



**Dairy heifers:  
what weight  
should they be?**

**Assessing copper  
levels in cattle**

**Leptospirosis**

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# Tired of Johne's disease wastage in your dairy herd?

It comes to our attention repeatedly that some of our dairy clients are tired of either losing or culling cows because of Johne's disease (JD).

Most dairy herds lose around 3-5% of the cow herd per year from unplanned culling decisions (downer cows, calvings, acute mastitis, sick cows that cannot be saved, etc). What concerns us is that JD can account for 25-33% of these losses in some of our problem herds.

Over the last four years we have been working on alternative blood tests and control strategies to help break this pattern. The answers really lie with

ensuring that your replacement heifers are low risk JD replacements.

It is easy to imagine that if the incidence of JD in replacement heifers is the same or more than the main herd, then JD will continue to get worse.

Contact your Vetlife clinic if you would like to know more about a JD control programme for your herd.

They would be very happy to outline some of the real options that you do have to make progress with this frustrating disease.

Adrian Campbell

## Situations vacant & classifieds

*We thought it could be a useful service for our clients to create space in the newsletter for a situations vacant and classifieds section. This would only be run in response to client demand but, with a print run of over 1000 for the combined sheep, beef and dairy newsletter and with a further 50 copies sent to other rural professionals and suppliers, your advertisement for staff or for a second hand irrigator will be reaching a lot of interested rural homes.*

*Please send expressions of interest to:*

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# Do I need to worm my milking herd now?

New Zealand dairy research shows that Body Condition Score (BCS) at calving is a vital influencer of milk production and reproductive performance in dairy cattle. Research has shown that a cow that calves at BCS 4.0 will on average produce 15 kg less milk solids and cycle 8 - 10 days later than a cow that calves at BCS 5.0. The lost days in milk from cows cycling later leads to a further loss of 15 - 20 kg of milk production the following season.

Under normal Canterbury conditions, it takes on average about a month to raise the BCS by 0.5 units. At this time of year, light cows (BCS of 4.0 or less) are light for a reason; somehow or other they cannot compete with their herd mates. These cows are going to have to work harder to gain body condition than a normal cow. Due to the increased demands of the calf and udder development during the late dry period it is difficult to put weight on cows at that stage. Further, cows put on body weight up to 20% more efficiently during lactation compared with the dry period. For all these reasons, it is better to look at the BCS of the herd now, rather than leaving it to dry off.

We have had a good late summer/autumn so far with plenty of cover and feed available. Despite these good conditions, BCS in many herds is low; too many cows are scoring below 4.0. With the high pay-out, the temptation to milk the herd on for as long as possible is understandable and leads to the classic conflict of bread today or jam tomorrow as cows that are too thin are milked on and end up calving down thin in the spring.

To make matters worse, parasite numbers during autumn are often higher than at any other time

of the year and conditions that favour good grass growth have also led to high worm burdens in many mobs of young stock. Does this mean that you should worm your milking herd now?

It depends...

- Are the milkers wormy?
- What are you hoping to get out of worming them?
- Will you achieve your objectives by worming them?

The first question can be answered with the help of a simple bulk milk test. This costs around \$60.00 and can be arranged through your local Vetlife vet.

The second two questions can be answered by talking to your Vetlife vet. They will use their knowledge of your farm, your farming system and your goals to answer the two questions: will worming give you what you want?

For example, if the test shows you have a high worm burden and you have a tail end of cows at a BCS of less than 4.0, worming the R2 and R3s in this tail end would help them gain weight now. Worming the rest of the herd may not be as cost effective at this time of year as a dose of wormer in the spring, when there is a much clearer increase in production from worming to pay for the cost of treatment.

But, if the test is moderate or low and the herd has very few animals scoring at less than 4.0 and you are hoping for some lice control, then worming now will not be cost effective. You would be better off using a lice specific product

such as Tempor or Blaze at drying off as all the pour on wormers will only give you a knock down against lice.

Or, if the test is moderate or low and you have plenty of feed on hand but there are light animals in the herd, worming is unlikely to be as cost effective a way of increasing the tail end's BCS as looking at feeding strategy, once a day or early dry off for this group. Even the best worming product cannot magic body condition onto a cow's back if she is not wormy.

So, do not rush the decision. Find out:

- Is my herd failing to reach the goals I have set because of a worm burden at this time of year?

And....

- ?Will worming the herd mean that these goals can be reached?

And....

- ?Would I be better to spend the money on a worming treatment in the spring/at calving?

If the person selling you a product at a knock down price can answer all those questions to your satisfaction then go for it. If they cannot, ask your Vetlife vet.

Andrew Bates  
Vetlife Temuka



# Colostrum

There are at least three reasons why colostrum is important to your calves.

