



FACT SHEET

MANAGING HEIFERS FOR CALVING EASE

Ensuring the maximum number of live calves on the ground is the number one priority for any breeding program. This can be a challenge at times when it comes to calving heifers, but it doesn't need to be. There are genetic and non-genetic factors that contribute to successful heifer management programs. With the Spring calving season just around the corner, we thought it would be a good time to answer some frequently asked questions about heifer management for ease of calving.

Q. If I use low birth weight bulls over heifers, won't I also get lower growth in the calves?

A. Dead calves have an extremely low growth rate, so no, not really. Birth weight is highly correlated to growth rate, so there is some diminishing factor in growth rates from lower birth weight bulls. However, it is possible to choose sires that will "bend the growth curve", allowing for below average birth weight whilst still maintaining above average growth.

Q. If I keep the biggest heifers to join, will they calve easier?

A. If they are the biggest because they have higher growth rates than their sisters, then they will also very likely have higher birth weights than their sisters, which they will transmit to their calves.

Q. Buyers prefer calves with extra bone.

A. No, they don't. Extra bone will only decrease yield in the cattle, so they don't prefer it at all. It will also increase the rate of calving problems in your herd. Seriously.

Q. If I calve them as 3 year olds, will they have a better calving?

A. No, they won't. There is no evidence, at all, to support this theory. In fact, 3-year-old heifers are more likely to have greater levels of internal fat, which will reduce their calving ability. All you have done is cost yourself a year of production from that heifer.

Q. How important is the shape of the sire?

A. Extremely important and not just for heifer matings. Sires should have a good, long, neck extension and a smooth inlaid shoulder. As a rule, if you stand in front of a sire you should be able to see down his sides, without the shoulders blocking your view. If they do, then don't use him on heifers. Excess bone will also reduce Calving ease.

Q. If one breed has more birth weight than another breed, should I use the other breed?

A. Birth weight is relative to the population. A sire with below average birth weight within a breed is still a suitable candidate for heifer joining's, provided he also has a shorter Gestation length EBV, positive Calving Ease EBV's and a desirable shape. Using the other breed is a quick fix, but be aware that the calves will have hybrid vigour, which will increase the birth weight size above the genetic component.

It is also important to check that any sire you consider for heifers has had a birth weight submitted for Breedplan analysis.

Q. Will shorter Gestation Length calves be born more easily?

A. Yes, compared to calves with longer gestation. Calves grow extremely quickly in the last trimester of pregnancy, so the difference in birth weight between a calf born a week early and a calf born a week late, can be very substantial.

Be advised though, that the sires EBV for birth weight will be calculated along with his Gestation Length EBV, so it is best to look for sires with a combination of below breed average birth weight and shorter gestation length.

Q. Can using Artificial Insemination improve my heifer management program?

A. Absolutely. Using Fixed Time AI (FTAI) has made AI not only affordable; it is now also profitable for cattleman to use. FTAI delivers several benefits;

- Ability to access PROVEN calving ease sires.
- Expect well-synchronised heifers to be around 60% in calf on Day 1 of joining. That means that in the first 7-10 days of calving, 60% of your heifers could have calves, dramatically reducing your labour requirements over time. Subsequent joining's will also be tighter at calving.
- Research has shown that a heifer, which calves in the first 3 weeks of calving, is 13% more likely to remain in the herd for life.
- Heifers that calve early have longer before they need to be rebred, which increases pregnancy rates for their second calf.



Q. How important is good nutrition?

A. Good nutrition is extremely important. At mating, a heifer should be around 65% of her adult mature weight and around 85% of her adult mature weight when she has her first calf. Well-grown heifers are better developed skeletally and are more likely to have adequate pelvic size.

This does not mean just bigger. It refers to a heifers weight relative to her mature weight. If she will be average size as a mature cow, she will be average size as a heifer. It only refers to how much of that adult size she has reached at joining and calving.

Having heifers in Body Condition Score of 2.5 to 3 at calving is ideal. This allows heifers to be well grown, but not over fat.

Q. How important is maturity pattern for 2-year-old breeders.

A. Maturity pattern refers to the length of time before an animal reaches maturity. An animal reaches maturity when extra weight gain results in increased fatness. When a breeder has a later maturity pattern, it takes longer before the animal reaches that point.

Cows use nutritional energy in a sequenced order.

1. Cows use energy first for growth.
2. Cows use energy secondly for lactation.
3. Cows use energy thirdly to store fat.
4. Cows use energy fourthly to bring on oestrus (Cycle).

In later maturing breeders, the requirements for growth in 2 year olds, can exceed nutrition supplied. This will reduce their ability to milk adequately, retain condition score and settle in calf easily. As with all things in nature, maintaining a balance works best. Extreme growth leads to extreme problems for maternal efficiency.

Q. Should I join heifers before cows?

A. Ideally a heifer should calve at least 2 months prior to her next joining to ensure that she has sufficient time to recover from her first calf. This is why it is good to join heifers around 3 weeks before cows. Having a 6-week joining period is also desirable; this can be better facilitated using FTAI in the joining.

Q. If I lock them in the sheep yards, won't they have smaller calves?

A. It takes an enormous amount of energy for a heifer to push out a calf, so be careful that you don't weaken them too much. You may also be denying them vital micronutrients such as Magnesium and Calcium. Heifers that have been well managed and joined to suitable bulls won't need to be locked in the sheep yards. If they are having problems, it is the symptom of other issues, which can be easily fixed.

The greatest profit driver for any breeding program is the ability to wean the maximum number of live calves. Managing heifer calving to provide the maximum number of live calves is very achievable with careful management.



... a better bottom line!