

## ORGANIC VEAL PRODUCTION

**BRIEF DESCRIPTION:** Organic veal production: systems, costs and market.

### BACKGROUND

Organic veal is produced from male dairy calves unsuitable for beef production. The calves spend the first few days of their lives with their dam, in the same way as beef calves and female dairy calves. This ensures the calves get the necessary colostrum.

Once the calf has received the colostrum, it can be removed and the dam returned to the dairy herd. There are two options for rearing the veal calf.

**Surrogate cows** will usually be cows that are not currently suitable for the dairy herd. This system can result in two or three years extra productivity out of an old cow, it could help young heifers settle before they join the dairy herd, or it could accommodate cows with high cell counts or lameness problems. Depending on the milk yield of the surrogate cow, up to four calves can be fed by each. However, two or three calves to each nurse cow is more typical.

Calves are penned with the surrogate mother to enable them to begin suckling the surrogate. The process will take two or three days on average. This is where good stockmanship is important: if calves are unwilling to suckle the surrogate, various methods can be used such as head yokes to hold the cow in place or restricting feed to encourage the calf to suckle.

**Whole milk calf rearing:** The alternative to using surrogates is to feed the calves via a bucket and teat system. The calves will be fed with excess milk from the bulk milk tank. Colostrum still has to be fed for the first few days of life.

### DISBUDDING AND CASTRATION

Veal calves are generally disbudded but not castrated. Disbudding prevents handling problems when the calves get older, but by leaving them entire the calves will have a faster growth rate and hence a better conformation at time of slaughter.

# Factsheet



## HOUSING

Housed calves must have a creep area available to them. This is a bedded area where calves have feed and water separate to the surrogate cow.

The veal calf shed must be an airy, well-ventilated building without drafts. The heat given off by the cattle should be enough keep the shed warm enough without heating. It is important to avoid the shed becoming too damp - a perforated roof, open ends or slatted/Yorkshire boarding are all good solutions for allowing the warm moist air to escape rather than condense.

## OUTDOOR MANAGEMENT

Once the calves are paired up with a nurse cow, you can pen the cows and calves together in groups of 4 – 8 cows (25 – 30 calves) to form maternal groups. This will help prevent the calves potentially becoming isolated when put out to graze.

Once the cows and calves are grouped together in maternal groups they can be turned out for grazing. The calves must be properly suckling from the surrogate cows before they get put out to graze. They are then reared in a very similar way to beef and dairy calves, other than in their diet.

## FEED

Whereas dairy and beef calves can be weaned from 12 weeks, veal calves are kept on milk throughout, until slaughter at around five or six months of age.

Calves will initially consume six to eight litres of milk per day, but by the time of slaughter they will be consuming between 8 and 15 litres per day. In total calves consume approximately 1500 litres of milk over their lives, but this can vary depending on a number of factors including breed, calf size and temperament.

Their milk diet must be balanced with unlimited access to hay or silage when penned and unlimited grazing in the field. Calves should also have access to calf mix in the creep area after two or three weeks. This can be introduced in low quantities. By week 12 the calf should weigh around 100kg; at this weight their dry matter intake will be 2.5kg/head/day. As concentrates may be used up to 40% of the dry matter intake, by week 12 you can feed 1kg/head/day of calf mix. The calf mix should have a protein level of approximately 16%-18%. A typical home-produced calf mix could include rolled oats, milled beans and molasses.

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## FINISHING

Organic veal calves are usually finished at between six and seven months. At this point they will have a condition score of 2 or 3. With Friesian calves they should finish at around 225-230kg, to give a carcass weight of 95-110kg.

## COSTS/INCOME

When considering starting a veal production unit, the costs of production must be carefully weighed up against the potential income. This should take into account the initial start-up costs, such as converting housing as well as the variable and fixed costs of ongoing production. Areas for consideration are outlined below.

Costs:

- Capital costs – constructing or converting an existing building into a calf shed.
- Labour
- Depreciation of surrogate mother cows (if using)
- Feed – forage, concentrate (and milk if not using surrogate cows)
- Bedding
- Veterinary treatments

## SELLING ORGANIC VEAL

Veal production is not a market to enter speculatively; farmers must have clear markets in place before setting up a veal production unit.

Because of the calf's diet and outdoor access, organic veal is a pink meat, often called pink veal or rose veal. Meat cuts fall into two categories:

- prime cuts that command a higher price (rear end, loin, shin, liver, kidneys and ribs); and
- secondary cuts (forequarters, brisket and trim).

Currently, most veal is sold:

- Straight to buyers (restaurants, delicatessens) with the benefit of consistent contracts and higher volume; or
- Through direct sales (box schemes, mail order) with the advantage of being able to sell all the cuts by offering packages combining prime cuts and secondary cuts in bundles (often with mince and sausages).