

Win-win grazing for replacements

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Growing young stock to target live weights requires good feeding, consideration to trace element deficiencies, disease prevention, such as BVD and coccidiosis, and a good parasite management program.

None of this is new or rocket science, yet we currently have a large proportion of our young stock under their target live weight at 22 months of age. The implications of this are less milk production, poor reproduction, and a shorter lifespan in the herd. There is a need to do better.

A vital component, especially in Southland, is the use of graziers to grow the young stock. The grazing relationship is not as strong as it could be sometimes, and has been identified as an area in need of improvement. The use of regular weighing provides indisputable feedback on performance and is a valuable tool which can open up that discussion between the grazier and owner/manager of the animals.

A common and easy explanation for the poor performing heifers is to blame the grazier. Blame doesn't change anything it just creates resentment. The question you have to ask yourself is, what can I do to improve the situation?

A strong relationship with your grazier involves good communication around expectations of targets and feeding levels. I believe having a stronger relationship between the owner and the grazier delivers better results. Most people have a desire to do well and reach those expectations. A strong relationship can begin for example, with a discussion of the expectations, and an animal health plan over a cup of coffee. But are those expectations always put down in black and white so the grazier knows where he sits? The answer would be no. By setting out clear and realistic expectations, on paper, of target live weights by a certain date and the daily growth rates needed to achieve this, the grazier knows where he is at. Have a conversation around feeding and put it into his language. If he is a sheep farmer, tell him growing heifers is like fattening prime lambs to go to the works. Or pre mating is just the same as pre mating in sheep, you need to flush them and have them on a rising plane. You may even have to tutor the grazier on the feeding management.

If you set out clear expectations, the only way to monitor this and provide feedback is to weigh the heifers regularly. Weighing is just part of a robust and planned animal health plan which should also cover off trace element and disease limiting factors on growth rates. Having a plan also allows the grazier to plan yardings, making it easier for him.

Weighing does cost money and is time consuming. But the information is invaluable. An eye appraisal is just not good enough. You do not have enough concrete evidence that the heifers are not performing until it is too late. If you weigh them you can say very objectively what percentage have hit target or not. The hard part is to have the tough conversation around the under performing ones. If you have that strong relationship, this is much easier to overcome. People respect you for being open, honest and fair. They will not always like it, but they will respect it. The relationship between grazier and animal owner too often sours because eye appraisal has failed and everyone has been thinking they are ok then suddenly they are not. The reality is that they would have been under performing all along but it is only when it hits a critical point, with a big tail end of animals, that eye appraisal picks up poor performance.

A complaint I see from graziers, all the time, is under target weight calves being sent to grazing. This combined with poorly transitioned calves off milk and onto grass handicaps the grazier from the start. Not only this, it gives the wrong impression of your standards. By making a commitment and doing your part, it can set the right standard from the start.

As I said in my opening paragraph, most of this stuff is not new. However, BVD infection amongst your young stock, and its effect on growth rates and disease, will be new to a lot of people. One BVD carrier in a mob will reduce average daily growth rates by 20%. So, if you don't blood test all your calves for BVD, then how do you know the poor performance is down to the grazier? Having an animal health plan in place for young stock would ensure that nothing like this gets missed.

In any human relationship the small things count but are often overlooked. At the end of the day saying "thanks the heifers are amazing" and giving him a bottle of wine goes along way in developing a strong loyal relationship. The comment "I shouldn't have to, I pay the grazier well enough" is all very well but, remember, for a lot of people it is not always the money that makes them tick.

After all these efforts, if your heifers are still under performing, be prepared to find alternative grazing. In our current situation this is never easy. Do your research. Are you willing to pay an incentive for heifers to hit target weight? Go and have a look at the stock they currently have on. Put your expectations in writing. Communication is the key. It is the silver bullet of successful young stock rearing with your grazier.