The Eternal Calving Date Debate
Treating Mastitis this Spring
Premating Preparation
Hunt for a Foreign Body
The term “precision farming” seems to be the in-word, covering all sectors of agriculture and all disciplines within each sector. Vetlife can claim to be part of the roll-up of support service providers who have novel and useful tools that are tech-based and that deliver real value on farm.

One big challenge of the past is that we have had some technology that is so data rich it is bewildering and now we have other technology that is so new that we know that it is still in the experimental stages (despite it being rolled-out to the end customer - our farm client).

What’s up?

There are at least three pieces of technology which have passed muster with us at Vetlife!

**Automated faecal egg counter**
Ideal for sheep enterprises but also calves. This is an amazing piece of gadgetry which essentially emails a photo to be read and texts or emails back within hours an answer to the faecal sample egg parasite count. The photo is taken by a special lens and so the story goes on.

**In-shed mastitis culture laboratory**
This truly in-house lab sits within the farm office and within eight to 24 hours interrogates the culture dishes with an electronic eye and then texts or emails the result to the farmer: growth, no growth, bacteria involved and the correct antibiotic to use for treatments.

**Cow collars – SCR Dairy**
These collars providing oestrus detection, health, heat stress and rumination data, are something that every New Zealand cow will have one day in some form. These collars provide another layer of information for even the very best New Zealand farmer, affecting the most major aspects of on farm efficiency.

What does this all mean?
As such, technology becomes widely trusted and the specific purposes understood, then I think we will need to accept that the investment in farming systems will be even higher than we know of now. The technology around dairy shed mechanisation or irrigation are good examples of where technology has been incorporated already, without which we could not operate as we know it.

The technology that I even mention above is typical of the far more wide-reaching and in depth technology which is emerging. That is to say, I believe we have hardly seen what farming will be like over the next decade, if the technology we have emerging currently is anything to go by.

As a vet practice, Vetlife is constantly resourcing itself to understand and apply these new tools. As we can remain aligned to our farmers needs and the emerging tools, we remain relevant and attractive to our clients (yes - even vets need to do that!).

I would like to wish all of our clients a brilliant farming spring. All-in-all it has a good look to the start of it.

Best regards,
Adrian Campbell
Vetlife Practice Principal
Many sheep, beef and deer farmers will be reviewing their annual scripts at this time of year. Why not use this process to your advantage rather than treating it as a pain in the proverbial.

Often this is your one chance to sit down with your Vetlife vet to revise your animal health plan or in many cases actually make one! These can range from simple print-outs that may be placed on the toilet wall if that is where your serious thinking is done, to more complicated laminated versions in your office that can send email or text reminders of jobs to do.

While formalising the plan, all aspects of animal health and new research can be discussed such as:

- Vaccination protocols.
  - Do I use clostridial 5in1, 6in1 or Covexin-10?
  - When to sensitise and boost?
  - When to order Toxovax so it is administered at the correct time.
  - Timing for other vaccines such as Campyvax, Salvexin and Yersiniavax to get maximum benefit.

- Ram health checks including palpation.
- The merits of “teasers” and when these vasectomies should be done.
- Fly control and lice treatments.
- Trace element monitoring and advice.
- Parasite management plan including:
  - Genetics.
  - Stock feeding and condition scoring.
  - Integration of stock classes and species monitoring via drench checks, FEC reduction tests and weight gains.
  - Programmes involving what drench, when and how often, route of administration, which animals and how to slow drench resistance by strategic drenching.
  - Analyse the past year’s results such as scanning vs tailing figures to identify areas of concern in ewe/lamb mortality or general under performance.

Most of the above parameters are just as applicable to the beef and deer sectors and can be incorporated in the same plan. The economic pressure remains on all farm classes and systems often need tweaking to maximise production efficiency - this may be by actually reducing animal health costs through impartial scientific advice.

All Vetlife clinics have an experienced sheep, beef and deer veterinarian, or access to one, so why not utilise this knowledge while fulfilling your legal requirements?

