

Feeding the transition suckler cow

In the dairy sector, dry cow management is one of the key and most challenging aspects of milk production. Getting the dry cow period right promotes easier calvings, stronger calves, primes the cow for the subsequent lactation and even influences fertility. In the month's livestock nutrition article, David Thornton from Rumenco outlines what the region's suckler producers can learn from the dairy approach.

Dairy farmers who place a lot of emphasis on dry cow management find that overall herd health and productivity benefit tremendously. For suckler producers the issues may not quite so complex, but for those that get dry cow management and nutrition right the benefits are just as rewarding.

Dry suckler cows require feed for maintenance and the growth of their unborn calves, must be primed for the demands of lactation and prepared for re-breeding. Suckler cows also need time to rest and recuperate, as well as the opportunity to repair their digestive and mammary systems. The dry period affords this opportunity, but – as in the dairy sector – it is also the ideal time to address feet and mobility issues, and improve the mineral and vitamin status of these cows before the bull goes back in.

For example, low levels of selenium and/or vitamin E can lead to poor muscle tone in the cow, which means calvings will be much more difficult. A deficiency in the cow can also mean a deficiency in the newborn calf, which translates into difficulty in standing or walking due to muscle degeneration. Other signs of selenium deficiency include reduced fertility.

Vitamin E deficiency is not usually a problem when dry autumn calving suckler cows are at grass in the summer, but it can be a problem over the winter in housed situations. More common in the summer at pasture is copper deficiency, another mineral linked to fertility. Pastures across the north of England are inherently low in copper, as many grass samples taken from the region show, so good copper supplementation in the run up to calving is the perfect opportunity to redress the balance and often pays dividends in terms of subsequent fertility.

Calcium and magnesium, too, are important minerals for the dry suckler cow. Both these macro minerals are essential for strong muscle contractions, but there are also cations that – if incorrectly balanced – can predispose the cow to metabolic problems like milk fever. Magnesium is a very important mineral for suckler cows and the stress of cold, wet weather or calving can easily trigger grass staggers.

In many suckler herds, improved fertility is the route to better profitability. And with mineral deficiencies at the root of many a herd's fertility problems, improved dry cow nutrition is often the key that unlocks better performance.

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In a box:

A Lifeline for Sucklers

Getting nutrition right immediately before calving is often the key to improved suckler herd performance. As with the dairy animal, the transition suckler cow is much more susceptible to metabolic problems that will influence subsequent fertility.

Recognising the importance of these issues, Rumenco has produced a technical advanced nutrition supplement specifically for suckler cows. Lifeline Pre-Calver is formulated to:

- Boost colostrum yield and quality
- Improve the vitamin status of the cow and calf
- Promote easier calvings and stronger calves

Ideal for feeding at grass from six weeks pre-calving, Lifeline contains a unique balance of minerals, vitamins on a sugar and protein base.

Nutritional boosters

Mannan oligosaccharides increase the production of immunoproteins and antibodies in the cow's colostrum, which helps boost immunity in the newborn calf. Lactose and molasses help boost dry matter intake and stimulate the rumen papillae for increased absorption of nutrients.

Boosting fertility through three copper sources

Lifeline contains three copper sources to combat potential 'lock up' problems by pasture antagonists such as potassium. This ensures any copper deficiencies are addressed.

Additional minerals and vitamins

Extra selenium and vitamin E to promote easier calving and increased calf vitality. Feeding Lifeline to the cow encourages newborn calves to stand and suckle more quickly. High magnesium to assist the mobilisation of calcium, and boosted zinc levels to promote a healthy udder, skin and hoof growth.

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[Picture of David Thornton]:

David Thornton has been with Rumenco for 28 years. He is a respected nutritionist and has helped many beef, dairy and sheep producers maximise the value of home grown forages through cost-effective supplementary feeding of Rumevite feedblocks, Supalyx and Lifeline buckets and the wider range of Rumenco feed products.

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