

Innovations in Calf Rearing, Tilburg Netherlands

17 – 19 March 2019

Units and facilities visited

Sunday 17th March

Leonel Leal, Ruminant Researcher at Trouw Nutrition R & D Boxmeer, Netherlands.

The focus of his talk was to explain the idea of metabolic programming and how in calves, this process continues for the first two months of life before weaning. During that time if calves are fed an elevated plane of nutrition, their metabolism can be programmed to impact lifetime production in a positive way - increased future milk production and reduced age at first calving in dairy heifers.

Monday 18th March

We visited four farms in Brabant

- Vero Jes, Molenschot
- Adrie Wouters, Hilvarenbeek
- Pierre Van Oort, Biest Houtakker
- Den Eelder, Molenachterdijk

On the farm visits we saw excellent management protocols: –

- transition cows,
- calving pens,
- mgt at calving,
- colostrum and
- neonatal calf management including feeding an elevated plane of nutrition to calves pre weaning

Technologies currently not in use in Northern Ireland

All the farmers were taking colostrum BRIX scores. They were actively targeting 25+ for heifer calves with the poorer colostrum to bull or beef calves.

On the four farms, calves were predominantly in hutches for the first weeks and used a milk shuttle to feed acidified whole milk ad lib in buckets with teats. For example at Vero Jes eight cows calve each week. They had a planned yard with five rows of eight individual hutches. The calves were in a hutch for three weeks. This set up allowed a hutches to be rested for two weeks. Falls and cambers in the yard changed in relation to direction of discharge required.

On all farms calves were grouped after three weeks and were fed one kg+ of milk replacer per day up until weaning. Weaning could be at eight to ten weeks. All farms were feeding good hay or straw which on two farms was mixed with concentrate. Again this was often fed ad lib until well after weaning. No farms fed grass silage to calves.

We saw bulling heifers on three farm and these were ready for service at 13½ months of age. Heifers were calving before 2 years old.

Application to Northern Ireland

Implementing operating protocols in relation to

- transition cows,
- calving pens,
- management at calving,
- colostrum
- feeding an elevated plane of nutrition to calves pre weaning

will allow participant farmers to achieve calf growth rates of 1kg / day, increasing future milk production and reduced age at first calving in dairy heifers.