Chris McFarlane
Vetlife Dunsandel

A huge THANK YOU to all our TeamMate Farmers who have and are picking up the poop for the parasite trial for Round 4 of the project. Without your help this project would not be able to be completed.
New Zealand dairy pasture systems follow the well-known seasonal pasture growth curve with the aim: firstly, to match pasture growth with animal demand and secondly, maximise the use of high quality pasture in the most productive period of milk production.

Dairy operators have different views on the pros and cons of shifting calving date early or late either to maximise days in milk or better match pasture demand with pasture growth. Below, Bernardita Saldias and Meg Simpson have each taken a side of the debate and highlighted the risks and gains to each of the two different mindsets of the most effective calving date.

**Calving early**

Grass is the cheapest feed in New Zealand dairy systems which also provides the majority of nutrients required for high milk production. However, when the milk production curve is overlapped to the pasture growth it can easily be seen that there are two deficit gaps between curves and one surplus gap. Pasture deficit occurs early and late in the season when pasture growth is slow and herd demand remains high, on the other hand a surplus of pasture growth can occur when pasture growth is higher than the demand in late spring and early summer. In systems that are based mostly on pasture supply, it is necessary to take into consideration stocking rate, pasture demand/cow and calving date and pattern to overcome the deficits of feed supply by feed demand as well as of course make the most of the plentiful feed source in late spring.

For several decades, New Zealanders have been working on the most economic planned start of calving, aiming to maximise the use of grass in a lactation to extend days in milk, resulting in a concentrated calving period starting in late winter-early spring which generally is translated to the 1st of August as the start of calving in Mid to South Canterbury. The benefit of starting calving early and having a concentrated calving pattern is the opportunity to increase days in milk, especially when drying off occurs around the 1st of June. The reason for 60 to 70 days of dry period is partly the expense of extending milk production after the 1st of June due to the low or nil pasture growth during winter meaning a much higher supplementation demand is required which increases the production cost of the system. In addition to this, there is a higher risk for pasture and soil damage and environmental issues (nitrogen leaching) especially if is a wet winter. Also, during the dry period (winter) cows have the opportunity to regain body condition score for the subsequent lactation and there are reparative processes that occur in the udder tissue over this time.

Changing calving date, for example, delaying calving by 14 days (14th of August vs. 1st of August) can have negative economic impacts and the most evident of these is the decreased days in milk. There is also a risk of faster reduction of daily milk yield after peak due to lower pasture quality and quantity in late lactation. From the reproductive point of view, once calving date is pushed later, it is relatively difficult to bring it earlier again in a short period of time, due to the reproductive cycle of the cows, therefore, if things do not work by having late calving it can take a few years to bring the calving date back to an early season start again.

If calving date is pushed later, it could possibly cause the rate of milk yield reduction to occur faster especially during summer as the cows’ intake is reduced by hot dry days. Therefore in areas where summer dry is an issue and reliability of rainfall/irrigation can be a limiting factor, having an early calving date can be advantageous to minimise risk of summer dry and consequent reduced MS production. High quality and quantity pasture growth generally occurs from September to November along the country, but in different areas of the country, pasture growth commencement will occur earlier or later in the season. Therefore, having a planned start of calving of the 1st of August is actually the right decision in places where pasture growth curve occurs later and the risk of summer dry is evident to maximise days in milk knowing fully the risks of high supplementary feed inputs in these shoulders of the season.

What impact would pushing the calving date back by two weeks have towards achieving a better balance of feed supply and demand and what effect would this optimising pasture use efficiency have for the whole system?

Meg Simpson will now examine the potential impacts that having a later planned start of calving could have on the farming system.

**Calving late**

Over recent years we have worked hard to compact our calving periods, especially since the removal of routine inductions and the increased prevalence of synchrony programmes...
for first calvers. This compact calving results in a
decrease of the period from planned start of
calving (PSC) to mid-point, and thus increases
the feed demand in the early calving period. In
areas where the pasture really does not start to
take off until September and we do not hit
balance day until late September or early
October there is a long time where pasture
growth is well below the feed demand resulting
in having to poke a huge amount of
supplement in while waiting for the grass to
grow.

