

# Taking stock

It's time for dairy producers to take responsibility for the culling of organic dairy bred male calves, says **Helen Browning**

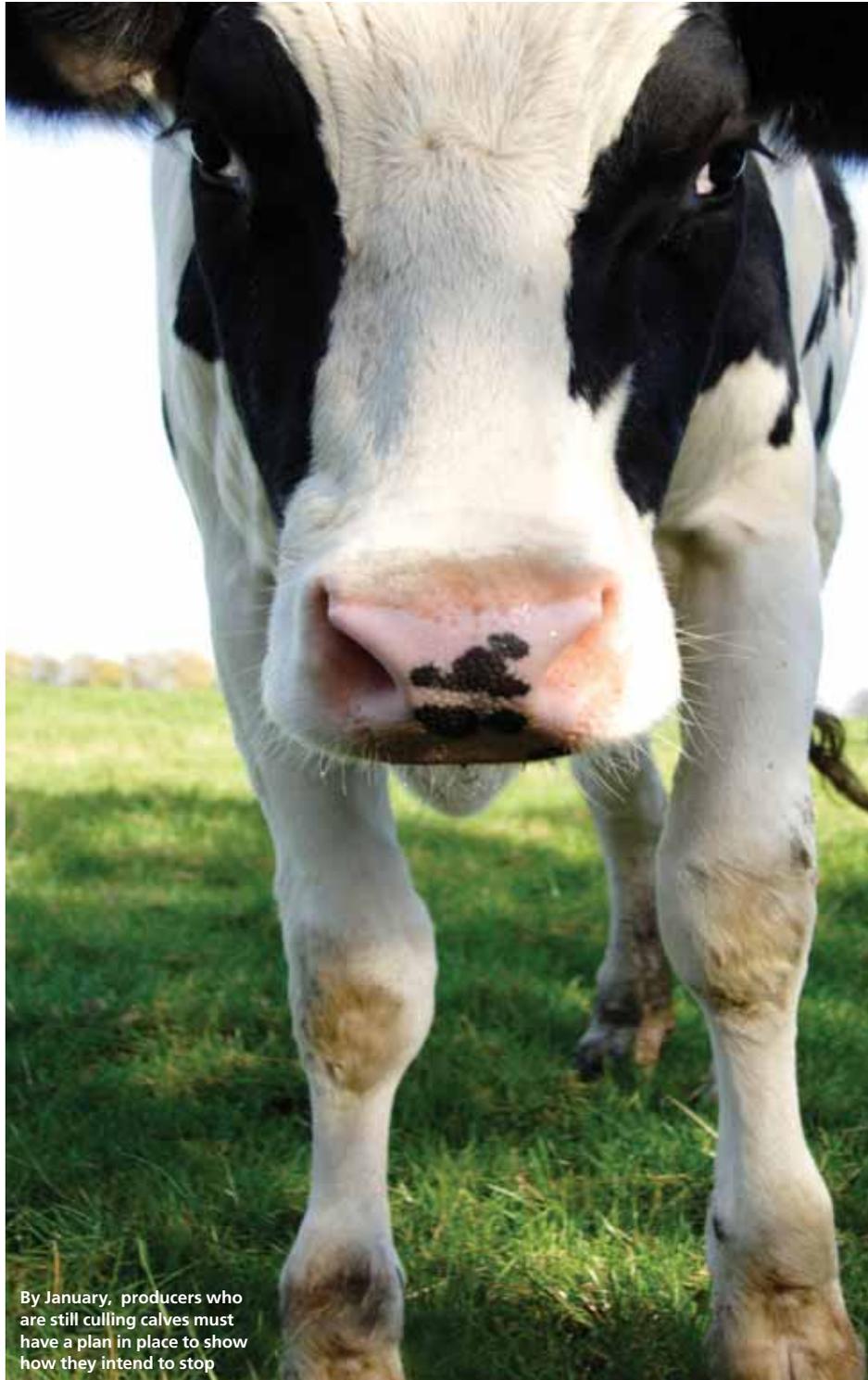
**F**rom 1 January 2010, an important change to Soil Association standards on calf welfare comes into force. This change was agreed and communicated to organic dairy producers last year and seeks to ensure that any producers who are still culling dairy bred bull calves have a clear plan (with timescales) to end this practice. Soil Association standards also prohibit calves from organic farms going for export – unless for breeding purposes – and this has partly been achieved by not allowing the sale of calves under 30 days old into markets. The aim is obviously to protect the integrity of organic farming in the areas of animal welfare and resource use.

## Challenges

Some producers have understandably expressed concerns about these changes – especially in light of falling milk prices – while others have requested clarification on the changes. The Soil Association is working to find a way through this difficult situation so that we can meet our objective of ensuring that every organically born calf is treated to the highest welfare standards, without causing unnecessary complications or economic loss for dairy producers – especially those already burdened by bovine tuberculosis (bTB) restrictions.

Live exports are currently not taking place from England and Wales because of bTB restrictions, although the European Union's recent recognition of Scotland as Officially Tuberculosis Free (OTF) could result in the resumption of exports north of the border. Where producers are experiencing extreme difficulties in implementing strategies to deal with their dairy bull calves, the Soil Association has agreed to consider 'exceptional permissions' – on a case by case basis – to permit the sale of calves younger than 30 days old at livestock markets until the export markets re-open.

