



Herefords to fore in short gestation

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Short gestation cattle genetics is set to generate \$11 million in extra milk production for hard-hit dairy farmers this spring, and John and Liz McKerchar's South Canterbury hereford stud is at the forefront.

Shrimpton's Hill Herefords at Cave has entered into a breeding partnership with Livestock Improvement Corporation (LIC) to supply semen and embryos, and is now the organisation's exclusive supplier of short gestation length (SGL) hereford genetics.

John's father started the hereford stud in 1969, purchasing stock from the Maungahina dispersal sale. By the time John and Liz took over the property in 1990 the stud had 200 cows. They decided to increase the herd "because that's what I was interested in," John says.

"This dovetailed into the growth expansion of the dairy industry and we could see to build the business we needed to market to dairy farmers because the beef industry was contracting. Today there are only 300,000 beef cows in the South Island and about the same number of dairy cows just in South Canterbury alone."

Herefords are the preferred breed of service bull for the dairy industry because every hereford-cross calf has a white face, he says, and this marker is becoming more and more important.

"AI a cow with an angus straw, and you can't tell whether the calf is angus or friesian. But it's easy to tell a white-faced hereford beef calf."

In 2001 Fonterra and the

Animal Welfare Accord indicated that inducing dairy cows to get them into milk earlier would be phased out. In response, the McKerchars recognised the advantage of using shorter gestation genetics over average or longer genetics. They started their short gestation breeding programme as a sideline breeding programme to the main herd. Coincidentally LIC started the same programme using friesians, jerseys and kiwicross.

"In 2012 LIC found out about our programme because they wanted to go to the market with an SGL product," John says. "They could see the need for a marker bull in terms of the white-faced hereford and we were told we had the best genetics."

LIC's breeding programmes manager Malcolm Ellis says when his organisation went looking for the best short gestation beef genetics, they found them at Shrimpton's Hill.

"We'd experienced demand for an extended range of short gestation genetics, for its ability to naturally deliver offspring up to 10 days early," he says.

"The key for the dairy industry is more days in milk at no extra cost. The earlier the cows calve the earlier they start milking."

LIC, which breeds about three-quarters of the country's dairy cows, has been researching the genetics solution for more than 15 years. As a result an estimated 148,613 calves are due to be born an average 7½ days earlier this spring and those animals will have a big impact on a farm's bottom line.

"Seven or eight days are pretty significant for a farm's calving

pattern and production, especially in these times of lower payout, because the sooner the cow calves the sooner she'll be back in the shed making milk," Ellis says.

"Cows that calve early can provide a range of benefits but ultimately it means more money for the farmer and, let's be honest, I'm sure they could all do with a bit more of that at the moment."

He calculates the extra days in milk to be worth up to \$11.2m in milk production this spring, or \$75.60 per cow based on the opening forecast milk price of \$5.25kgMS and the average daily production of a cow at this time of the year, 1.92kgMS per day.

"Multiply that across 100 cows and that's an extra \$7500 for the farmer. In total, short gestation genetics will generate up to \$11.2m this spring."

John says LIC has taught him that the most limiting factor in any breeding programme is the females.

"A top cow can only have one calf a year. But over the last two years, LIC has seconded four females from Shrimpton's Hill to extract eggs from, and mated the eggs with eight different bulls. The embryos are then frozen, flown

back to the farm and implanted in our recipients."

The first year of calves from this programme was 2014, and the McKerchars' top cow had 12 calves through embryo transplant by four different bulls. She had one bull calf and one heifer calf born 30 days early.

The heifer calf, which is just turning one, is giving eggs now while her half brother is on roster to produce semen. These two



yearlings will be hugely influential in the breeding programme through embryo transplant, John says.

“We have 26 recipients due to start calving this year. We are really pushing the envelope.”

“The key is more days in milk at no extra cost. With genetics

there is always a range, a bell curve. Farmers need to be reminded that there can also be a long gestation and the difference between the two extremities is about 23 days – that’s over a cycle. Calves could be later than the average by half a cycle if the animals have the wrong genetics.”

There are three things the dairy industry wants in it’s hereford genetics, he says – short gestation, low birth weight, and high calving ease.

However, it’s important not to confuse short gestation with premature birth. Last year’s calves were a month early, but at 32-34kg they were not premature. John likes using bulls with low birth weight and high growth rate which give trouble-free calving

with the potential to grow.

The McKerchar’s are “huge believers” in Breedplan, the genetic evaluation system for beef cattle. They say it’s important for their market and they wouldn’t have the contract with LIC if they didn’t have very good Breedplan figures. It works, they say.

“After all, we selected the two shortest gestation animals we know, and their calves arrived 30 days early.”

They are excited to be part of LIC’s SGL breeding programme. Three of their bulls are in Hamilton and they have another on standby.

Another is at Awahuri (Palmerston North) on “international duties.” Fifty thousand straws have been sold to

England and there are further inquiries from the United States, they say.

“Semen sales for hereford bulls are significantly higher than this time last year. It’s exciting getting

international inquiries.”

“We can now concentrate on the single trait – gestation length – while keeping a close eye on birth weight and calving ease. We won’t lose sight of the special traits our hereford breed brings to any market.”

The Shrimpton’s Hill Herefords on-farm spring bull sale is on September 29. Eighty-one per cent of the sale’s offerings are in the top 10 per cent of all recorded herefords for short gestation, and 23 per cent are in the top 1 per cent of the breed for short gestation.

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John McKerchar



John and Liz McKerchar have secured a contract with Livestock Improvement Corporation to supply short gestation hereford genetics.