

SPECIAL SUCKLER SERIES

WINNING THE WEANING CHALLENGE

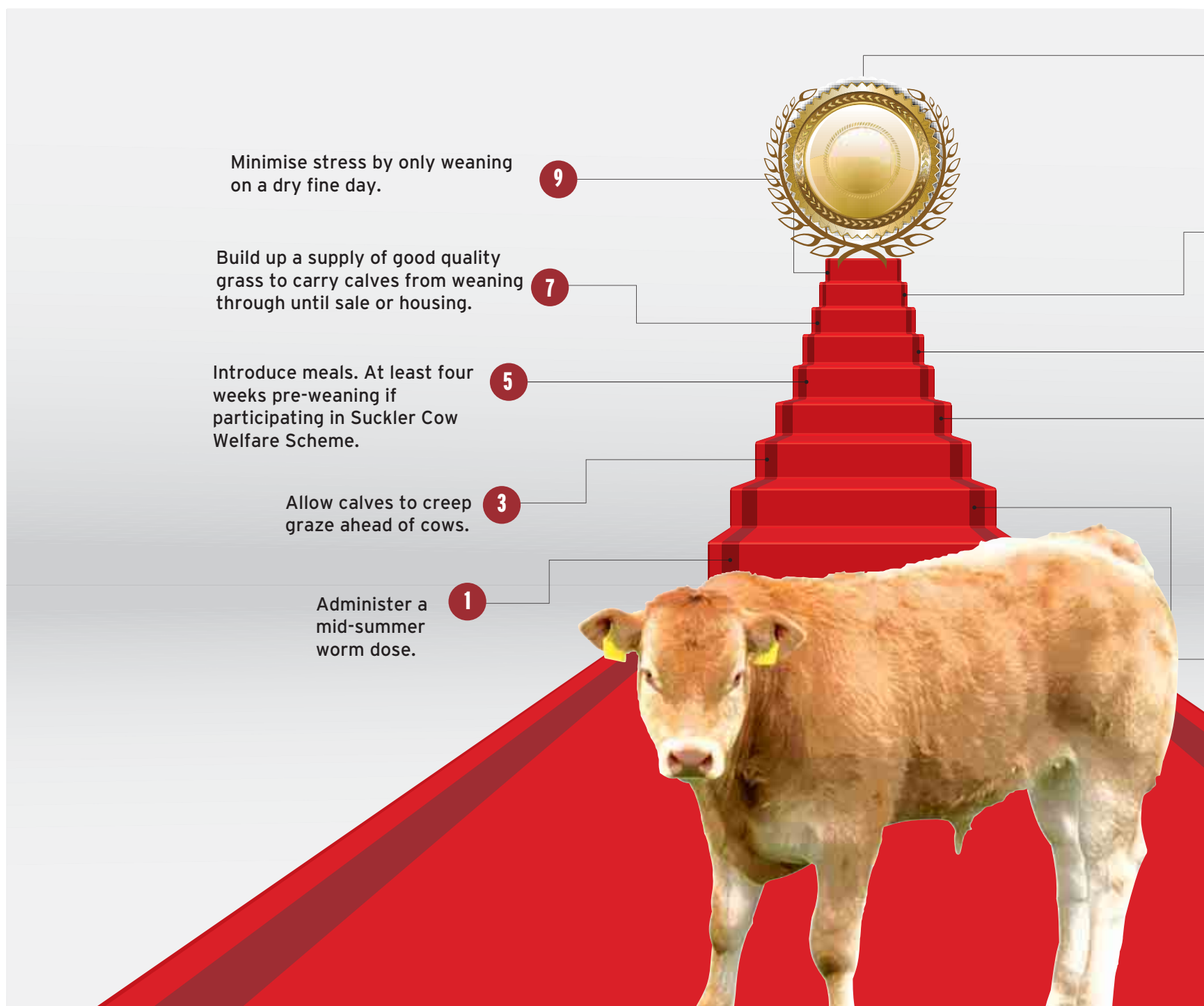
Livestock editor Justin McCarthy looks at the best way to manage your calves post-weaning

THIS WEEK

Managing the calf post-weaning and ensuring the calf remains healthy up until selling.

Next week

Managing the cow post-weaning including reducing feed costs, body condition scoring and cow health.



SMART WEANING

Keeping calves healthy from weaning to sale

All the steps taken prior to weaning have been focused on ensuring calves remain healthy and continue to thrive when weaned from their mothers.

Achieving this goal is critical on farms that intend to sell calves at between eight and 10 months of age. A pneumonia outbreak immediately after weaning has the potential to dramatically reduce the sale value of calves on these farms and therefore reduce herd output.

It is essential that farmers participating in the Suckler Cow Welfare Scheme, under which calves must be re-

tained on the farm for at least 14 days post-weaning, adopt a high level of management to ensure calves remain healthy from weaning through until sale.

Over the past four weeks we have detailed the steps you can take in advance of weaning to reduce the risk of health problems. These are outlined in figure 1.

Implementing a dosing regime that ensures calves' lungs are in a healthy condition prior to weaning is an essential part of any pre-weaning strategy along with meal feeding and implementing a graduated weaning procedure where cows are removed from the group over a period of time.

If implementing a vaccination programme, the final booster shot should be administered two weeks prior to weaning in order to ensure maximum immunity is achieved.

Management: Getting it right

WHILE each of the steps outlined in figure 1 will help reduce the risk of running into health issues, there is no substitute for good management post-weaning. It is essential that the following simple management practices are adopted to ensure all your hard work pre-weaning was not done in vain.

Wean on a dry fine day: During periods of wet and cold weather, both cows and calves are under stress. Grass intakes are low and the risk of calves getting a chill is high. Therefore weaning during periods of unsettled or muggy weather should be avoided. Where possible try to wean calves when the weather is still fine and ground conditions are good. There is no advantage in allowing early spring-born calves to suckle cows until October. Therefore, make the most of any good weather in September to start weaning.

Keep good grass underfoot: Provided that you have taken the necessary steps to build an adequate supply of good-quality grass, there is no

reason why calves that have been properly conditioned prior to weaning will not achieve in excess of 1kg of liveweight gain per day for the 14-20 day interval between weaning and selling. Assuming each additional kilo is worth €1.80, the financial reward is in excess of €30 per calf. In most cases where calves have not been conditioned properly and grass supplies are tight post-weaning, selling weight can actually be less than weaning weight, even where no major health problems have been encountered.

Ensuring you have an adequate supply of good-quality grass post-weaning will also help reduce stress levels. Moving calves from a mainly grass-based diet to round bale silage, for example, will add stress due to the change in diet.

Figure 2

Check list for a healthy calf

Rectal temperature of between 38.5-39.5°C
Pulse ranging between 72-92 and is strong and regular
Breathing is clam and regular
Respiratory rate 20-40 breaths per minute
Raised skin fold immediately levels out after 1-2 seconds.

Where possible, the diet of the calf post-weaning should remain constant for at least two-to-three weeks after weaning. Any necessary changes should be introduced gradually. This advice extends to the type of ration

Early detection and treatment of respiratory conditions is critical

being fed. This should be kept constant during the entire weaning process. Any variation in meal feeding levels should be carried out gradually.

Check regularly: Regular checking of calves post weaning is vital to winning the weaning challenge. For the two weeks after weaning,