It is worth remembering that while the 30-day standard was established to prevent the export of calves (above 30 days they are too old for the export trade), the immunity level of the calf is lower at 30 days than at 15 days, so it may be better from the calf's point of view to sell at a younger age. We also recognise that the requirement to carry out pre-movement testing for bTB of any calf leaving the farm after 42 days old left a very narrow window for calf sales without additional hassle and cost.



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Nevertheless, once calf exports re-start this standard will be re-enforced and, as such, this exception does not provide a long term solution.

Another complication for those wanting to rear organic dairy calves (particularly where these calves are reared away from the dairy farm) is the requirement to feed a minimum of 51% liquid milk. The Soil Association has now agreed to consider exceptional permissions which – if granted – would allow producers to rear calves entirely on organic powder milk once the colostrum feeding period is complete. This permission already exists for producers who have particular feeding problems where they are implementing strategies to control Johnes disease and could be extended to other farms where the result is a move away from killing calves at birth. However, although supplies of organic milk powder are available, the powder is currently imported from the EU and is expensive. Where difficulties arise, these exceptional permissions should result in practical options other

## RELATED EVENTS

On Thursday 28 January, the Soil Association is hosting a free event at Chard, Somerset to provide producers with 'best practice' advice on developing a plan to avoid the killing of healthy dairy calves. For more information – and booking details – see page 21

than putting calves down at birth. Calves can either be sold non-organically at an early age (avoiding rearing costs) or reared away from the dairy farm if demand is there and the costs stack up.

### The way forward

By January 2010, producers who are still culling calves must have a plan in place to show how they intend to stop, with a realistic timeframe for ending the practice. This can – and should – form part of your animal health plan. Although on-farm killing of calves may not be a welfare issue (as long as the calves are cared for properly until slaughter and slaughtered humanely) the practice is distasteful for producers and public alike, and is a waste of a 'resource' that has already been invested in.

We see a 'realistic timeframe' as a maximum of five years, within which time alternative options should be in place. We are well aware that it will not be easy for some producers to end this practice without changes to their farming systems, nor until the necessary infrastructure – such as calf rearing and the market – is in place.

To help, the Soil Association is planning a number of activities to assist producers in overcoming the challenges. Strategies include a seminar (see below left) to promote different approaches and case studies, as well as negotiations with processors and retailers to develop markets. Many – probably the majority – of organic dairy producers have already moved away from culling male dairy calves. Some of the ways that they have done this include:

### Breeding

Some producers are moving to dual purpose or less extreme dairy breeds. For the majority of UK dairy farms with 'black and whites' this involves using British Friesian genetics which can make good beef carcasses – and the cull cows make a lot more money, too. Many other producers are cross-breeding, using dairy shorthorn, Montbeliardes, MRI, Swedish red and others, and are gaining worthwhile improvements in health and fertility, too. It is worth noting that some of our native dairy breeds, such as the Jersey and the Ayrshire, present as much of a problem as the Holstein.

### Sexed semen

Organic standards permit sexed semen if it is physically (rather than chemically) separated. It seems most effective on heifers, although it currently narrows your choice of bulls. However, it will inevitably become more widespread and (hopefully) cheaper over time, and should massively reduce the number of male dairy bred calves being born.

### Veal

Pink veal production may be an option for the extreme dairy breeds – as long as a suitable market is available. The popularity of this meat is increasing, albeit from a very low base. For information on pink veal production see *OF#92* (winter 2006).

## Developing a plan

Soil Association Certification Ltd is writing to all organic dairy producers on this issue, providing basic guidance on the required changes. But you might consider including the following in your plan:

- n List what you are currently doing with dairy bull calves
- n List why rearing calves or selling calves is currently not an option (if appropriate)
- n List what options you intend to explore to stop killing calves at birth
- n Provide a timescale for the options that might work for you – and start working towards it
- n Create an annual progress plan that you can check against.

For advice on your implementation plan call **0117 914 2400** – if we can help, we will.

### Forage focus

You can improve the conformation of male dairy breeds substantially by leaving them entire and selling for beef at 12–16 months. It goes without saying that getting this right within the parameters of the organic standards requires excellent forage quality, as well as good management.

### New entrants

Many producers see calves as a distraction from their main business. Why not consider helping a new entrant to get a foot on the farming ladder by offering them the chance to use your buildings and grazing for calf rearing – perhaps as a share farming opportunity? Rearing calves close to the dairy farm can also overcome problems of sourcing organic milk, while yogurttised milk can also aid storage.

### Suckler systems

Some organic dairy producers have set up calf rearing systems using older or high cell count dairy cows to rear calves, either on the farm or as a separate farming enterprise. A very small number of pioneering organic dairy producers are leaving calves suckling while also milking the same cows.

### This is the start

None of these options are a panacea but, over time, they could form part of the solution to ensuring that every calf has a productive, comfortable life. As organic dairy producers, I believe that it is part of our job – and our responsibility – to help this modest ambition become a reality.

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