



Getting value from your non-replacement calves – breeding strategy

We know calving is an exceptionally busy time, this is a quick reminder of the importance of record-keeping. Calving records create a link between the calf and its parents, which is useful for replacement heifers, and can also help to increase the value of calves you sell for rearing.

Processing dockets and movement records can help calculate what value calf sales have contributed to your farm business and are useful to understand changes in income if you are considering modifying your breeding strategy to increase the value of non-replacement calves.

A reminder from 2023/24 season, you won't be able to routinely slaughter calves on farm. If this impacts you, now is a good time to start planning for this.

Every region is different, and it's important for you to look at what works for your farm. The options include:

- Looking at breeding strategies to get the most from your non replacement calves
- Selling your calves for beef
- Having a chat with your local processing company to see what options they have

Breakout box

Breeding strategy is key

Over the last two years in particular the team at Ballyberg Farm near Hamilton has been working hard to reduce their non-replacement calf numbers.

And they have succeeded says farm director Noldy Rust, with several different methods paying dividends.

The 51-hectare farm is home to 180 cows, mostly Friesian with a few cross breeds.

Noldy says the team has been using a variety of breeding strategies to get the most from their non replacement calves.

“The aim is to have no bobbies and to make each calf valuable. For our artificial insemination (AI) programme, we use sexed semen which gives us a 90% chance that calves born will be female. We also use pedigree bulls, or those with records, to utilise the demand from the beef market. It's about mating strategically so every calf is either a replacement or can be sold to beef farmers.”

“We generally AI for five weeks then put Hereford bulls out. By that time 70-80% cows will already be in calf but there is demand for Hereford calves, depending on their markings. Hereford calves with pure white heads is what we are after.”

“We also use Friesian sexed semen for our cross breeds and generally get a good replacement if it’s a heifer. If it’s male, then depending on the markings we can sometimes sell to the beef market. Black calves don’t have that much value in the beef market – the exception is for Wagyu.”

Currently, the farm’s non-replacement calves, if not sold as beef calves, are sold for pet food, something that suits the farm’s operation.

“It won’t be the same for everyone but it’s quite convenient for us because the company is local so they come take care of the whole process. There would be more money if we sent them to the works but money is not the driver, doing things right is.”

Noldy’s tips for other farmers:

- Mating is the time to get it right so do your research on your breeding.
- Priority is to put the semen in the cow that will give you a saleable calf – whether a replacement or a dairy beef.
- Don’t try to eliminate all bobbies at the risk of ruining your cows. The wrong breed over the wrong animal could cause calving problems. You have spent time and money rearing heifers and they are valuable.
- Use sexed semen and beef breeds that will work for you.
- Use pedigree bulls or those with records.