

PREPARING FOR CALVING

FEBRUARY 25

As we slowly begin to leave the dark evenings and mornings behind us, we approach the calving season. Pre-calving is an important period to assess condition score (BCS) as a quick and comprehensive evaluation of cow health that leads to informed decisions about nutritional supplementation and adjust feeding strategies to optimize cow and calf health.

Pre-calving blood tests offer valuable diagnostic insights into the metabolic status of your cows. Bloods give us vital information about energy reserves and protein levels, helping identify potential nutritional deficiencies or metabolic challenges that will impact calving success and subsequent calf performance. Detecting and addressing these issues early can significantly reduce the risk of calving complications and improve overall herd productivity.

Pre-calving bloods

Blood sampling dams pre-calving assesses energy and mineral status allowing us to correct nutritional issues to contribute to a smoother calving period. Good nutrition and management in the latter end of pregnancy along with the first few weeks post calving is essential to ensure profitability in your beef suckler herd. Nutritional issues can be a common contributing factor when cows fail to get back in calf. Forage analysis is vital to enable us to alter the ration once we have interpreted the results, so this is something to bear in mind.

We recommend sampling a minimum of 6 cows per group and this must be done a minimum of 3-4 weeks before calving begins. The cattle will need to have been on this diet for at least 2 weeks before sampling to ensure the blood parameters have had time to adjust!

The parameters we test for in house are:

- **Magnesium**
 - Required for metabolism and absorption of calcium within the cow around calving
 - Sufficient magnesium is important to prevent staggers
- **Protein status**
 - Adequate protein is essential pre and post calving, playing an important role in calf growth, colostrum quality and quantity and future fertility
 - Urea is used to assess the rumen degradable protein in the diet and protein utilisation
 - Albumin provides a picture of the longer-term protein status
- **Energy – quantified by NEFA (non-esterified fatty acids) level to indicate negative energy balance**
 - If a cow's diet does not meet energy requirements, fat is utilised for energy. NEFAs are produced during this process and can be measured in the blood to indicate if the current energy in the diet is meeting the demand

If issues are found pre-calving and the ration is altered accordingly; re-sampling 2-3 weeks post calving can help us to assess if these corrections have sorted the problem!

Body condition Scoring

Condition scoring is a quick, straightforward but under-utilised on-farm method to assess condition pre-calving. In a study run by SRUC it was found that only 4% of farms were implementing condition scoring effectively and making informed management decisions based on the results.

It is recommended that cows calve with a body condition score of 2.5-3. If cattle are too lean then there is risk to calf survival and future fertility will suffer. However, calving in too fat will negatively impact calving ease and occur unnecessary feed costs. Cattle calving in at a score of <2 were found to have calves that were 7% less vigorous than cows score ≥ 2 , less vigorous calves will be slower to stand and less likely to have sufficient colostrum intake.

How to condition score?

It is best to work off a 1-5 scoring system and consistency is key. Condition score cattle at 2 points - the tail head and the transverse processes. As a general rule, it should be possible to feel the transverse processes without applying too much force and the bones should feel slightly rounded at the end. The tail head should be a deep cavity with some fat cover between skin and bone.



A pre calving kit list MOT

Calving ropes

- If you've just bought a new pair, tie in your knots before the first calving! You do not want to be fiddling around as you are mid calving
- Some people like to have a red and blue rope - red for right!
- Check that they are not mouldy and have not disintegrated after having a well earned break from last year.

Calf care

- Iodine dip
- Colostrum powder
- Tube/Trusty Tuber
- Thermometer
- Dedicated sick pen, ideally with a heat lamp can be useful for calves that are struggling to get going.



Calving Jack

- Make sure you know where your jack is!!
- Check all parts are working
- Make sure its clean!

Extra Kit to have around

- Lube
- Veluflax
- Long rectal gloves

We wish you all the best for the calving season and will be on hand for any queries or whenever help is needed!

Hannah Alexander



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