

Twinning, why settle for a goal of 90% calving when 135% is possible?

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Most producers and stud breeders tell us that reproduction is a high priority and they use both genetics and management practices to help improve this. The Victorian Livestock Farm Monitor Project (14/15 report) shows that the average calving percentage is between 88 and 90% and the South West sector which has been reporting longest, has a 44 year time line with no obvious trend for change. Why have these efforts been ineffective? The answer is that they have not recognised the opportunities that Twinning presents.

In the 1980's there was a flurry of research on twinning. At Hamilton and Grafton we were able to demonstrate that twinning could be managed and should greatly increase productivity and profitability on the farm if it could be achieved at low cost. At that same time, the US Meat Animal Research Center in Nebraska set about selecting a composite line of cattle for twinning (USMARC Twinners). This was quite successful, with the twinning rate improving at about 2% per year and getting up to a calving rate of 160% by 2004. These cattle produced very acceptable carcasses. At that time we started to import these genetics to our farm at Cavendish where we run a small beef herd.

Over the last 10 years (~ 500 calvings), we have achieved a twin calving rate of 35% in our autumn calving herd which has been run under commercial conditions through a number of quite poor seasons. There is a little bit of extra supervision required at calving time and it is useful to use ultrasound pregnancy testing to predict the number of calves due. Over this time the steers have gone into the Hamilton weaner sales and in spite of the high number of twins in the group they seem to match other local cattle and sell very well.

One of the common criticisms of twinning is that the twins are smaller. It is true that they are smaller at birth and weaning than comparable singles. We had a detailed look at this in our heifers by comparing the ability of single born and twin born heifers to get in calf at 15 months of age. At weaning at 8 months of age the single heifers weighed 312Kg and the twins 256Kg a difference of 18%. Looked at on a per cow basis, a cow with twins is producing 164% of the weaning weight of a cow with a single. When we looked at the ability of these normal twin heifers to get pregnant, being born a twin did not reduce pregnancy rates, so that post weaning these twins had caught up to their single mates in every regard.

We have been running these composite genetic twinners commercially for 10 years. Many other enthusiastic cattle producers should be able to do the same. They are greenhouse gas friendly and potentially much more profitable. Why not think about twinning cattle? Come and see us at "Ivanhoe" during Beef Week.