1. It is a richer source of food than milk and provides extra energy, fat, protein, minerals and vitamins for the first few days of life.
2. It provides antibodies against the potential diseases that the cow has encountered thus protecting the calf from these diseases. These antibodies can only be absorbed in the first 12 - 24 hours of life and so all calves need a drink of colostrum as soon after birth as possible.
3. Ongoing colostrum feeding will help coat the calf's gut with protective antibodies against gut pathogens, especially if the cow has been vaccinated with Rotavec-Corona one month prior to calving. This protection lasts for as long as the calf receives colostrum and stops within a day or so once colostrum feeding finishes.

Colostrum is made by all cows but there are some differences.

- Colostrum from heifers is generally of poorer quality than that from cows; it has less of everything, especially the antibodies. (Although, heifers primed with a vaccine such as Rotavec will produce good quantities of the vaccine antibodies in their colostrum.)
- The quality of colostrum declines rapidly after calving. The best quality product comes from the first two milkings.
- Colostrum from induced cows is generally of poor quality and is not suitable as a feed for calves.

### How much colostrum to feed?

A useful rule of thumb is to feed 6% of body weight as day 1 colostrum within the first 6 hours.

| Day 1 feeding levels for fresh colostrum |                       |   |
|--|-----------------------|---|
| Breed                                    | Estimated body weight | Litres of colostrum needed in first 6 hours |
| Jersey                                   | 30 kg                 | 1.8 litres                                  |
| Xbreed                                   | 35 kg                 | 2.1 litres                                  |
| Friesian                                 | 40 kg                 | 2.4 litres                                  |

On the second day, a similar amount of second milking colostrum can be fed. Thereafter, calves should receive about 10% of their body weight as milk/colostrum per day.

| Day 2 and hereafter feeding levels for fresh colostrum |                       |   |
|--|-----------------------|---|
| Breed  | Estimated body weight | Litres of colostrum needed in first 6 hours |
| Jersey   | 30 kg                 | 3.0 litres                                  |
| Xbreed   | 35 kg                 | 3.5 litres                                  |
| Friesian   | 40 kg                 | 4.0 litres                                  |

### Storing colostrum

If colostrum is cooled before it enters the vat/tank it will keep for up to 24 hours, but this will be reduced for warm product straight from the cow. In a fridge, it will keep for up to a week. To keep it longer than that, it can either be frozen, and therefore it will keep for months, or it can be mixed with natural yoghurt or products like colostrum keeper to acidify it. In this form, it will keep for several weeks but the antibody content will drop slightly. Colostrum so stored is not suitable for feeding to calves as their first feed. Frozen colostrum must not be thawed in the microwave or by rapid heating on a stove, it must thaw at a natural rate or in a water bath as the mentioned alternatives destroy the antibodies.

One way to ferment colostrum is to mix it with yoghurt: take about 500mls of natural yoghurt and mix with 10 litres of colostrum. Keep this until it goes sour (about 48 - 96 hours) and then add to the main colostrum tank. Alternatively, add 1 bag of commercial yoghurt starter mix to a drum of colostrum. Clean plastic or stainless steel containers must be used and they should be stored out of direct sunlight at an ambient temperature of less than 20°C. Warmer temperatures can be associated with the development of a pronounced sour smell which can lead to refusal by calves. Containers should be covered at all times with a loose fitting lid. The colostrum should be stirred twice a day to prevent a crust from forming. A submersible pump with the outlet hose removed and dropped into the colostrum (with a rope on the handle to take it out) can work well. It will need to agitate the colostrum for 2 - 3 hours each day to ensure it is thoroughly mixed.

Alternatively, a paddle from the vat can be fixed into the lid and set running. The taste test for colostrum is a good way to monitor its quality. A clean finger dipped in should taste sour but not rancid. If it goes rancid it probably means that:

- Antibiotic milk has been mixed with the colostrum (antibiotic residues will inhibit the fermentation process that acidifies colostrum).

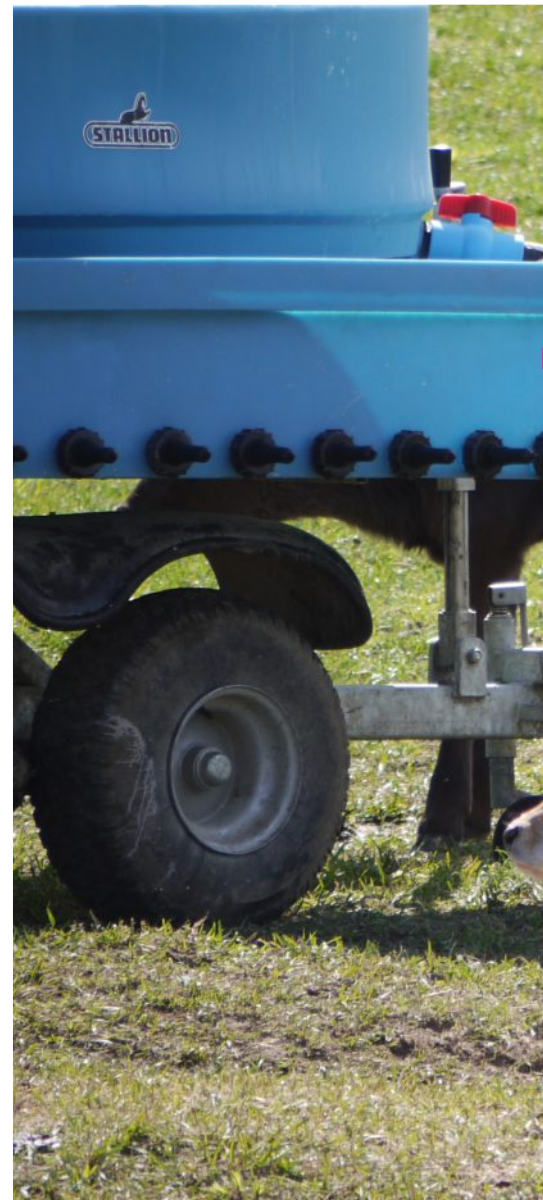
- Containers, stirrers, milk or water were dirty.
- Colostrum was not stirred.
- Colostrum was bloody. This can be frozen and fed to calves but it will not ferment well.

