

Heifers: big girls XL

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On most dairy farms the heifers won't cover their rearing costs until they reach their second lactation. If they don't get there they still owe you money when they are culled.

An extra 50kg in bodyweight at first calving means 850 litres more in the vat over her lifetime (and this is conservative).

Having a feed plan for your heifers is as important as it is for your milkers. It is easy to let your heifers drop down the priority list. Growing heavier, well-framed heifers is an investment for the future of your farm.

IT'S A FACT...

Heavier, well-framed heifers:

- Get in calf easier the first time
- Produce more milk in their first lactation
- Get back in calf sooner for their second lactation
- Stay in the herd longer
- Need less help calving
- Cope better with herd competition

Putting more money into your pocket.



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- Critical times for feeding supplements are post weaning and when there is a shortage of quality pasture (this is usually for at least 6 months of the year in most Australian dairy regions).
- Use high-quality supplements containing at least 11.5 MJ ME/kg dry matter and 16% crude protein.
- You'll probably need a cereal plus a legume.

Making it happen

Feeding heifers is an important task. Allocating the time to the right person to do the task may be the most important step.

To make sure the job is done properly and safely, decide how you want your heifers fed and write it down. Then make sure the people responsible understand what needs to be done, how to do it and when to do it. Keep in mind they may need some training to do the tasks effectively. For lists of job tasks, standard operating procedures and safety protocols for feeding heifers visit Dairy Australia's www.thepeopleindairy.org.au.

Rearing off-farm

Agistment, leasing and contract rearing may be a way to ensure your heifers are well looked after. Before committing to rearing your heifers off farm make sure that both parties are clear about the expectations and responsibilities. Document the requirements, responsibilities, targets and payment terms in an agreement or contract. See www.incalf.com.au for an example contract.

Feeding systems

Use a feeding system that saves you time. If using a self-feeder consult a nutritionist to minimise the risk of acidosis. For tips on how to reduce wastage see the Grains2Milk Factsheet 14: Feed don't waste it (at www.dairyaustralia.com.au).

Examples of portable feeding systems are pictured below.



Moveable wheeled heavy gauge trough feeder



Covered grain or pellet self-feeder shifted using forks



Metal skirting used to control fodder wastage with larger heifers

How to keep on target

Weighing heifers is the best way to keep track of their progress. The process is simple:

1. Know your target weight

Use the InCalf Growth Target Rule of Thumb to work out the target weight for your heifers at any age. Or look up the table in *The InCalf Book* (chapter 8) or www.incalf.com.au if you want to be more precise. In a seasonal/split herd, assume all your calves are the same age as the oldest in the group, as they will all be mated at the same time.

The Growth Target Rule of Thumb

Holstein-Friesian target weight =

age (months) x 20 + 40 = kg

Jersey target weight =

age (months) x 15 + 35 = kg

e.g. 10-12 month old Holstein-Friesian heifers – set age at 12 months (12 x 20) + 40 = 280kg target weight.

2. Draft as you weigh

Weigh your heifers every 3 months and draft out those below the target weight for preferential feeding.

Weighing is usually a straight forward task and can be linked with other animal health jobs, such as drenching young stock.



If you don't have scales:

- Find out if there's a local service, for example through your herd improvement centre. Weighing is often a cheap service and can be very convenient.
- Use a girth tape or wither height measuring stick. These are available through rural merchandisers. Check www.incalf.com.au for wither height and girth tape charts.



3. Preferentially feed

The best way to help heifers below the target weight to catch up is to separate them and give them extra feed and TLC. Splitting them into a separate group reduces the competition for feed and enables you to direct supplements to the heifers that need it most. For heifer feed requirements see the Grains2Milk Fact sheet 2: Feed budgeting (at www.dairyaustralia.com.au).



And don't forget your health and reproduction management plan: vaccination; worming; bull to heifer ratios at joining; and bull vaccination. For more information go to *The InCalf Book* (chapter 8) or www.incalf.com.au.

