With pressure on profit margins, block calving is an attractive option for many. More focussed management to optimise some of the key drivers of production such as management of the calving window, fertility and grassland management, means block calving systems are some of the most profitable in the business.

**Spring calving blocks**

Generally calve February to March and aim to maximise milk from grazed grass. They require little capital investment to set up and running costs are trimmed out as much as possible. Breeding tends to be towards crossbreds and New Zealand genetics with the Holstein being unsuitable.

**Autumn calving blocks**

Benefit from being able to push for higher yields during the winter housed period, before being turned out and pushed on grass when back in calf in the spring. Commercial (not extreme) Holsteins with good fertility and crossbreds with Holstein influence would be a suitable animal for this system.

Block calving systems offer a number of opportunities (green) and limitations (red):

- Higher margins per litre
- Labour saving
- Better grazed grass utilisation
- Focused, seasonal management for improved production efficiency
- Cow type must suit the system, with fertility being a top priority
- Land suitability, availability location & rents may be limiting
- Strict culling/ replacement to keep the block
- Milk buyers generally don’t favour seasonal producers
- Liquid milk buyers requirement for level profile milk supply means that for many, block calving systems are not possible, especially spring blocks which produce milk when seasonal supply outstrips demand. Autumn milk is preferable making seasonal calving at this end of the year more popular with liquid buyers. Cheese makers are more tolerant of block calving systems.
Is autumn block calving a suitable option for your herd?

There are a whole host of other factors to consider before moving to an autumn block other than milk buyers requirements:

**Farm limitations**

Medium, well drained soils which can grow grass all season long and carry stock at either end of the grazing season are optimal for autumn calving herds. Rotational paddock grazing systems, preferably with 12 hour breaks will enable maximum milk from grazed grass. The grazing area needs to be able to support the herd even when grass growth rates are poor.

**Current calving pattern**

Moving to an autumn block can be achieved either radically or gradually, however either way is expensive. For a true all year round calving herd moving to a 3 month block, the cost of moving can be estimated at approximately £245 per cow which equates to £24,500 per 100 cows. This allows for culls going out to be replaced with heifers which front load the block. There are cashflow implications of moving to a block abruptly so a gradual approach may be more feasible.

**Cow type**

Excellent fertility is crucial to maintaining a tight calving block. Commercial Holsteins can suit an autumn block, when well managed, but there is certainly a place for crossbreeding for a more fertile animal. On this system, the saying “yield is vanity, profit is sanity” springs to mind, however with top class management, and suitable genetics, reasonably high yields can be achieved without excessive culling rates. Bull selection should certainly consider fertility indices and legs and feet.

**Fertility management**

True block calving herds which calve in 90 days or less will aim for a 6 week in-calf rate of >75% and a failure to conceive culling rate of <8%. Genetics are important, but optimal fertility management is critical to reaching these targets. Healthy, cycling cows and excellent heat detection are key to optimising submission and conception rates.

Grassland management

Tracks and water troughs as well as good quality swards are key to a successful paddock grazing system. To keep concentrate feed use to a minimum it is important that grass quality is maintained with surpluses and deficits managed appropriately with buffer feeding and silage making.

**Heifer rearing**

Autumn blocks enforce 24 month calving since heifers need to front load the block to allow for focussed management and greater chance of remaining in the block. This in itself can have positive implications on profitability since 2 year calving requires fewer heifers in the system to support the herd. However, this relies on achieving target weights sooner so at 2 years heifers are strong and well grown.

**Personal objectives**

From a lifestyle perspective, autumn block calving systems are often favoured since batch management applies which permits each stage of the production cycle to be focused upon efficiently. Cows can be managed as a single group for most of the year and with tight blocks, the parlour can be switched off for a period, allowing for summer holidays.

**Summary**

Autumn block calving systems are not suitable for everyone, however if it’s a feasible option for the farm business it could potentially provide a profit lift of up to 2 pence per litre, which equates to £16,000/yr per 100 cows for a typical 8,000 litre herd.
Case study

Huw Jones, Pengwern Farm, St Asaph
Huw decided to move towards an autumn block around 2 years ago. For cashflow reasons and following recent investment in cow housing and slurry storage, Huw has opted to move the block gradually. Moving from calving Holsteins all year round, Huw is now crossbreeding the more extreme Holsteins with Swedish Red and at present calves the majority of the herd in 6 months. He aims to tighten this to a 4-5 month block. Although not extreme, this block will allow more focussed management throughout the year and a quieter summer on the dairy side, enabling attention to be focussed on the cereal harvest.

Since moving towards an autumn block, yields have already increased from 7,800 litres last year to 8,500 litres at present. The aim is to achieve 9,000 litres with 3,500 litres coming from forage. Buildings have been improved, however Huw sees much of the improvement to have come from slicker management, especially around calving and at serving as well as from better use of grazed grass.

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