Balance day is the time where pasture supply
equals the herd demand. A later calving date
reduces the interval from PSC to balance day.
Using a spring rotation planner to allocate feed
over the first grazing round through until
balance day means that a greater area of
pasture can be allocated per day, resulting in
increased intakes of grass and decreased
reliance on supplement. Different farms and
systems will have varying results depending on
stocking rates, calving patterns, feed supply,
cover at the planned start of calving and other
factors, but the upshot of this increased daily
area allocation can be being able to feed post-
calving cows fully on pasture or at least reducing
the heavy reliance on supplementary feed. Some
modelling of delaying calving date on spring
rotation planners across different farming
systems shows a decrease of the requirement of
spring supplement from PSC to balance day of
between 25 to 70%.

Delaying the return of cows to the milking
platform by an additional two weeks can also
have the potential to increase the total pasture
grown over the winter period. This can either
increase the cover at the PSC, or mean there is
a lower required average pasture cover (APC) at
dry off, which possibly could result in reduced
supplement necessary at the end of the
autumn. Even at a typically low winter growth
rate of 10 kgDM/ha/day these two weeks
would contribute an additional 140 kgDM/ha to
the APC over the dry period.

However, the financial analysis is not so cut and
dry as saying we fed this amount of supplement
less so we saved this amount of money. But we
do reduce the exposure the business has to risk
cased by the volatility of supplement cost.
Delaying calving by two weeks whilst
maintaining the same dry off date adds another
14 days to the winter dry period that cows
require feeding. Ensuring access to reliable
grazing through this late winter period becomes
critical. Another 14 days of the dry period can
also help to increase our capability to put
condition on cows to have them calving at a
more favourable BCS, or lower the targeted BCS
at dry off because we know that we have the
time to put weight on the cows.

As well as the financial cost of the
supplementary feed required to cover the deficit
over the early calving period there are also
other reasons why reducing this feeding
through later calving may be a positive thing.
These include the additional costs of feeding
out (running tractors, wagons etc.), the
potential for pasture damage and reduced
supplement utilisation during wet periods and
the additional labour requirement during a
period where you are already busy.

There are also the more loose possible benefits
like calving cows and getting calves outside
another two weeks further through the winter
heading the right way to nicer weather,
extending your dry period by two weeks giving
more opportunity for decent breaks off farm or
to get the winter projects done. There is also
the likelihood of seeing reproductive gains in
the first year as the period from PSC to PSM will
be longer, though this will not continue once
you settle back to a 52 week calving interval
again.

Assuming that we are drying the cows off at
the end of the season regardless of the PSC date
the argument for an earlier calving date is
mainly centred around days in milk. The
question becomes, how economic are those
additional 14 days compared to the gains that
can be made in the spring? Days in milk may be
one of the biggest drivers of productivity, but
what is its impact on profitability?

Overall, all dairy farms will differ in some degree
from each other and decisions need to be based
on the whole farm system which includes feed,
animal, people, economic, environmental, and
infrastructure. The debate around the most
appropriate calving date hinges upon all of
these factors above. Different operators have
differences in opinions and their appetite for
risk often dictates which of the two systems
they lean towards.

Bernardita Saldias and Meg Simpson
Centre for Dairy Excellence, Geraldine
Calf Selection and Transport

As dairy farmers fill their quota for heifer replacements each year, we start to see more and more calves being traded and transported around the district. Whether they are travelling between nearby farms or venturing further afield there are a few things that should be kept in mind to make sure that calves arrive in the best condition possible and do not struggle in those first few weeks after transport.

