

Heifers on Target

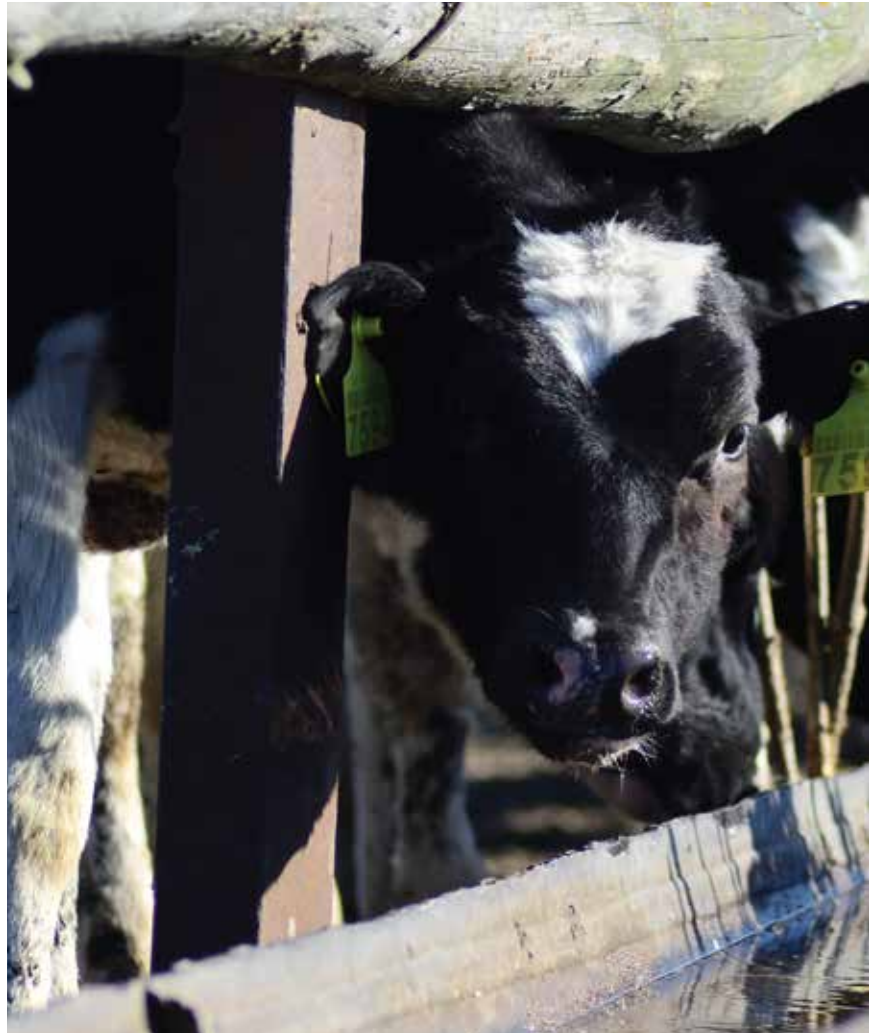


Alicia Richters

Subtropical Dairy Extension Co-ordinator northern NSW

Heifer rearing on dairy farms takes considerable time, effort and investment, with an average cost of \$1300-\$1500 per heifer. It is imperative that heifers are raised well to ensure they will be productive cows for years to come. The benefits of well-grown heifers and how to achieve this were the main topics of discussion at a recent 'Heifers on Target' workshop held in Ettrick in northern New South Wales in August. The discussion group style workshop was hosted by Peter and Kerry Little and led by experienced vet Dr Carl Hockey. The day was well attended with 26 people, including our newly formed discussion group from the Far North Coast NSW.

Throughout the workshop, the group discussed some of the benefits of well-grown heifers including having heifers reach high levels of milk production sooner, to offset their rearing investment. Research shows that better heifers have higher fertility rates, better production over their life and live longer. One of the key targets discussed was having a heifer calve at 85% of her mature liveweight. The group discussed how to achieve this target, including nutritional requirements through different ages including the split between maintenance and growth energy needs. In tough seasons, such as the current drought, achieving heifer growth rate targets can be difficult. As such, it's recommended that farmers seek assistance from a nutritionist or provide a supplementary feed when pasture quality and availability is low. Only keeping higher value replacement heifers that will go on to be high performing cows is also a suggested strategy. Many farmers in the group were joining lower value heifers with a beef bull or selling them early to save in rearing costs. Ensuring a good animal health program is in place on farm including vaccinations and drenches will also contribute to the long-term success of good quality heifers. After lunch, the group headed to the dairy to check out a range of heifers and test our weight estimating skills. A group of heifers ranging from 3-18 months old were weighed with the group discussing the results. ■■



Northern NSW farmers at the recent Heifers of Target day at Peter and Kerry Little's farm, Ettrick.

A range of supporting material is available for farmers through the Dairy Australia website including growth targets, production estimates, weight charts and more. These resources can be accessed at

www.dairyaustralia.com.au/heifers-on-target