### Diluting colostrum

This is a controversial area but the following guidelines may help.

DO NOT dilute the colostrum that is fed to a calf for its first feed.

Stored colostrum should be fed to older calves. Colostrum has a higher solids content than milk and for older calves, colostrum can be diluted. The solids content of colostrum decreases with



the days after calving so the dilution rate also should change. Colostrum from the first two milkings will have around 24% and 18% solids content respectively. At an 18% solids value, colostrum should be diluted at 2:1 i.e. 2 parts stored colostrum with 1 part warm water (maximum temperature 40°C). Colostrum from the 3rd, 4th 5th and 6th milking will have a solids content of 13 - 14% and should be diluted 3:1 (3 parts colostrum to 1 part water). Colostrum can also be diluted with whole milk and the rates for this are then approximately 1 part colostrum to 4 parts whole milk. Remember, that although diluting with water or milk can give you the same solids content as milk, the concentration of antibodies will also be decreased.

#### What about commercial colostrum supplements?

There are a number of commercial products available that act as colostrum substitutes. Research studies with these products conducted at universities suggest that calves that received these products were healthier than those that received no colostrum at all; **however, they did not receive the level of protection they would if fed frozen, stored colostrum.**

Colostrum substitutes are better than nothing but not as good as the stuff nature has provided.

#### What about the risk of Johne's disease?

Johne's disease (*Mycobacterium paratuberculosis*) can spread to your herd through infected colostrum. If you are using colostrum from another cow as a supplement, be sure the cow from which you get it is free of Johne's disease. If you have high levels of Johne's in the herd, pooling colostrum is a risk factor in the spread of this disease. Ensure that milking hygiene in the colostrum mob is as good as possible to prevent faecal contamination of colostrum and so spread of Johne's. Blood testing August calvers and using colostrum from animals that test negative for Johne's for your heifer replacements can also help to limit spread.

#### What about selling colostrum?

Don't. The best colostrum is from the first milking. That is why it has the best price. Theoretically, if pure colostrum is fed on day 1 and then diluted with water as above for the next 21 days, each cow will produce just enough colostrum to rear her own heifer calf.

Bobby calves will require a further 12 litres if diluting with water. If bobby calves are not fed colostrum, they are very likely to get Rotavirus or Crypto' and then this will spread into the heifer pens.

Thus, in the first few critical weeks, allowing for 50% bull calves, **theoretically** you can afford to sell about a quarter of the colostrum you get. If you dilute with milk, then again, **theoretically** you can get away with selling more. However, this assumes that day 4 colostrum (of which there is more) is as good as day 1 or 2 colostrum. It is not. That is why Fonterra will not pay the same price for day 4 as for day 1 or 2, and it will not do the calves as much good either. Using the diluted colostrum from day 3 and 4 will satisfy the energy needs of the calves but it will not give them nearly as much antibody protection as the thicker, richer, day 1 and 2 product. Most farms do have an excess of colostrum, but it is an excess of the higher volume, weaker, day 3 and 4 colostrum rather than the liquid gold day 1 and 2. Keep that resource on the farm.

Andrew Bates  
Vetlife Temuka



# Dairy heifers: what weight should they be?

Top dairy farmers in New Zealand are getting more than 75% of their heifers calved within three weeks and 92% by six weeks. In order to do this, heifers need to be well grown at mating and weigh 60% of their mature body weight. If any of the following sound familiar:

- Too many empty heifers
- More than 25% of your heifers calving after the third week of heifer calving
- More than 25% of your non cycling mob as heifers
- More than 25% of your culls as first calved heifers

Then you may need to look at the weights your heifers are achieving during rearing.

## What does a target weight mean?

The graph shows a mob of R1 dairy heifers weighed in early October 2010. Nearly all the animals were above target weight **for their age** and the average weight for this mob was 290kg. With a mature weight of 500kg, this means that the **average weight** was on target for 60% of mature weight at the start of mating two weeks later.

