

Section 7

Monitoring the Performance of Calves



Introduction

Margins are tight in calf rearing. Therefore it is important to set objectives for the enterprise, making sure that rearing protocols are designed to ensure the achievement of the objectives that you set.

- ① What are the important targets for rearing dairy beef calves?
- ② When should calves be weighed?
- ③ How should weight measurements be made?
- ④ Records and costs.

Monitoring the Performance of Calves

① What are the important targets for rearing dairy beef calves?

The critical targets up to 15 weeks of age are:

- Minimal mortality, maximum of 5%.
 - Pre-weaning (less than 28 days of age) mortality rate of less than 3%, regardless of the cause of death.
 - From 28-120 days, target less than 2% mortality.
- Minimal morbidity: If the calf suffers setbacks from poor health, feed intake and average daily gain will be affected.
 - Fewer than 10% of calves should be treated with antibiotics and/or electrolytes prior to weaning.
- Optimal daily liveweight gain: average 0.7-0.8kg/day up to 15 weeks.



Figure 1. Target liveweight of calves from 1-15 weeks of age. Source: Agriland, M. Gould & J. Cooke, 2013.

② When should calves be weighed?

Producers should weigh calves at birth, or at the time of arrival onto the farm, and again at six to 10 weeks. Alternatively, calves could be weighed at times that coincide with existing management practices (such as dehorning) to minimise additional labour requirements.

③ How should weight measurements be made?

Weighing scales offer the most accurate measure of calf weight and, if set up correctly in a race or crush, will be the easiest method to use. If weighing scales are not available, use a weighing band (girth tape) or height stick or height marks on the crush wall.

KEY TIPS:

Using the same measure and being consistent are important to accurately monitor animal performance.

④ Records and costs.

Good record keeping goes hand in hand with good management. It is vital when managing an efficient calf rearing enterprise.

The following details should be recorded and will enable you to complete an analysis of the calf rearing enterprise:

- Costs of all inputs – milk, milk replacer, meal, straw, hay etc.
- All stock purchases and sources.
- Cases of illness, treatments and cost.
- Performance of calves at various stages.

Analysis of the records kept (Table 2) will enable you to compare achievements with the physical and financial targets set. They will also help you to identify deficiencies in performance and in the use of inputs.

Table 2. Sample chart of performance data to record to analysis the physical performance of calves

Analysis of physical performance	Actual performance	Target performance
Mortality %	<5%
Weight at birth (kg)	40kg
Weight at 12 weeks	100-102 kg
Average daily gain (ADG) (kg/day)	700-800g/day
Feed cost per kg liveweight gain	

KEY POINT:

Studies both at Teagasc Grange and on co-operating farms have shown that, in young bull rearing systems, up to 40% of the variation in carcass weight can be explained by the weight of the calf at 12 weeks of age,



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