

Measuring the losses due to poor fertility

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After working out the costs of milk production for his client and identifying the strengths and weaknesses, compared with standards, the veterinarian needs to sort out the causes of the waste. Let's consider fertility the usual suspect. Yields lower than expected, calving interval longer than planned, more services than 2 per conception, and excessive culling. What's it costing the farmer?

Over the last 10 years calving intervals have deteriorated. In 1983 they were 384 days, in 2005 the average is 415 days. Do not believe the farmer who says his high yielders warrant extended lactations. They, like the lower yielders, would produce more litres per cow per year if their calving interval was close to 365 to 375 days. Cows lose about 20 litres from peak to 305 days, whether peak at 60 litres or 35 litres. The percentage drop in yield per month is now usually around 8% whereas in the old days it used to be 10% per month. For most UK cows, high and low yielders, the cost of a day's delay in conception is about £2.00 in the stage from 85 days to 120 days post calving. Serious delays (from say 150 days post calving onwards costs around £5.00 per day (as each day's delay then leads to an extra dry day only). The only exception to the 365 day calving interval rule is the cow that drops its yield as slowly as 4% per month. As the butterfat and protein levels rise towards the end of

lactation milk value also rises at this stage (the curve shape for BF and protein is the mirror of the yield shape) and so for such flat lactation cows longer calving intervals are more economic. (Beware, there are very few of these cows around - fewer than farmers think)! It would be a good idea to select cows, and bulls, for flatness of curve and to have a herd of cows that peak at no more than 42 litres but which dry off at 28 litres. Such cows give 10,000 litres in 305 days, and would be less likely to have excessive condition score loss than the typical high yielding cow around to-day.

So step one is to take stock and carry out a Herd Profile Check, using ALL the raw data fed through a high quality computer program such as Interherd, the fertility indices for the last year or two. Include all cows, culled or not. Find all services, AI or natural. Include all PDs, positive or negative. Put in the lactation number of the cow and the service bull's ID. If possible include the inseminator's name. These days' condition scores should be collected every time a herdsman or vet handles a cow. Put them in. Put in group change dates. If you can get them on a disk put the yields and milk quality in. Vets should have all their clients cattle recorded in this way, as part of the duty of care of that herd. It costs about £3 per cow per year to keep the computer topped up, and this should be included in the hourly rate charged. Cows on good computer systems earn the vet £20 more per

year, and good vets earn the farmer at least £60 more per year.

The profile should be carried out separately for first lactation and multiparous cows. (They are two very different animals).