However, the target applies to each individual animal. A heifer that is below 60% of her mature weight at mating will be less likely to cycle and conceive, irrespective of the average weight of the mob. It is great to have a good average weight for the mob, but it does not

help the lighter heifers in that mob. In the herd above, if the heifers keep growing at the same rate that they have been, 33% will be below target weight at mating (300kg for a mature weight of 500kg). Some of this is because there is a 7 week spread in the ages of the heifers, but:

- The ages are evenly spread between the youngest and the oldest
- The youngest heifers still have to reach 60% of mature body weight at the start of mating if they are to get in calf early

To get 75% of these heifers conceiving in the first three weeks of mating, they ALL need to be up to target at the start of mating. This means that the youngest and smallest animals have to grow faster in order to catch up.

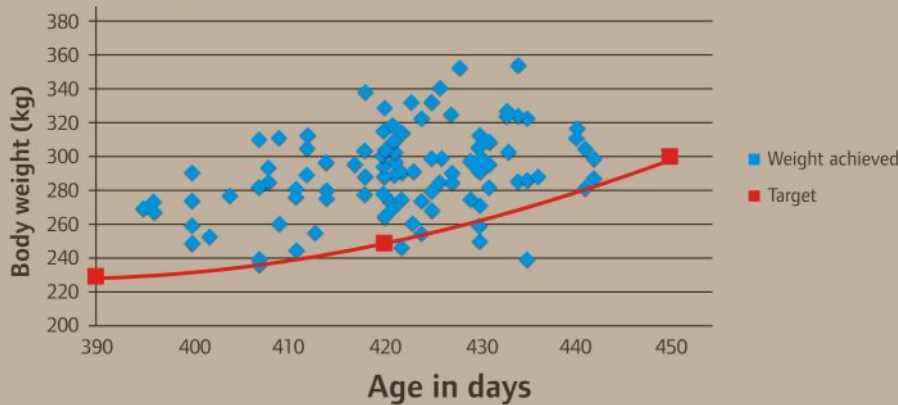
This is one of the reasons why regular, monthly weighing is so important and why it is vital that graziers and owners do not rely on average weights but look at:

- The range in weights
- The rate of gain for that month
- The number of animals below the minimum weight for that month

You want to get all your heifers in calf early, not just the older ones. Set the minimum weight each month so that target weights at the start of mating and the start of calving are met for all the heifers, not just the older ones.

Andrew Bates  
Vetlife Temuka

## Body weight achieved against age: October



# Assessing copper levels in cattle

Copper is involved in a number of systems in the body. It generally acts as an activator of enzymes. It has a role in blood cell development, bone, skin and connective tissue development, and in the immune system. Deficient levels can result in anaemia, abnormal skeletal development, osteoporosis (weak bones), joint disease and poor immune function. On the farm, you may see poorly growing, scouring young stock and adult cows with poor reproduction and production.

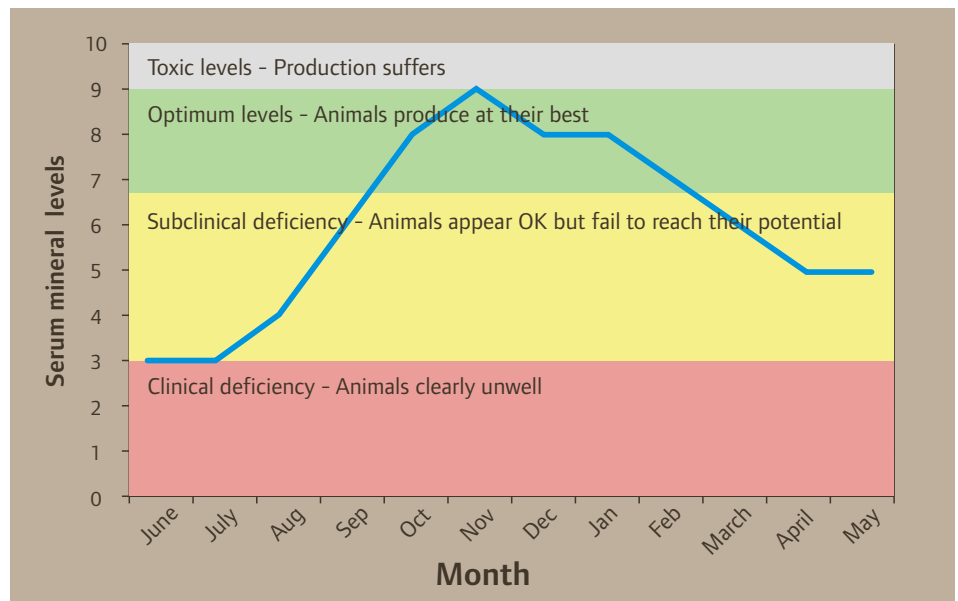
Copper deficiency can be due to either inadequate content of the diet (primary deficiency) or due to interference with absorption by other minerals in the diet such as Iron, Molybdenum, Sulfur and Zinc (secondary deficiency). In New Zealand, we experience secondary deficiency more commonly because in pasture-based grazing systems the content of other minerals in the diet is less easily controlled and soil ingestion is likely.