When selecting calves make sure to physically inspect them and ask a few questions about how they have been managed up to this point. Calves should be at least four or five days old, they should be bright and alert with no signs of ill health. Check that their eyes are bright and ears up, their navel is dry and there are no signs of lameness, scouring or pneumonia. Ask some questions about colostrum management on the farm, have these calves been fed on good quality fresh first or second milking colostrum? Did they get at least one 2 L feed of colostrum in that critical first 24 hours of life (ideally within the first 12 hours)? Has there been any illness in this mob? Calves are born with a very immature immune system and need colostrum to provide them with the antibodies required to mount an immune response to infection. Buying calves with a history of poor colostrum intake is a gamble that rarely pays off.

Transporting young calves home needs to happen with as little stress caused as possible. There is a respiratory disease called “shipping fever” which is associated with transport and can have big impacts on a mob of calves. In this condition, bacteria which usually exist in the upper respiratory tract quite happily without causing any problems proliferate when the calf is under stress and lead to a severe pneumonia. While this pneumonia can be treated on an individual animal basis, “shipping fever” can affect large proportions of a mob and some calves may be lost. Risk factors for this condition include stress, mixing of different lines of calves, exposure to cold windy or wet conditions, exhaustion, overcrowding, dehydration and starvation. Calves which spend a long time in transport are quite obviously at risk, but so too are calves who travel a much shorter distance but do so on the back of a crowded trailer with no protection from the elements.

If you suspect “shipping fever”, with calves that become depressed and lethargic with nasal discharge, coughing or heavy breathing, talk to your Vetlife vet for advice on how best to treat the pneumonia and manage the outbreak.

Prevention is always better than cure. Choose good strong healthy calves that have had colostrum in their first days of life and set your trailer up with the following: wind breaks to protect against drafts; a cover if there is a chance of rain; place bedding on the floor of the trailer (a soft mat, straw or sawdust) and make sure calves have enough room to lie down. Taking these precautions will decrease the risk of infection (whether that is pneumonia or scour) and will help to ensure your new calves continue to thrive once they make it home.

Jess McDowell
Vetlife Temuka
Mastitis has been an issue on many farms this spring with more herds grading and more clinical cases on many farms. While there are always several factors in these situations, some common observations from these herds include:

- Not using the RMT test on colostrum cows as they leave the colostrum mob.
- Not teat spraying properly.
- Using teat spray at a dilute ratio that is not suitable for the spring.
- Machines that have not been tested or machine faults that have not been corrected.
- Starting the season with old and worn liners; you are NOT doing your cows or heifers any favours with this one.

If you are struggling with cell count or too many clinicals this spring, check your milking team off against this list and give your Vetlife vet a call.

Treatment choices are also worth looking at. We are currently running a large multi-farm mastitis trial on Vetlife client farms and initial results confirm the importance of penicillin as the treatment of choice in the spring. 91% of the mastitis isolates so far are sensitive to penicillin. So what?

- This means that penicillin-based products are the most likely treatment to give you an effective cure.
- This means that penicillin-based products are likely to be BETTER than non-penicillin-based products.

Just because something has been around for a while does not mean it is not still useful. Ask your partner for confirmation on that one. Talk to your Vetlife vet about the best treatment choices for your farm: consider whether you want to treat once or twice a day, the best product ingredient for the job, treatment duration and milk withhold.

Penicillin tubes are cheaper than many alternatives and with a 12 hour treatment interval the milk lost during treatment is reduced as well. Comparing a typical 24 hour dosing interval antibiotic combination intramammary with a 12 hour straight penicillin tube, the total treatment cost (tube plus lost milk) is 1.5 times greater for the 24 hour dosing. For a 1,000 cow herd with a typical level of spring mastitis of 15% this is equivalent to an extra $2,200 of cost. Twenty-four hour treatment might be convenient but it is expensive.

Treatment costs are only one part of the picture; treatment effectiveness is every bit as important. A cheaper product that does not do the job is no cheaper at all. Talk to your Vetlife vet about the best product for your farm.

Andrew Bates
Vetlife Temuka
Premating Preparation

It feels like calving is not even over, yet mating has snuck up on us again! It is time to start preparing for mating, looking at your heat detection and figuring out what sort of reproductive programmes you are going to use to help you get the best results out of your cows. Your Vetlife team is here to help discuss all matters of your reproductive performance last season and to work with you to get the most bang for your buck.

