THE LIVESTOCK PARTNERSHIP
SUCCESS THROUGH HEALTH

Mr C Burrell
Knepp Castle Home Farm
Knepp Castle Estate Office
West Grinstead
West Sussex RH13 8LJ

February 2011

Annual Herd Inspection 2011

Although the ground was still very wet we had picked a beautiful sunny day to inspect the three different herds.

Park
The animals had come out of the winter in a good body condition. On average the 19 cows and their followers were scored to be body condition 3+ (scale 1-5). This is significantly better than 12 months ago when the animals had to endure a hard long winter. During the winter 09/10 one adult animal was lost suffering from pregnancy toxaemia. This condition is seen at the end of pregnancy when a large part of the abdominal space is taken by the uterus. This leaves little space for the rumen. When feed quality is poor than the dams' intake will not supply enough energy for the dams' maintenance and the pregnancy requirements. In this situation the female hormones regulate the metabolism in such a way that it will prioritise the pregnancy over the dams' requirement. This results in the animal becoming weaker and weaker.

For welfare reasons and to reduce the need to feed animals in the winter it was decided to introduce the bulls later in the spring of 2010. This delay in breeding has resulted that animals are not heavily pregnant during the winter months. In my opinion this has been very successful in both the Park and the Southern block.

Some concerns were raised about the heifers failing to re-integrate after their return. Currently to prevent heifer calves being served by the bulls heifers are taken out the herd, reared as a group and returned when they are old enough for breeding. These animals can be away from the main herd for 4-5 months. This appears to have an effect on the herd structure as these heifers isolate themselves from the main herd on their return. It should be stated that when heifers are served too young it can have serious welfare implications. Often these animals fail to calve unassisted and when not monitored closely it results in increased mortality. In a situation where there are no large predators these animals will suffer in labour for many hours/days when they remain undetected. I can see two ways of dealing with this:

- Darwinian selection: animals that mature/conceive too early and fail to calve naturally will die and won't produce any offspring.

- Tight calving pattern and remove bulls after 3 months: in the wild most females in the same herd will all calve within 1-2 weeks.

By leaving the bulls in for 3 months you create a balance of cows getting the opportunity to conceive (4 cycles should result in >95% pregnant) and heifer calves being too young to conceive (3-6months).

A steer was pointed out by Pat. It clearly had a respiratory problem. According to Pat this animal had been a poor doer for some time. As this been a chronic case treatment is unlikely to result in significant improvement.

Southern Block
This herd was purchased nearly two years ago. As the animals in the Park behave as one herd (except the heifers) it is quite striking that the animals in the southern block are split up in several different groups.

Blood tests have shown that these animals have tested positive for a number of diseases like BVD (Bovine Viral Diarrhoea), Leptospirosis and IBR (Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis). This might explain why in 2010 31 of the 45 cows failed to calve! As the original Longhorn cattle on the estate have never been exposed to these diseases these animals have no immunity. As animals and handling equipment are moved between the herds this is a potential time bomb. For this reason I have advised to protect all breeding cattle against these diseases by vaccination while we try to eradicate the disease in the southern block. Once this has been established we can cease to vaccinate. Regular blood sampling of youngstock will determine when this can be achieved.

Due to a combination of heavily pregnant animals and poor grazing, several animals were lost during the winter 09/10. Delayed breeding in spring 2010 has resulted that no animals have been lost this winter and that the animals were in a reasonable body condition of 2-2½. There was some variation between the different animals. This could possibly be explained by the variation in the stage of pregnancy and some animals still suckling last years' calves. Again a tight calving pattern would reduce the variation in body condition.

Interestingly it appeared to me that just as much willow showed signs of browsing as it did last year when this was suggested to cause renal failure in at least one animal. It could be that the animals had no other choice than to eat willow last year while they might have eaten it in smaller quantities over a longer period this winter causing no apparent problems.

Although the bulls didn't go in until late June some calves have already been born due to a bull calf which was castrated late. Due to the relative small herd size bull calves are castrated to prevent inbreeding.

Northern Block
The grass quality does not seem to have changed much since it was converted from its commercial farming situation. The cattle were in condition 3½-4 which might be too good for some of them as it could result in calving difficulties. As no problems were seen in this herd during the hard winter of 09/10 and animals are currently in a very good condition I don't think that delayed breeding will be beneficial for this group (maybe the contrary is true). I suggest that bulls should go in on the 1st of June like in most commercial beef herds in the south resulting in a calving period between March-May.

A potential risk for introducing disease from the southern block to the northern block was identified: during last years' mating season a cow with mastitis and blind quarters was kept away from the bull

together with heifers from the southern block. If the animals in the northern block weren't vaccinated this animal could have potentially introduced disease into the herd which could have had a disastrous effect on fertility.

Maarten Boers MRCVS
Mobile: 07989 116 429
Email: maarten@livestockvets.co.uk