn with our team – catching up with those of us you know and meeting our new team members. We look forward to seeing you there.

Thursday 27th March, from 5.30pm
Vet Clinic Morrinsville, 62 Moorhouse Street

Please let us know if you are coming before Thursday 20th March by calling 07 889 6738 or emailing office@vetcm.co.nz so we can organise catering.



Historic dairying nonsense!

By Jackie Davies

A little bit of light relief: the topic of early dairying at the Tawhiti Museum in Hāwera, Taranaki.

I visited this lovely museum while on holiday and enjoyed the modeling showcasing history from our country, some of which was dedicated to early farming. The following information is from the displays in the museum.

In 1814 Reverend Samuel Marsden arrived in the Bay of Islands with the first two cows and a bull for a mission settlement farm.

Despite some setbacks (mostly the settlers preferring to eat the cattle rather than breed and milk them), by 1823 a herd of some 50 cattle had been established – plus others had escaped and were running wild in the bush.

From there cattle farming grew! To the right is some photos of a (slightly bizarre) model of a potential early milking machine in Tawhiti Museum.



What do you call a museum about cows?



A moo-seum.

Here's an excerpt from 'Shear Nonsense', a book written in 1953 by Hāwera local John Brimblecombe:

"It is well to remember the brown cows are difficult to distinguish from mud and may be lost in the approach to the cow-bail, about which I will tell you later. In selecting by breed, bear in mind that Jerseys are low to the ground and high in butter-fat, while Friesans are high to the ground and low in their habits. Shorthorns have short horns and Longhorns have long horns, unless they have been sawn off, when they become Shorthorns. Beware of cows with three legs (Leghorns).

Next you require a cow-bail. This can be built on the lowest place on the farm, thus avoiding the necessity of running the drainage off. The concrete can also be sloped to the centre of the yard, where the manure then collects in one place and can be swept off at a different point each day. The upper works of the cow-bail should be made of something fairly firm to fix the milking machine to.

The latter is a complicated bit of machinery, still constructed on the lines of the original design by Mr Heath Robinson. I am told that a picture of one once appeared in a German paper

and struck terror into the hearts of the people at this fresh evidence of the terrible war machines being turned out by the Allies.

It starts at the business end with four cups that fit on to the cows appendages. They can be easily attached to the cow using only four hands, and a really good sharemilker can do it using only three. From there tubes and things run off to various pipes, and to valves and things which go click or clack, or suck their teeth very rudely."

Calving in autumn

By George Varney



As we come to the end of what has turned into a particularly dry summer, it is time to turn our attention to the rapidly approaching autumn calving season – but what does calving in autumn entail?

Autumn calving is becoming increasingly popular in the Waikato for many reasons, including longer, warmer days and improved hygiene conditions as cows calve.

However, along with the benefits come certain challenges and key considerations that need to be accounted for, particularly when milking through the winter.

Benefits

A significant advantage of autumn calving is the reduction in calf illness, likely due to warmer weather and drier conditions keeping calf sheds cleaner.

Additionally, calves expend less energy on thermoregulation, allowing their bodies to focus on immune system development and growth.

Another reason many farms are shifting to autumn calving is the winter milk premium offered by some dairy companies, making it a financially attractive option.

Producing milk during the colder months can provide a more stable income stream and balance workloads throughout the year.

Challenges

While there is minimal published research comparing autumn and spring calving, we can safely assume many of the difficulties faced with an autumn-calving herd are associated with shorter day lengths and wetter conditions. These include:

- *Milking in winter* – With darker mornings and evenings and increased likelihood of inclement weather, efficient lighting and warm, dry conditions for workers become even more important.
- *Managing milking facilities during winter* – Ensuring cow comfort and maintaining a high standard of shed hygiene during colder, wetter months is essential to prevent mastitis and other health issues.
- *Pasture management* – Wet ground conditions can lead to increased pugging and pasture damage, requiring careful rotation and supplementary feeding strategies. These conditions also increase the risk of lameness.

Key considerations

Animal health considerations for autumn calving are largely similar to those of spring calving.

Pre-calving vaccinations for Coronavirus, Rotavirus, Clostridia, and Salmonella remain essential and

should be scheduled at least 3-4 weeks before calving begins.

During the transition period, proper mineral and trace element management is crucial for ensuring cows reach peak production early in lactation. This also supports reproductive health, helping cows begin cycling sooner and reducing the risk of metabolic issues.

We offer whole-herd and selective testing for key minerals, such as copper, selenium, and B12. We also stock a wide range of supplements to help you address deficiencies.

When rearing autumn calves, colostrum quality is just as critical as it is in spring. Store colostrum in a cool location, as residual summer heat can degrade its quality if it's left at room temperature. Ensure each calf receives at least 4–6L of high-quality colostrum within the first 12 hours of life, ideally during the first 2 hours post-birth.

By planning ahead and implementing best management practices, farmers can make the most of the benefits of autumn calving while mitigating its challenges, so it may be an option to consider. Talk to your vet if you have further questions.

If you are already an autumn calver and you would like support with herd health, vaccinations, or trace element testing, our team is here to help!

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