

Calving Ease Indexes

January 2010

Official calving ease indexes for Holstein and Friesian sires are being published from January 2010 onwards to help dairy farmers make more informed breeding choices.

The indexes are expressed as 'percent Easy Calvings', on a scale of about -3 to +3 and are centred around a breed average of zero, with positive figures indicating that calvings are predicted to be easier than average and negative figures predicting more difficult calvings.

These independent calving ease indexes are the result of an industry-wide collaboration* and the analysis of some 400,000 UK calving records. These have been gathered by British farmers as either part of their regular milk recording or as part of their participation in progeny testing.

The two genetic indexes which result from the study - Direct Calving Ease and Maternal Calving Ease - together give a complete picture of a bull's 'calving performance'.

Direct Calving Ease (dCE %) gives a prediction of the ease with which a calf by that sire will be born.

Maternal Calving Ease (mCE %) predicts the ease with which a daughter of that sire will give birth

Direct Calving Ease is likely to be of most interest in the first instance, and is naturally going to be important when breeding maiden heifers, where the use of negative dCE% should be avoided as these are predicted to give a higher proportion of difficult calvings. However, dCE% shouldn't be ignored in older cow matings either, where it would always be wise to avoid bulls which are likely to produce very difficult calvings.

Attention should also be paid to Maternal Calving Ease, as long-term selection for dCE% without any regard to mCE% could set up problems for the future.

As part of a broader breeding strategy, it is recommended to select primarily for Profitable Lifetime Index (PLI) and using the Calving Ease indexes - as well as other fitness traits - as secondary criteria, with careful judgement made on a case-by-case basis about their relative importance.

For the time being, dCE% and mCE% will remain as stand-alone indexes although they may be included within PLI at a future date.

**The calving ease indexes project was heavily funded by Defra, and had additional support from the Scottish Government, CIS, Cogent, DairyCo, Genus ABS, Holstein UK and NMR, and was undertaken by SAC.*