Although there are a number of signs that people widely recognise associated with copper deficiency (poor coat quality and pigmentation, scours), these tend to show up only when levels are getting very low. To maintain optimum copper levels, it is therefore necessary to take tissue samples as it is impossible to gauge by eye the mineral status of animals. The graph below shows how the mineral status in animals typically changes through the year. Although the animals appear to be doing OK from July to May, they only perform to their potential between October and February. Blood or liver sampling at any time prior to October or after February would identify this discrepancy which could then be corrected.

The liver is a storage organ for copper and this is the best sample to take for copper levels prior to winter as copper stored in the liver will leach into the blood to maintain adequate copper levels in the blood. Sampling animals at the works is a cheap but flawed method as animals sent to the works are seldom representative of the rest of the herd i.e. they are usually, empty or sick. A more meaningful picture of the copper storage status of the herd can be gained by taking liver biopsy from animals that are remaining within the herd. The idea of a liver biopsies can conjure reactions of revulsion; many people find the thought of a sample being taken from deep within the living animal

horrific. In reality, cattle tolerate it very well. We use a very similar technique to that used in the human medical field. The skin and muscle over the target area is anaesthetised and then a very small cut (1-2cm) is made through the skin. We then direct a sterile sample needle into the liver and collect a few grams of liver (the total weight of which is around 5-6kg). The process only takes a few minutes for each animal and can be done in a tightly packed race. Most cattle stand quite still for the procedure.

Duncan Crosbie  
Vetlife Temuka



# Preventing scours in the newborn calf

Calf scours (diarrhoea in calves up to 30 days old) is a major problem on many New Zealand dairy farms. It is influenced by feed quality, insanitary conditions, overcrowding and poor management of sick animals. The infective agents involved include: (in order of importance) Rotavirus, *Cryptosporidium*, BVD, *Coccidia*, *E.coli*, *Salmonella* and Coronavirus; scours is usually a combination of more than one of these.

Prevention is achieved through good calf management and vaccination of the cow pre-calving.

## Calf management

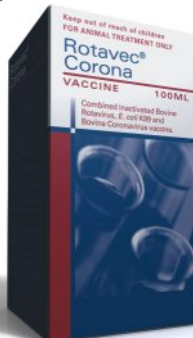
Table 1: The main features of calf management aimed at scour prevention

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| Colostrum and milk | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CONSISTENT - no sudden changes in feed volume, composition or quality.</li> <li>• The same person should feed out at the same time each day.</li> <li>• Calves MUST receive at least 10% of body weight within 6 hours, 20% within 12 hours</li> <li>• Continue to feed pure colostrum for first 4 days of life. Then continue to add colostrum to the milk for the next 3-4 weeks at 1 part colostrum to 4 parts milk.</li> </ul> |
| Housing            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bedding that keeps the calf warm and dry and allows faeces to be shovelled away regularly.</li> <li>• Shelter from rain and draughts.</li> <li>• Separate sick pen.</li> </ul>   |
| Cleanliness        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both trailer and housing.</li> <li>• Use cleaning product that kills both bacteria and viruses such as Virkon.</li> </ul>  |

## Vaccination of the adult cow pre-calving with Rotavec Corona (Intervet Schering-Plough)

Rotavec Corona vaccine increases Rotavirus, Coronavirus and *E. coli* antibodies in the cow. When animals are exposed to a bacteria or virus, antibodies stop them from being able to infect the animal causing illness. The cow secretes these antibodies in her colostrum, and **if this colostrum is fed to the calf within the first day of life, particularly within the first 6 hours, the**

antibodies are passed to the calf to protect them from infection. Continued part colostrum feeding ensures that the calf's gut is bathed in a protective coating of antibodies preventing disease causing bugs from gaining a foothold.



|                                    | How common in NZ | Morbidity (How contagious/likely to spread it is) | Mortality (Risk of infected animals dying)             |
|------------------------------------|------------------|---|--|
| <b>E. coli K99</b> (< 4 days old)  | Moderately       | High  | Very high in severe cases<br>Not as high in mild cases |
| <b>Rotavirus</b> (< 21 days old)   | VERY             | Moderate to high                                  | Moderate   |
| <b>Coronavirus</b> (1-3 weeks old) | Not very         | Low   | Low – recover in 3-10 days                             |

Table 2: The importance of the infective agents protected by Rotavec Corona

### Tips on vaccinating

Optimal results are achieved with Rotavec Corona when:

- **Cows are vaccinated 3-12 weeks pre-calving**
  - In herds with a calving spread of longer than 9 weeks, the herd can be split.
    - Vaccinate early calvers at least 3 weeks before the planned start of calving. This can often conveniently be done at drying off.
    - Vaccinate later calvers later (no more than 12 weeks from expected last calving).
- **The whole herd is vaccinated**
  - Selective vaccination dilutes the level of protective immunity at the herd level.
  - There is less boosted colostrum so it is harder to continue to give calves the

benefits of prolonged partial colostrum feeding.

