

Keeping heifers on target over winter

While the focus for most milk producers in the winter is the milking herd they should not neglect the youngstock warns Cargill's calf and heifer rearing specialist Bianca Theeruth.

So all the hard work is done? The latest group of heifers were successfully weaned and have grown well during the summer. A mild autumn and an extended grazing period meant they were outdoors for longer. But there's no room for complacency and undoing all the good work. Bianca Theeruth encourages producers to keep these young heifers closely monitored and on track for good performance.

"All too often, young stock can be over looked at this time of year when the milking herd is indoors but they need close monitoring too. This can prove costly, in terms of calf health and growth rates," says Ms Theeruth.

"We know that these heifers have to achieve target growth rates throughout their 24 month rearing period if they are going to calve at two years old. Slow growing heifers will join the milking herd late and they are a 'silent' costly drain on the business."

Heifer rearing trials clearly show the importance of consistency when it comes to rearing these heifers. "It's not a 'stop-start' process—and it's very difficult to make up for lost time, which is why the latest heifer rearing programmes urge producers to meet targets at very regular intervals."

For Holstein heifers, the target growth rates are between 750g and 850g per day and Jerseys should be gaining between 500g and 600g per



The key message is—don't neglect the young stock this winter.

day from birth to 24 months.

Weighing is ideal and the animal's percentage of its mature body weight, based on a third-lactation cow of the same breed, can be calculated. This can be measured at several stages—which

is what we recommend in our Nurture with Provimi heifer rearing programme—and fitted in around routine worming, dosing or service time, to make things simpler. Targets for Holstein heifers are shown in the table below.

| Holstein heifer growth targets to achieve 24 month calving | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------|--|--|-----------------------------|---------|---------|
| Phase | Age | Target Weight (% of mature body weight) | Target Height (% of mature body height) | Target Body Condition Score | | |
| | | | | Goal | Minimum | Maximum |
| Colostrum | Days 1 to 2 | 6.25 | 55 | | | |
| Pre-weaning | Days 3 to 56 | 13 | 58 | 2.25 | 2.00 | 2.50 |
| Post-weaning | Month 3 | 16.5 | 65 | 2.25 | 2.00 | 2.50 |
| Grower | Months 4 to 9 | 42.5 | 75 | 2.50 | 2.25 | 2.75 |
| Puberty | Months 10 to 15 | 55 – 60 | 85 | 3.00 | 2.50 | 3.25 |
| Pregnancy | Months 16 to 23 | 90 | 92 | 3.25 | 3.00 | 3.50 |
| Close up | Month 24 | 94 (7 days pre-calving) | 95 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.75 |

"But if weighing facilities are not available, heifers can be measured with a wither stick, or even with a line on the wall, and compared to the target height required at bulling. There's a strong correlation between weight and height, so it's a reliable method. And, again, the animal's height can be expressed as a percentage of its mature height."

Body condition scoring is also important. The onset of puberty is primarily related to body weight as well as body condition score. So small heifers should not be bred just because they are 15 months old—there's more than age to consider here.

"The consequences of breeding from small heifers can be far reaching. If heifers are under condition at calving they will not have enough fat reserves for optimum milk production and there will

Pitfalls in performance over winter



Young and in calf heifers may not get all the attention they deserve during the busy winter months and, as a result, they can face setbacks in growth performance that can have longer term consequences. Typical pitfalls that producers should watch out for are ventilation of buildings and forage quality.

"Poorly ventilated housing or excessive air exchange can lead to problems," says Cargill's Bianca Theeruth (pictured above). "Don't ignore a few coughing calves. It's a sign something isn't right."

"Look too at the silage analysis and know what the quality is throughout the feeding period, adjusting quantities and altering the feed rates accordingly. Heifers need a quality silage of at least 70% dry matter digestibility."

Other obvious, but equally important areas to watch in the heifer yards are feed trough spaces and access to ad lib fresh silage that is pushed up regularly. "These factors are just as important in the growing heifers as they are in the milking herd."

be an increased risk of a negative energy balance in early lactation."

She warns that over conditioned heifers can also encounter problems too.

Excessive fat tissue in the mammary gland may alter udder development and milk production potential. These heifers can also have difficulty calving and metabolic disorders that affect milk production.

So it really is vital that producers monitor records. "Those who don't are taking a high risk strategy," warns Ms Theeruth. "Too many still rely on the 'eyeball method' and this can mask the truth. If you don't measure and record the information, you can't monitor performance accurately."

She encourages producers to weigh or measure and condition score their herds at the start of winter. "And take a careful look at heifer management, preferably before they have an effect on growth rates and body condition."

"Age at first calving, rearing

costs and first lactation yield are all good indications of the heifer rearing efficiency," she adds. "For example, trials have shown that heifers should reach 75% or more of the milk yield of mature cows in the herd."

"We also know that small heifers eat less, produce less milk and leave the herd earlier."

"And first lactation and lifetime milk production are optimised in well grown heifers calving at 22 to 24 months old. Heifers calving outside this range are associated with higher rearing costs, health problems, increased culling and lower lifetime profit."

"Heifer rearing is management intensive, particularly in busy winter periods. But if producers take advantage of defined targets and monitor progress they can see where they're going, make timely adjustments and meet calving age objectives with healthy, mature heifers that earn their place in the herd long term," adds Bianca Theeruth.