

Unit highlights key tips for maintaining herd fertility

Catching cows on heat can be hard work these days. But picking a heat detection aid and learning to use it effectively, plus working closely with the vet, have paid dividends for one Somerset dairy herd.

Block calving herds may have the edge when it comes to catching bulling cows. Greater numbers equals more expression of heat. But year-round calving herds with fewer animals bulling at any one time need not despair. With a combination of motivation and focus, plus smarter use of routine vet visits—and the right heat detection aid—it is possible to get cows back in-calf sooner, rather than later.

This approach is certainly working for herd manager Dave Wilson who routinely achieves a heat detection rate of 80% (compared with a target 70%) and 85% of cows served get pregnant.

Dave manages 500 cows averaging 8,000kg for cheesemakers

AJ and RG Barber in Somerset. Cows are run on a simple grass silage and cake system, making full use of summer grazing. Calving starts on June 24th and finishes on November 1st. "We get a good chunk calving up front, but there are drifters towards the end so heat detection gets harder later on as we are serving problem cows," says Dave.

Whereas at the start of the breeding period, he might catch 42 cows bulling in the paddock in one day, at the tail end this drops to just two or three a day. "And we don't see them all because they don't all ride, even if they are on heat. With some cows, all we see is that they sniff another cow or pee more in the parlour."

This is a typical scenario in modern herds, says the farm's vet Paddy Gordon from Shepton Vet Group. It's often compounded by the fact that high yielding cows are not on heat for as long, or as strongly, as average yielders. "Essentially, smaller numbers means less expression of heat and in year-round calving herds there is no perceived urgency, so it's easy for things to slide on a basis of 'we'll catch-up later'. Heat detection becomes a lower priority," he explains.

The daily drudge of doing the same routine isn't a great motivator. Furthermore cows are more likely to show signs of oestrus at quiet times (not at milking or feeding) which imposes a longer working day on staff. Some herds may be short staffed; many simply lack the right infrastructure to get routine jobs done efficiently. "Good planning is important so that the essentials

like heat detection get done and the day isn't spent dealing with lame cows or fire brigade emergencies," says Paddy.

A good starting point, he believes, is a routine fertility visit. It's not just about PDs or jabbing cows with hormones—vets can help focus attention, set targets and motivate whoever is responsible for heat detection. "Vets are another set of eyes and, because



Estrotect strips and pedometers are used as an aid to heat detection.

Heat detection tips for year round calving herds

- Watch cows for 30 minutes twice a day—early in the morning and early in the evening. Consider also watching at noon when mounting activity may also be high.
- Watch cows away from the feed fence.
- Hot weather, high production, crowded conditions or high stress environments may curb mounting activity. Adjust your observations accordingly.
- Cows in standing heat average about 1.5 mounts per hour and are in heat six to eight hours.
- Cows may be willing to mount others even though neither may stand for mounting.
- Cows in pre-oestrus may bawl, be restless or sniff, lick or head butt other cows.

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we see cows at intervals, not on a daily basis, we can spot changes.

"We also go from farm to farm so are aware of current issues affecting management. Targets might include how many cows have been served since the last visit or how many are pregnant. Then it's a case of identifying the focus—is it serving cows a bit sooner or an emphasis on calving cow health so cows are more fertile by service time?"

As well as setting targets, Paddy's weekly visits to the Barber herd include checking cows that have had assistance, twins or a problem at calving, and those not seen bulling by 42 days or served by 60 days. Because Dave starts recording heats six weeks before service, he knows which cows to expect on heat and uses this, together with information from the vet visits, to focus on these cows once they pass the voluntary waiting period.

While heat detection is a team effort (all of the farm staff carry notebook and pen to record heats throughout the day) Dave is conscious that it can be a matter of perception. Last year, therefore, he took overall responsibility for watching cows, co-ordinating records and deciding which cows were ready to be served. The result was an extra 45 cows back in-calf.

"You have to put a bit of time into it and watch for changes, looking for different marks on cows. I check them after evening milking, before it gets dark and first thing in the morning—up to five times a day. The best time to find them on our system is usually mid morning around 10.30am and after lunch about 2pm," he says.

Two heat detection aids are in operation—pedometers and Estroprotect heat mount detectors placed between the hip and tail head. They work on the basis of scratch-off technology, like a lottery card. As more of the silver surface is scratched off by friction, each time a cow is mounted, it indicates a cow in standing heat.

Dave says they are easy to apply and give a highly visible result, although he has worked hard at interpreting subtle changes for individual cows and finds them particularly useful at the tail end of breeding. "Cows on heat are



Dave Wilson has taken overall responsibility for herd fertility.

not necessarily more active, so we don't rely on the pedometers. Autumn housing also puts a check on heat detection as we change over systems. It takes time for cows to adjust and settle. They are also a bit more cautious about bulling inside on concrete. This is when Estroprotect is really handy—it gives away any clear heats, but also quiet ones."

Dave's results show how putting one person in charge of heat detection and working closely with the vet can catch more cows on heat, even when bulling cows are thin on the ground. Block calving herds may have the edge, but year-round calving herds needn't miss out on pregnancies.

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