### Optimal colostrum management practices are in place

- The efficacy of the vaccine depends on calves receiving adequate colostrum; it will be ineffective if this is not ensured. 50% of New Zealand dairy calves receive insufficient colostrum. Make sure your herd is on the right side of the line.

Calf management and vaccination of cows are two useful tools for minimising the impact and losses associated with calf scours in New Zealand dairy farms.

Chelsea Underwood  
Vetlife Ashburton



# Heifer mastitis stresses eased with Teatseal

The biggest problem Stu Davis expected when he decided to use Teatseal last spring on his heifers was the stress of administering it to them. After repeated problems with spring mastitis infections in his 140 replacements every year, he decided to go with the advice offered by Andrew Bates at Vetlife Temuka. Andrew recommended Teatseal as the best option to rein in the repeated levels of infection Stu was getting every spring.

"I decided that if the vets were keen enough, then we would give it a go," says Stu. Using the skills of the Vetlife team, and his own staff, he found the job was completed in a few hours without a great deal of drama. Stu says he had good reason to consider a new approach to dealing to spring mastitis as infection rates in the past had got up as high as 30% in heifers making spring a stressful, time-starved period.

"You also spend a long time, and a lot of money growing a heifer out, and to lose a quarter when she gets infected so early on in her lifetime is a real kick, we had to have a better way to cope with it."

After his first spring using Teatseal he only had two heifers with mastitis all spring, something even one of his new staff members commented

on. The move to Teatseal has also accompanied two other changes this season, including adopting a new teat spray and changing antibiotic treatment. The BMSCC sits comfortably around 150,000 in March and the season started at a record low for Stu of around 120,000.

"Not having so many heifers with mastitis might have slowed down the infection passing through the rest of the herd - sometimes their infection does not show up until a few days after they have caught it, giving it time to spread."

Getting the Teatseal administered involved rowing up the heifers tight in the herringbone, with any particularly feisty ones administered some sedative to calm them down.

"But I think we only had four or five that played up, the rest were fine."

One of the concerns Stu had about Teatseal was the risk of infection on administration as the tube opens up the teat canal.

"The vets emphasised the need to keep everything very clean, using the wipes well and keeping the tubes out of the way - we did that

and had no problems at all with infections afterwards."

Meantime, the results provided a spring that was more straightforward with extra time to spend focusing on other issues that inevitably crop up at a busy time, and less time lost trying to sort out mastitis in the shed.

"We would definitely do the heifers again with Teatseal, it did exactly what it was supposed to do, and did it well."



## Helen Williamson

Some of you will have met with Helen already on your farms but for those who have not here is a brief bio.

After leaving school, Helen headed straight for the high country to work on a sheep and beef station, exercising hunters and cutting horses, mustering, gardening and child-minding - a dream job! She then did more horse work in the North Island, preparing thoroughbred yearlings, before heading on her OE. On her return to New Zealand she worked at Cambridge Veterinary Services before making the shift to Vetlife when she and her husband Steve, a fencing contractor, shifted back to South Canterbury to raise three children and be closer to lakes for boating and mountains for skiing.

Having always loved dogs, Helen has owned working dogs and pet dogs (the current pet terrier is famous for killing the Board of Trustees Chairperson baby pet possum in front of the whole school at Pet Day a couple of years ago), been a Dog Obedience Instructor and Puppy Pre-School Instructor.

New Zealand working dogs require a high energy diet to perform a full day of work and maintain body weight. Traditionally these valuable dogs have been fed a cereal based biscuit which requires them to eat a large quantity to meet their energy requirements. Eukanuba Premium Performance provides an

animal protein, nutrient rich diet for sustained energy and improved coat and body condition for around the same cost.

Helen started in the position of Vetlife Eukanuba Working Dog Rep at the end of

## Vetlife Eukanuba Working Dog Rep

February. She is based at Vetlife Washdyke and is on the road delivering and advising clients with working dogs and puppies about feeding, nutrition, worming and vaccinating.



# Leptospirosis

Despite the fact that vaccination of dairy cattle in New Zealand against Leptospirosis has been around since the late 70's, New Zealand's level of infection in the human population remains unacceptably high. Initial vaccination of herds was sparked by work carried out in the early 70's which showed 80% of dairy herds were positive for the condition. Following vaccination both human and animal cases showed a dramatic decline. The reason good control of Leptospirosis has been that hard to achieve however, is not down to short comings with current vaccine options but rather to an underestimation of the complexity of the disease.

