

Good news on calf rearing protocols

Key messages on the importance of colostrum management, vaccination against pneumonia, and reducing antibiotic use are hitting home, according to the latest #Calfmatters survey results.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

Producers are definitely upping their game when it comes to calf rearing and tackling disease, including pneumonia or bovine respiratory disease. And this has been underlined by the responses from the 2020 #Calfmatters survey, which Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health's vet Ailsa Milnes has analysed. "There's plenty of good news in there, not least that more producers are improving calf rearing protocols and systems and also vaccinating calves, as an added insurance to prevent pneumonia," she says. "This

means that an increased percentage of producers are also treating less than 5% of their calves for respiratory disease." This is the fourth consecutive year that the survey has been carried out. "So we are able to look back at the pattern of responses, which as well as giving us a snapshot of what's happening now, allows us compare the results to what producers have said and done in previous years. "Firstly, we had an increased number of responses to our survey in 2020 with almost 500 completed forms.



This indicates a greater interest and awareness of calf health," says Dr Milnes, adding that many responses also came from #Calfmatters followers. Of all the respondents, more than half (54%) were dairy producers, with the rest being beef and specialist contract rearers, and their average herd size was 195 milkers. "It's slightly higher than the average UK dairy herd size of 148, and it's a good representation of the modern UK dairy unit."

Preventing disease

One of the most positive findings is that more producers are vaccinating their calves to protect them from BRD – 47% of producers stated that they vaccinated some or all calves on farm. "This is higher than the national average, which is around 40% according to industry figures, and marks a year-on-year increase from our survey responses," says Dr Milnes.

"There's been a big drive by RUMA during the past few years to encourage producers to vaccinate, where appropriate, to prevent disease and to reduce the use of antibiotics that are needed to treat sick animals," says Dr Milnes. "Producers are seeing the benefits of using vaccination that includes the reduced incidence of pneumonia, improved calf health and wellbeing, reduced antibiotic use, and fewer vet visits. Our survey results also show that there's an increased awareness of the role that vaccines play in increasing animal health and welfare – and in reducing antibiotic use. So the message is getting through." She adds that producers are motivated to use vaccines because they see these benefits and they also witness better staff motivation. "Treating is not only time consuming – it's also demoralising. Seeing your antibiotic use and vet and medicine bills falling year on year is highly motivating, as is looking after healthy and thriving calves."

Reduced incidence

In 2020's survey, 67% of respondents stated that they had to treat fewer than 5% of their calves (see Table 1) and this is a figure that has improved in recent years, from 61% in 2019 and 56% in 2018). "The 'more than 25%' box has always been ticked by the minority and that number continues to fall," adds Dr Milnes. The survey also highlights that the colostrum 'message' – its vital role in protecting calf health and getting them off to the best possible start, is also getting through. "Respondents showed that they have a firm grasp on the importance of colostrum – quality, timing and quantity – and have good protocols in place. We can see an increase in producers testing colostrum quality, with 38% routinely testing in 2020."

Table 1: Percentage of calves treated for pneumonia (BVD) by survey respondents during the past year

percentage of calves treated for pneumonia	percentage
below 5%	67
5-10%	20
10-25%	9
more than 25%	4

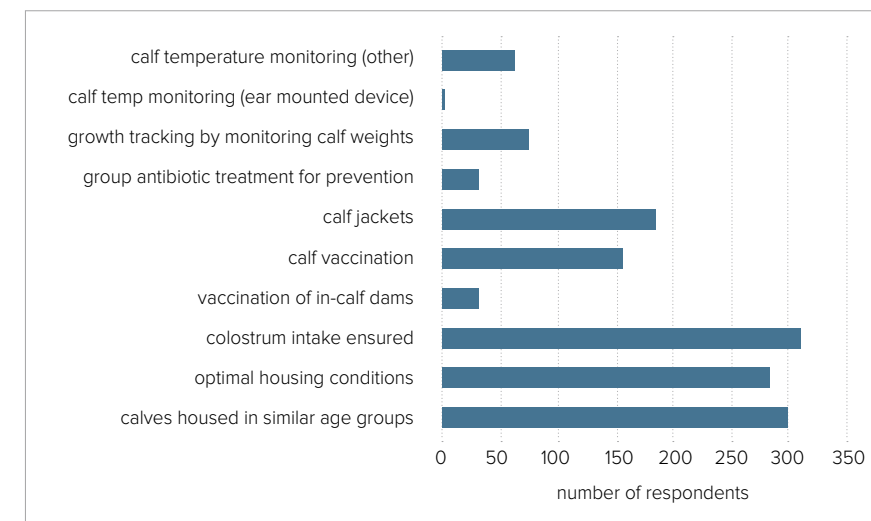


Table 2: Management methods used by survey respondents to reduce calf pneumonia

Dr Milnes said that producers also appear to be more aware of the role of management – particularly the calf environment – when it comes to maximising health and growth rates, and preventing disease. "When we asked them what their priority was, going forward, to improve their current calf rearing system, the top answer was to house calves in similar age groups, followed by managing colostrum intakes, and monitoring calf housing conditions. "So there's an awareness that mixing different aged calves also poses a disease risk. And this could be the reason why producers also say that they need to invest in additional or upgrading calf housing facilities."

Identifying 'bottlenecks'

Dr Milnes says that it's encouraging that producers are assessing all aspects of their calf rearing systems and identifying 'bottlenecks' (see Table 2). "They're certainly aware that management and husbandry has to be tip-top to prevent disease and maximise health and welfare. And they're using vaccination as part of a complete care package. It's not a panacea and it isn't being used as such. Vaccination should be used as part of the overall strategy." The survey also asked what the impact of pneumonia is on their business and the top answer was increased vet and medicine bills, followed by the loss of income from less productive calves and dead/culls. "And 29% of respondents also highlighted personal or staff stress as a significant impact, due to the additional work created by sick calves." "This question has been asked every year of the survey and the responses have been fairly consistent, but with an increased perception of the impact. Producers are increasingly seeing that BRD effects calf growth and productivity and is not just related to the cost of dead or sick calves." When asked what, if any changes to farm policy had been made as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the top answer was to review farm biosecurity. "The threat of this virus has focused minds a little here – both in terms of human and cattle and calf health. And that's a positive outcome, despite the on-going difficulties faced by producers and the wider industry," adds Dr Milnes. |



Ailsa Milnes: "Producers are using vaccination as part of a complete care package"