

# ACHIEVING GOOD SUCKLER COW FERTILITY

**Breeding a hard-working, productive suckler cow which requires little hands-on management is key to the success of the Livesey family's Borders farm.**

**R**ob, Kath and son Iain run a herd of 90 Salers cows at Firth Farm, Lilliesleaf, alongside 1,100 Mule ewes. They took over the tenancy of Firth, which extends to 223 hectares, in 1998 and have since grown the business to 324 hectares.

Most of the farm is down to five-to-seven year grass leys, although there are about 25 hectares of permanent grass, and 49 hectares are ploughed for winter cereals each year.

They have used a Salers bull since they moved to Firth and gradually bred up the cows so that the herd is now pure. Rob said: "We started with the breed because of its easy calving and because we wanted a simple system, but we have been impressed with how fertile and easy to manage they are. Now we are in a position to know which cows have the best maternal genetics and select accordingly, improving the herd all the time."

Culling hard and only keeping females from the best families has meant that from 2014 to 2016 no more than one cow each year has not been in calf. There can be more empty heifers and Rob finds that, as a rule, they are not as fertile as the cows. There are no second chances, though, and anything not in calf is removed from the breeding herd.

Heifers calve down at two-years-old, and Rob aims to have them around 380kg to 400kg at 15 months when they go to the bull. Any animals lighter than that are not retained in the herd.

A tight calving period is critical, according to Rob, and he achieves this by working with nature as much as possible. He said: "After being health-checked, bulls go out around 15th June when grass is at its peak, summer days are long and the cows are at their most fertile."

All the bulls go out at the same time, but the cows get nine to ten weeks while the heifers only get six weeks. The Liveseys regularly achieve 60-70% cows calving in the first three weeks of the calving period, and over 90% inside six weeks. In 2016, 65% of the cows calved to the first turn (three weeks) while second turn was 32%. Rob said: "It is an advantage of easy calving that they are also easy to get back in calf."

A compact calving period means that Rob and Iain have more heifers achieving their target weights at bulling, which gives them more mature replacements to select from. Surplus heifers are sold for breeding, either privately or at Castle Douglas.

Each year, seven to eight of the best bull calves are kept entire and either retained or sold as breeding bulls. The steers are sold at around 17 months when they weigh approximately 540kg.

Steers are currently sold at Aberdeen and Northern Marts, where Rob and Kath's other son, Rory, is an auctioneer. The even batches of steers are popular with buyers and very satisfying from the Liveseys' point of view. Another advantage of a tight calving period, according to Rob, is that bullying is minimised because calves are all the same size.

Because Firth is a wet, heavy farm, all the cows are in-wintered from November until after they calve in April. They are straw bedded and fed a diet based on silage and urea-treated wheat with minerals. Rob said: "We are lucky here that we do not seem to have any trace element deficiencies and the cows are easy to keep healthy." The herd is in the high health herd scheme and vaccinated for BVD and Leptospirosis. It has also been John's risk level one since 2010.

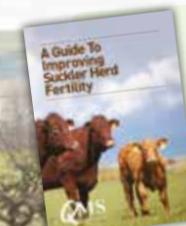
**A compact calving period means that Rob and Iain have more heifers achieving their target weights at bulling, which gives them more mature replacements to select from.**

The cows' mature weight averages around 680kg at a condition score of 3 to 3.5. Rob said: "I find that because the cows are so fertile and calve very easily, condition score is not as critical, and I like to keep them reasonably fit throughout the year."

Steer calves comfortably gain 1.2kg per day until weaning in November at 350kg and receive no creep feed, so this is a useful tool for Rob and Iain to analyse how well each cow is milking. Anything which cannot rear around half her own bodyweight will not be kept.

The Salers Breed Society started using Breedplan to record EBVs three years ago and the Firth herd is fully recorded. Rob said: "I think we have to do this as a breed and it should be seen as a useful tool, alongside visual assessment."

The key maternal characteristics are good fertility, early sexual maturity, good fleshing ability, milkiness, longevity and easy calving. The Liveseys get great satisfaction from running such a herd, where the cows can pretty well look after themselves and management is simple.+



QMS has completely revised and updated its Guide to Suckler Herd Fertility Booklet. The publication is designed to help assess herd fertility and identify scope for improvement.

To request a free copy phone QMS on 0131 472 4040 or email [info@qmscotland.co.uk](mailto:info@qmscotland.co.uk).