

# Pick the right suckler breed to maintain profit and cut costs

Breed and feed have a marked effect on suckler fertility. **Emma Penny** reports

A MOVE towards using purebred beef animals as suckler cows, coupled with pressure to cut costs, means producers must know which breeds will perform best on farm.

Finding the right breed for lowland, upland and hill suckler herds is exactly what a three-year, EU-funded project at the Scottish Agricultural College in Aberdeen is all about.

According to SAC beef specialist Kevin Sinclair, the project is looking at maintaining suckler cow fertility and profitability under extensive production systems while minimising the amount of bought-in feed required.

The project, which started in 1994, involves four contrasting breeds — the large, milky Simmental, the large, but lower yielding Charolais, small but milky Welsh Black and the small and less milky Aberdeen Angus. All the cows are purebred, and are being AI'd to produce purebred calves. The Charolais and Simmental cows are on trial under typical lowland and upland diets, while the Welsh Black and Aberdeen Angus



*The project, run by the SAC's Kevin Sinclair (right), is looking at maintaining suckler fertility and profits while minimising bought-in feed requirements.*



Sinclair. "In winter, the diet consists of straw and concentrates, and in summer we feed grass nut pellets and molassed sugar beet pulp, with grass pellet content changing to reflect seasonal pasture growth.

"The cows calve in May, are synchronised and AI'd in late July, and the calves weaned in late October. We are looking at the long-term effect of nutrition — and even two years into the project there are significant differences."

The Charolais cows have lost so much condition that only 30% are in-calf this year, while 70% of the other breeds held to first service. Although Dr Sinclair speculates that the Charolais' poor performance may be due to its large size, which obviously requires more energy to maintain, he points out that further tests will be done to ensure there are no other factors affecting fertility.

"I would have predicted that the Simmentals would have had more difficulty, but they have performed better. They are starting to look thin, but, being regarded as a dual-purpose breed in some countries, they may — like dairy cows — have more internal fat to mobilise."

As expected, the Welsh Black and Aberdeen Angus cows are performing best in the upland trial,

having lost less condition than the Continental types. But both breeds are expected to reach condition score 2 before weaning, which

## Cow performance — body condition score Mar 1996

	Lowland 38GJ ME	Upland 33GJ ME	Hill 28GJ ME
Aberdeen			
Angus	—	2.90	2.43
Welsh Black	—	3.13	2.33
Charolais	3.15	2.30	—
Simmental	2.83	2.50	—

Source: SAC.

cows are being trialled under nutritional conditions found on upland and hill farms.

On the lowland diet, cows receive 38MJ ME a head a year, falling to 33MJ ME a head a year on the upland diet and only 28GJ ME a head a year on the hill diet.

The cows are housed, or penned outside all year round to make diet management accurate, explains Dr

## Cow performance — body condition score Sept 1996

	Lowland 38GJ ME	Upland 33GJ ME	Hill 28GJ ME
Aberdeen			
Angus	—	2.85	2.18
Welsh Black	—	2.72	2.18
Charolais	2.68	2.05	—
Simmental	2.38	2.18	—

Source: SAC.

may start to compromise fertility, he says.

"Condition scores will probably be down to about 1.75 by calving next year. That is not necessarily a problem if the cows are on a high level of nutrition after calving, but there will probably be a significant reduction in fertility at lower levels of feeding." ■

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