

# Measuring for success

**KEVIN O'SULLIVAN**

Heifers are the backbone of every dairy herd. Through the use of EBI and AI, they provide improved genetics, leading to improvements in traits such as milk solids, health, fertility and longevity. Breeding replacements is also one of the largest costs on any dairy farm. Efficient calf rearing ensures an adequate supply of heifers calving down at 22 to 24 months of age.

### **Colostrum 1-2-3**

This is vital for every calf to ensure it receives adequate antibodies, energy and growth hormones from the first milk-

ing of the post-partum cow. The quality of the colostrum can be checked on farm using a refractometer, while effective absorption can be checked by measuring serum protein levels in young calves.

### **Feeding the calf**

To reach target bodyweight for breeding at 13 to 15 months, heifer calves need to be growing by 700g to 800g per day. The first six weeks of life are crucial for udder development. Any calf that fails to reach these levels has been shown to produce less milk in their first lactation and are more likely to be culled at a younger age. It is recommended that calves

should receive 15% of their birthweight in milk or milk replacer every day until weaning (a 40kg calf needs 6l/day). Growth rates can be monitored easily using weigh bands.

### **Developing the rumen**

The calf needs to be able to digest grass at a young age, so the rumen needs to develop quickly. Access to both highly palatable coarse calf creep and ad-lib water from the first week of life has been shown to be the most effective at stimulating rumen development. Calves should be eating 1.5kg of concentrates/day and weigh 85kg to 90kg before milk is removed from their diet.

### **Health strategies**

Any disease event in the first six weeks can permanently check growth rates and future performance in calves. Scours and pneumonia are the biggest culprits. It is vital to accurately diagnose the causes of disease so controls can be put in place.

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