Leptospirosis is a zoonosis, meaning that apart from posing a high risk to farm stock, it also provides a significant risk to in-contact staff. The effect of Leptospirosis in humans varies; it ranges from no apparent effect, to flu-like symptoms, to severe illness. If the disease progresses to kidney failure, liver failure or meningitis, then hospitalisation is required. Infection in livestock frequently occurs without

any apparent signs of illness. However, infection can also cause serious illness including abortion in cows, red water in calves and even death.

The disease is well-managed by animal vaccination of all classes of stock on a property, but comprehensive control requires an additional strategy where the risk factors associated with disease are identified and mitigated. The above measures form the basis of 'Leptosure' which is essentially a risk management programme designed to run as a collaborative effort between vet and farmer. During a Leptosure consult, a vaccination programme specific to the herd in question is discussed along with vaccine handling and storage requirements. Risk factors linked to hygiene and personal care, effluent management, waterways (as a source of infection), rodent control and disease control of other classes of stock are also discussed, and the whole process is signed off with a list of actions that require implementation. Once all steps have been taken as outlined in the



consult, the herd owner receives certification of Leptosure.

However, the biggest plus for the farming operation comes from the peace of mind gained that the working environment is safe to both stock and staff.

John Acten  
Vetlife Methven

## 100% farmer ownership of Fonterra critical for farmer payout

Why is farmer ownership of Fonterra so important? Last year Temuka dairy farmer Desiree Reid spent six months visiting some of the world's largest dairy businesses to answer this and other questions.

Desiree travelled to Ireland, England, the Netherlands, the United States, Canada, Argentina, China and the Philippines, and visited companies like FrieslandCampina, Dairy Farmers of America, Land o' Lakes, The Irish Dairy Board, Kerry Group and Dairy Gold.

What she found is that in dairy farming, 100% farmer ownership of the processor is the best structure for farmers to maximise their farm gate milk price. On the other hand, ownership models that incorporate public investment systematically reduce the farm gate payout over time.

A stark example of what happens if you dilute farmer ownership is seen in the United Kingdom. Over ten years ago the government removed collective farmer ownership, and fragmented the industry. Since then the farmer's share of the consumer dollar has been eroded by seven percent, while the retailer's nominal share has increased by 300 percent. What is interesting is that the change has had no impact upon the price of milk to the UK consumer.

UK farmers thought they were winning in the short term, as they did not have to provide capital and their short term price went up as

processors competed for supply. However, the big picture is that over the last decade the farm gate price of milk has been systematically lowered to the average cost of production. The way a UK farmer makes money is by producing milk more cheaply than his neighbour, and not sharing his farming insights with anyone.

Why is farmer ownership so important in dairying? The reason is that our raw product milk is highly perishable. Raw milk does not last long meaning farmers only have around three days to negotiate a fair price. Everyone further down the value chain knows our weakness. They use our individual weakness to play us off against each other, and systematically squeeze our margins back to the cost of production. This is exactly what has happened in the UK.

Farmer ownership dictates the purpose of the co-operative. A dairy co-operative is just a large equity partnership between farmers. Its purpose is to maximise our share of the consumer dollar. Its purpose is to maximise our milk price.

Like any equity partnership we must choose fellow investment partners with the same goals as us. Public investors have the opposite goal to farmer investors; public investors aim to reduce milk price so as to increase profit.

There is no example of where public ownership of dairy processing assets works for the farmer. In Canada, corporate processor Saputo forced farmers to agree to new supply rules by



withholding milk payment for three months. The killer was that farmers had no choice but to continue to supply their milk without payment, because they had nowhere else to dispose of their milk, as snow-covered fields meant it could not be put to land.

Desiree Reid

If you would like to read Desiree's report contact her on [desreid@ihug.co.nz](mailto:desreid@ihug.co.nz)

