

Don't let the days slip away

High production cows don't have to go hand in hand with high calving intervals

A calving interval of 391 days is achieved by 25% of NMR herds and among them are some high production units. These herds are maximising milk per cow per year and calves per year – something those with extended calving intervals will be missing out on.



Robert and Linda Tarver: "We use records to know which cows should be on heat"

If a herd is producing 9,500kg of milk and has a calving interval of 390 days then the annual milk per cow will be significantly higher than one with the same yield but with a 430 day calving interval," says NMR's national field manager Jonathan Davies. "And if I ask producers in NMR's top 25%, they usually say it's down to heat detection. They want cows back in calf in the first 60 days after calving and they know to achieve this she has to be fit and healthy. They rely on accurate action lists and being among the cows to spot cows showing signs of heat."

Slim cows

One producer – who ranks fourth nationally in NMR's Annual Report for production – agrees with this. Getting cows back in calf, preferably in their second cycle after calving, ranks high on Robert and Linda Tarver's agenda. And preparation starts early. The Tarver's Bishampton herd from Worcester averages 10,985kg of milk and

840kg of fat and protein on three-times-a-day milking with a calving interval of 391 days.

"I know we only have 90 cows in the herd at the moment, but the formula is the same in larger herds," says Robert. "Don't let the cows get fat in the dry period, don't feed too much protein early in the



Jonathan Statham: "Calving intervals can be reduced on many farms"

lactation and use records to know which cows should be on heat then put the time in to spotting them." He adds that he has, for many years, referred to NMR individual calving intervals in his

Table 1: NMR average calving intervals, February 2009

no. herds	days
average – all NMR herds	429
top 25%	391
bottom 25%	477

Table 2: Conception rates in range of serving intervals (source: InterHerd/Bishopton vets)

class	no. services	% non-return within 35 days	% PD positive or re-calved	% calved	gestation (days)	% female offspring
< 50 days	181	49	30	16	278	100
50-80 days	613	61	39	25	280	98
81-120 days	535	56	34	24	281	100
> 120 days	961	49	33	22	280	100
unspecified	10	90	70	70	275	100
overall	2300	54	35	23	280	99

breeding plans, selecting cows for good fertility and this is paying dividends too. The herd is fed on a partial TMR year round with 5.5kg per cow of concentrate in the maize and grass silage mix. Up to 6kg more of an 18% concentrate is feed according to yield in the parlour.

"I watch that the cows don't get too fat," adds Robert. "And I keep protein down in early lactation to avoid them milking like mad and not getting back in calf."

Both Robert and Linda, who does most of the day time milking, prioritise heat detection in their daily schedule. They go through the cows regularly checking for signs of heat.

"We want to see cows bulling in their first cycle," says Robert. "Then we know that things are right and, all being well, she will be served in her second cycle."

To prepare for this all cows are washed out 30 days after calving. Then they are inseminated once they're spotted bulling in the second cycle around 65 days, as long as they're fit. "We aim to get as many as possible back in calf at this stage. These are the cows that put most milk in the tank each year, produce a calf regularly and give us least breeding problems."

Vet Jonathan Statham from Bishopton Vets in Ripon, North Yorkshire, sees no reason to delay breeding even in high yielding herds.

Better conception

"There are obviously exceptions such as cows in poor body condition that are not cycling or those on ET programmes, but

if she's cycling 40 to 80 days post-calving and she's had a clear post calving veterinary check then why wait? The loss is estimated at £4 a day for each cow's extended calving interval."

To support his argument Jonathan refers to a table on InterHerd that shows conception rates in cows bred at 50 to 80 days are the same, if not better, than those served in the 80 to 120 day window or even after 120 days (see Table 1).

"And I question what those producers with extended calving intervals are measuring. It's easy to talk about high yielding cows producing 10,000 or 12,000kg of milk, but how long is it taking them to get there?"

Although he acknowledges that high yielding Holsteins may have more persistent lactations, the vast majority still peak then decline following a traditional milk production curve. "So is it really profitable to be milking a lot of stale cows?"

A benchmark used at Bishopton among its dairy herds is average days in milk. A herd of freshly calved cows will have a low value and a herd of stale cows will have a high value. "Stale cows put less milk in the tank and the margin between their milk production and their keep is less – they are contributing far lower to the business," he adds.

Heat detection hurdle

While there is plenty of evidence to support getting cows back in calf sooner rather than later, heat detection remains a major hurdle on many units.

"There are lots of reasons for poor heat detection," adds Jonathan. "High yielding Holstein cows may show less expression of heat and labour is often more stretched these days. A high incidence of lameness, tighter stocking rates, poor floors and low ceilings and a negative energy balance all contribute to poor heat expression. These root causes need a review on many units.

"Calving intervals can be reduced on many farms, but producers need to be confident that they can serve cows earlier. Using action lists and automated heat detection to spot heats may be very helpful. If a cow has had post calving checks and is fit, well and has shown signs of bulling at 45 days then why wait?"

Karen Wright