Better growth in weaned cattle has more than justified the use of targeted mineral treatments, says Vic Morris.

Correcting mineral issues helps cattle thrive

A known deficiency in selenium and low copper levels mean Clun, Craven Arms-based Vic Morris finds supplementing both cattle and sheep is essential to maximise performance.

Mr Morris, who farms with his brothers Brian and Graham, says farming on the red soils of the local area has always presented a challenge in ensuring livestock receive adequate minerals and trace elements.

ñIt's something we've had to overcome over the years, particularly in the suckler herd where poor mineral and trace element status can have a significant impact on performance. Luckily, unlike some herds we've never found it has affected fertility, but it does impair the performance of young stock.ò

With all calves from the herd, apart from heifers retained for breeding, sold as yearling store cattle, ensuring they perform well is essential, with store buyers willing to pay premiums for well bred cattle in full bloom at the local sales. ñWe've got many repeat buyers for our calves and they need to know the cattle will go on and thrive when they get them home.

ôAnything with a mineral or trace element deficiency will soon show up when it changes home,òhe explains.

The farm runs a herd of 170 near pure Limousin cows which have been bred up from the original suckler herd over a period of 30 or so years. ñOnce we started with the Limousin we just kept using it and have always retained our own replacements for the herd. This also helps with trace element issues as the cattle are used to the ground rather than buying in replacements which could be adversely affected by a change in mineral status.ò

Cows calve in two blocks, one spring and one autumn, with some cows now being put to a British Blue bull to add some extra width and shape to the store cattle. ñWe were finding the good Limousin bulls we wanted were getting too dear, so we switched to putting a proportion of the herd to a Blue bull instead as these can generally be bought cheaper for the same quality of bull.ôô

Mr Morris says historically the selenium issue was overcome by giving cows a long lasting injection.

ôôTrace element deficiency used to raise its head in young calves. We found calves would start to scour in the first week or so after birth for no apparent reason. There was no disease issue present and blood tests and forage analysis revealed a selenium deficiency, so we started injecting cows prior to calving and it did the trick.

ñThe copper problem was being seen in growing cattle and they just didn't seem to thrive and had a dullness to their coats.ò

Nowadays Mr Morris and his brothers opt to drench cows with a multivitamin drench prior to calving with this drench covering a wide range of trace element issues.

ñWithout a doubt since we've been drenching cows we've seen some big improvements. The scouring in calves hasn't returned and calves are born more lively, with plenty of get up and go.

ñWe use the same product in the young stock too and find calves are noticeably improved after they've been dosed.

In fact we can pretty much tell when they need another dose just by looking at them, in some batches you wouldn't believe they were the same cattle a week or so after they've been drenched.

ñWith all feed home-grown, apart from a protein pellet added to home mixed rations, it is important we stay on top of the mineral issues as what's lacking in the silage will also be lacking in the barley and oats too,ò he says.

ñSpring calving cows are wintered on just silage and straw, while autumn calvers receive some rolled barley at bulling to help with energy levels. Calves are creep fed to maximise growth and are then offered a mixed ration of silage, crimped grain and a protein blend.ò

The Morris family use a similar drench in their sheep flock to ensure lambs thrive and ward off the risk of CCN in lambs. ñWe used to see a few cases of CCN in lambs and its one of those conditions that unless you spot it immediately you've no hope of beating it, so using the drench as a preventative measure is well worth it. We also drench ewes ahead of lambing and have seen a noticeable reduction in prolapses since we've been treating them,ò says Mr Morris.

Ewes in the 1450 ewe flock are lambed inside before being turned out to the farm's lower pastures and then moved to the high ground which runs to 1300 feet once they're strong enough and grass growth is sufficient. ñWe aim to sell all our lambs as finished lambs so don't want anything to give them a check when they're growing. Lambs are generally dosed with a mineral drench at about eight to nine weeks old when they have their first anthelmintic drench.

ñIf we didn't see a response we wouldn't be using anything, but we can tell when the lambs have been dosed with the mineral drench as they come in to bloom and really do well then.

With all the forage samples we've had analysed highlighting both copper and selenium as significant issues and other trace elements as background problems too it's essential we keep on top of things.ò

Jonathan Guy of JG Animal Health says the Morris familyôs problems are not unique to them or their area. ñThe key is to find out what the cause is and develop a strategy to tackle it effectively and ensure treatments are given at the right time.

Forage analysis can reveal a lot about a farmôs mineral status and it is always better to check what you need first before using any blanket treatment on the whole herd or flock. Blood testing can reveal some mineral and trace element issues, but forage testing is important too as it can reveal any hindering trace elements, such as molybdenum which can impact on copper uptake.ò

Drenching cows prior to calving has eliminated scouring in young calves.

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