Whilst you are thinking about your repro and looking at your cows, have you thought about body condition scoring? If you are looking at some of these cows now and thinking that maybe they are lighter than the desired BCS 4.0 at mating, then it is time to think about getting us out to body condition score now and in the future. Vetlife has DairyNZ accredited body condition scorers who can come out during milking and individually score every cow and these results can be entered onto MINDA.

If we BCS cows now and regularly throughout the season, you can see how your cows track right from the beginning of the season all the way around to that 5.0 at calving that we all desire. Getting an idea on how things are going means you can make little adjustments earlier before cow condition becomes a big problem. Call your Vetlife vet today to talk about your body condition scoring options.

Olivia Sutton
Vetlife Dunsandel

Non-cycling Cows: What do I do?

There is nothing more guaranteed to get a robust discussion among dairy farmers than the subject of non-cycling cows, OK, rugby probably would, but let’s think animal health for now. Reams of scientific papers are available which explore the various treatment options and you could spend a lifetime getting informed on the subject although, I suspect you would not have many friends left by the end of the process.

As someone that likes to keep life as uncomplicated as possible, I have a few thoughts on the subject:

1. Cows do get back in calf if they are given enough time.
2. CIDRs do actually work!
3. A “one size fits all” approach does not work!
4. Non-cycling cows sometimes are actually cycling; they just are not obvious.
5. There is more to treating non-cyclers than just intervention programmes - planning for extra feeding of cows next spring etc.

So what help is this to you out there with non-cyclers? My main message is that to have any chance of success there has to be a two way conversation about what you as a manager or herd owner want to achieve and what we as Vetlife vets can offer to facilitate that. There is no quick fix solution or silver bullet and each farm situation is different. As experienced herd managers we respect your experience and ideas and we as experienced vets try as hard as possible to match our knowledge to help you achieve your goals.

The earlier these conversations occur, the better the chance of a good outcome. Reproductive intervention comes at a price and this cost can be recuperated or actually turned into a net gain by more milk production but it does involve investment up front and some brave decisions being made before mating starts. With a more buoyant milk price and a positive international milk price trend, reproductive intervention should be able to give better returns on investment. Vetlife has also been working to secure competitively priced repro products for this season to make sure we can give the best possible options for non-cycling cow treatments.

We want to hear your ideas and help you achieve those goals, so let’s start talking!

Paul Johnson
Vetlife Temuka
As we are well through calving, it is the time again to plan for mating. While we all start to tail paint cows to look for non-cyclers and hence make decisions about hormonal interventions, we often tend to overlook the heifers.

Heifers go through a lot of distress: physiologically being mums for the first time and socially as they join the adult girls which are usually much more dominant. That is the reason we often see two year olds not doing well at mating. So, synchronising them at their first mating at fifteen months makes that transition much smoother as they get more time to adjust prior to next mating. Also, heifers take about 10 days more to start cycling again after calving compared to adult cows.

In brief, the following are the benefits of synchronising heifers:

- Compact calving over a short period.
- Extra days in milk.
- Quicker genetic gain and additional AB heifer calves.
- Easy to manage/train heifers in the shed as you get more time before the peak calving period.
- Heifers get more time to start cycling before next mating.

Following are the options to synchronise the heifers:

1. Single prostaglandin (PG) injection.
   This is the cheapest option if you do not want to spend much money on your heifer mating programme. It will only work in heifers that are already cycling. Also, the corpus luteum (CL) is responsive to PG only between Day 5 to Day 16 of the oestrus cycle.

   This plan involves five days of AI to detect heat, then jabbing all the remaining heifers with PG. The majority of them will respond in the next five days and are inseminated to detect heat. After that bulls are introduced into the mob. You do not get any improvement in conception rates and the calving pattern would not be as compact as the programmes listed below.

