OPTIMISING FERTILITY AND MANAGING PREGNANCY IN THE SUCKLER HERD 1

Controlling factors which can affect fertility of cows, heifers and bulls such as nutritional management and infectious diseases are fundamental to the productivity of a suckler herd.

Pregnant females must be managed accordingly to ensure optimal body condition is maintained, minimise calving difficulties and maximise colostrum production for the newborn calf.

PROFITABILITY is directly related to the number of calves reared per cow or heifer served annually.

COMPACT CALVING PERIODS

To maintain a 365-day calving interval, cows must get back in calf within approximately 80 days of giving birth to their last calf. To achieve this, cows must:

- Be in good health
- Avoid calving difficulties
- Be in correct body condition score and on a good plane of nutrition both before and after calving
- Be served by a fertile bull

Cows which calve early in the season have longer to recover before the next service period, and their calves have longer to grow which results in heavier weaning weights. Other benefits include:

- Reduction of disease spread
- Targeted labour requirements over a compact calving period
- Selection of homebred replacement heifers from the most fertile cows in the herd

AIM: Pregnancy rate >95% from a 9 week service period, with >65% of cows and heifers calving within the first 3 weeks.

BULL FERTILITY

Few bulls are infertile (incapable of getting a cow in calf) but up to 1 in 5 are sub-fertile and therefore produce fewer calves than a fully fertile bull.

If fertility issues are identified prior to the service period, bulling groups can be chosen accordingly and costly delays in identifying bulling issues during the breeding period can be avoided.

Bulls must be closely observed throughout the breeding season, as problems such as lameness or injury can occur during service.

AIM: Breeding Soundness Examinations should be carried out by your vet on all bulls each year, 10 weeks prior to the breeding season.

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PREGNANCY DIAGNOSIS (PD)

Identifying whether cows and heifers have conceived (and their predicted calving date) early after bulling can guide management decisions such as culling and nutrition during pregnancy.

AIM: Book PD session between 30 days after the first cycle and 60 days after bull removed.

CALVING EASE

Avoiding difficult calvings is essential to maintain a compact calving period and maximise calf survival. Dam body condition, sire choice, and heifer growth can all impact on calving ease.

AIM: Keep and analyse records of assisted calvings, use EBVs, ensure optimal nutrition and carefully select replacement heifers to optimise calving ease in the herd.

MAINTAIN A HEALTHY HERD

Many infectious diseases can impact on fertility and maintenance of pregnancy.

- Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD), Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR), Leptospirosis, Campylobacter and Salmonellosis can all lead to infertility and abortions.
- Johne's disease does not cause abortions but infected cows suffer weight loss and can be difficult to get back in calf.
- Clostridial diseases can cause sudden death in any age of cattle, and loss of a pregnant cow also results in the loss of that pregnancy.

Herd status should be assessed for each of these diseases through diagnostic testing and analysis of fertility data, and risk factors established for each individual farm through discussion with your vet.

Vaccines are available to aid in the control of BVD, IBR, Leptospirosis, the main serotypes of *Salmonella* and clostridial diseases. They should be used as part of a control programme, in conjunction with assessing and managing relevant risk factors for each disease on farm.

Biosecurity is an important component of infectious disease management and particular attention should be paid to purchasing and quarantine policies for replacement stock. These should be sourced from herds with an equivalent or superior health status where possible, and appropriate testing and vaccination programmes completed during quarantine as guided by your vet.

AIM: Understand the risks that infectious diseases may pose on your farm, know your herd status and protect your herd from infection using a robust herd health plan.

Nutrition and heifer management are important factors in optimising fertility and managing pregnancy; please refer to these sheets for further information.

Further information: AHDB BRP+ Optimising suckler herd fertility for better returns.

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