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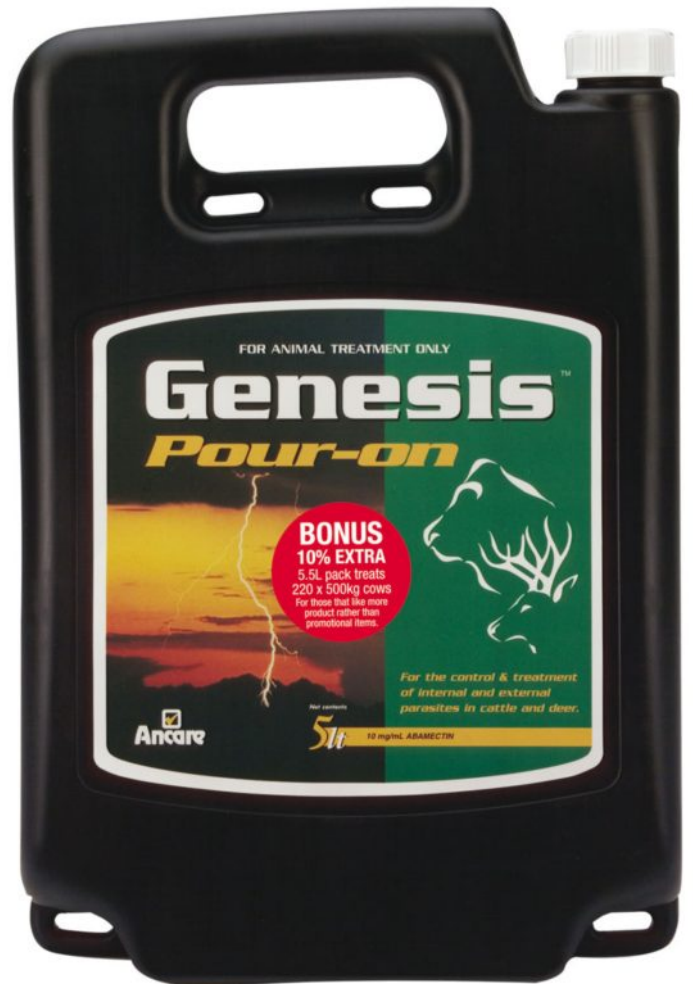
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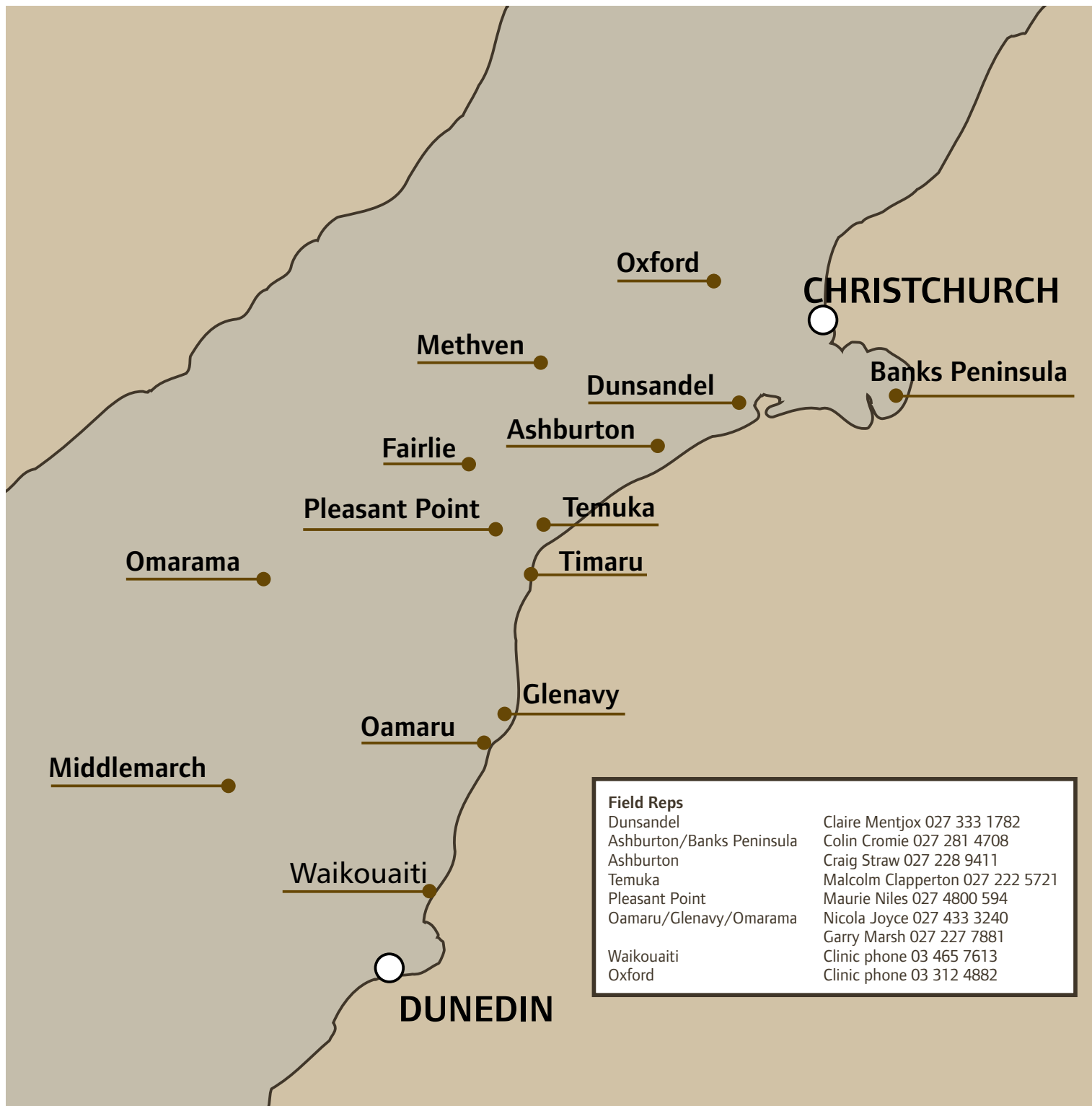
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