2. Double shot PG programme.
   As mentioned above, the CL is only responsive to PG between Day 5 to Day 16 of the oestrus cycle. This programme involves two shots 11 to 14 days apart as the first shot brings all the cycling heifers into the PG responsive window. The second jab should be planned one to two days before the planned start of mating (PSM). Heifers are then inseminated to detected heat over the next five days. This gives better oestrus synchrony compared to the single PG programme but is much inferior to the CoSynch programme as it would be ineffective on heifers yet to reach puberty.

3. CoSynch programme (CIDRs/DIBs).
   This involves a progesterone impregnated insert on Day 1 along with a jab of GnRH. The inserts are removed on Day 7 and heifers are jabbed with PG followed by another jab of GnRH on Day 9 at the time of AI. This involves fixed time AI, so there is no need for oestrus detection and all the AI is done and dusted in one day. The oestrus synchrony is much more compact and you get much higher conception rates. Also, it is a useful tool if you suspect a high proportion of pre-pubertal heifers. Although the CoSynch programme may appear expensive, the benefits and income from extra days in milk far outweigh the cost of doing it. Trial work done in a peer reviewed New Zealand paper to estimate the economic benefits of CoSynch compared to the Double PG programme found a mean $25.73 of extra income. This was assessed in terms of extra milk production (assuming $5.50/Kg MS pay-out) and the value of four day old female AI calves. The additional cost of drugs, vet fees and management costs of yarding the heifers was also taken into consideration. Therefore the CoSynch programme may appear expensive, but the benefits and income from extra days in milk far outweighs the cost of doing it.

Jagdeep Singh
Vetlife Temuka
Hunt for a Foreign Body

Arthur, a six year old Huntaway, was seen after a history of a chronic draining tract in his neck. It had been treated for infection and had had surgery for a suspect foreign body as a cause for the pus continually draining from a hole in the underside of his neck. He was presented after two months of unsuccessful treatment.

Looking for foreign bodies can be a frustrating thing. Something as small as the hair off a grass seed can be the source of irritation to the body, causing it to try and reject it. Often it will try to “wall off” the foreign body and surround it with white blood cells to get rid of it. Often though, foreign bodies can move, as in the case with grass seeds/awns, and are found no where near where they went in. The draining tracts may still leak pus from the entry site if the tract is still open.

One of the ways that we find foreign bodies is to follow the tracts to the source. Grass seeds that enter between the pads can travel all the way up to the elbow before they are found. Grass seeds can enter the body through the skin or even be inhaled or eaten with disastrous effects. These foreign bodies can travel into the chest or abdomen and be very hard to locate. Larger foreign bodies like sticks or glass can penetrate the body and break off, leaving a foreign body a long way from the entry wound. Many foreign bodies can be located by exploring the entry hole and removing them with forceps. In the more difficult cases, as with Arthur, it can be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

There are a couple of methods we have for narrowing down where to look. The entire tract can be removed, but in Arthur’s case, this had already been tried and was unsuccessful. Ultrasound, CT scans and fistulograms are also used. With Arthur we decided to do a fistulogram. He was sedated and a dye (that shows up on X-ray) was injected into the draining tract. You can see in Figure 1 that the dye is pooled in a pocket on the bottom side of his neck. The blue dots outline the areas filled with the dye. There is a little bit that travels backwards, and some more that goes up a tract toward the top of his spine.

We massaged the area gently and then let the dye drain out. Saline was then flushed into the sinus to remove any large pools of dye that might obscure any foreign object. The dye sticks to the surface of the object and in Figure 2, a large object is outlined by the dye (indicated by arrows on the photo). So this object had gone in on the underside of Arthur’s neck, and lodged on top of his neck in the muscles near the spine.

Once we knew where it was, we carefully dissected down through the muscles of his neck and removed a large piece of stick. Once the stick was removed, the wound on the underside of his neck healed up and the discharging stopped. Arthur is back at work with no ill effects from his ordeal.

Lori Linney
Vetlife Alexandra
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