Suckler Nutrition

It does not matter whether you are calving in spring or autumn, all sucklers need to be in optimum body condition score, with spring calvers scoring a condition score of 3 at housing, 2.5 at calving and 2 at turnout. Autumn calving cows will have been at grass all summer and these cows are slightly more difficult to manage body condition, so grazing quality and sward height must be monitored to ensure they do not receive too much. Supplementary silage or hay must be offered if grass is in short supply due to drought, summer burn off, poaching or over grazing. If condition is still required, early weaning will allow these cows to replenish their body reserves more quickly, as it takes approximately the equivalent in energy of 6kgs of milk to replace 1kg in body live weight.

The most important factor to consider when deciding on supplementary feed for sucklers is whether they need it! In many cases spring calvers will be housed and fed a combination of straw, silage with a little protein supplementation. If cows are in poor condition and need to be fed, then choices range from home grown barley to compound suckler feed. If you choose compound feed make sure it contains high levels of *energy* and optimum levels of vitamins and minerals. If you choose to offer barley as a concentrate, supplementary protein will be required in the cows' diet in most situations.

Do you have enough grazing and silage?

Summer conditions can leave you with too much grass or, commonly, burn-off grass, leaving you with restricted grazing, especially in mid summer. With calves at foot, a beneficial way to maximise your returns on calves a well as extending grazing for your sucklers is to creep feed the calves. This way they will eat less forage and they will be making better use of supplementary feed at this age to maximise potential. It also removes one more stress factor on the calves come weaning, as they are used to the new feed given to them when housed in Autumn.

Silage yields can prove to vary from the expected and quality will be affected by weather conditions. In years where the volume cut is low, care must be taken to assess requirements for the housing period to ensure additional silage is not going to have to be purchased and profits lost. If you think you might be short, house thinner cows first and leave fatter cows outside. If housing fatter cows restrict their quality intake, but not the volume, so offer low energy forage e.g. straw with little silage, whereas, if some cows have poor condition , offer silage and concentrates where required. Consult your feed specialist to discuss your options in these areas as breed, age, size and feed available all play a part here. Practically, with many housing layouts, farmers will say they have too few pens to filter out the thin ones and also to have two different feeding regimes, but if you don't, then the fat ones get fatter and the thin ones get thinner – and these will be your downer cows at Spring calving. To avoid this make *your* housing and feeding regimes adaptable so they cope with varying feeding needs.

Many farmers grow supplementary feed for sucklers. This commonly can be Swedes or fodder beet. Such feeds are very high in water (11-20%DM) so supplementing with anything less than 10kg per day is largely non beneficial. These have good sugar levels which give energy, they are extremely palatable and are an ideal solution for extending silage/hay supplies if in short supply.

Vitamins and Minerals

Vitamin E is much publicised and has many benefits including helping smooth muscle function. Therefore a deficiency will lead to more difficult calvings, calves are born weak with little vigour and not wanting to stand and suckle. Recommended levels have increased in recent years with modern-day suckler cow recommendations being 1000 iu/day. Selenium is another important mineral and is required to prevent white muscle disease in the calves and also to minimise fertility problems in the cows. Supplementation of selenium can be in the form of drenches, boluses, injections and powdered mineral supplementation. Such deficiencies are uncommon in summer grazing with grass being rich in vitamin E so supplementation will be needed in autumn and when housing.

Iodine is under government review with the legal maximum supplementation being halved in September 2006 to 5mg/kg of feed. This will not be an issue for suckler farmers as they are not feeding these cows hard at any time. The main deficiency symptoms are swelling of the thyroid gland in the neck and can lead to the birth of weak or dead calves. Iodine deficiency can be caused by low levels of Iodine in the soil or herbage or by other factors such as high calcium intakes or moving to lush grass. Deficiency can be rectified by oral supplementation in the feed, in a carrier or in a powdered mineral.

These are 3 examples of vitamins and minerals required by cows during housing and often at times during the summer grazing. However there are many more minerals and vitamins required to be supplemented to your sucklers to maximise the health status of the cows as well as minimise problems come calving and bulling. All feeds are supplemented, but you need to be aware that the levels are optimal.

Consult with your feed company for advice on supplementary levels of vitamins and minerals and discuss your options for your sucklers, whether spring or autumn calvers, to try and make life a bit easier and perhaps more profitable!

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