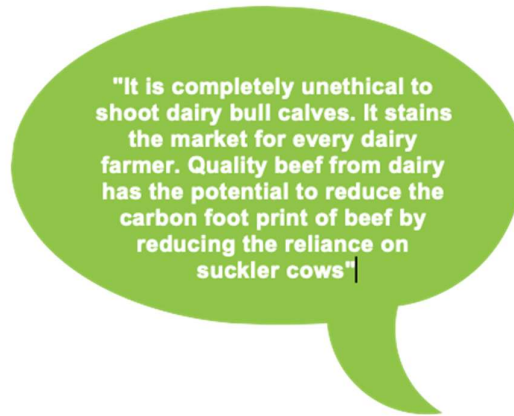


## Executive Summary: Dairy Bull Calf Management Survey

Dairy bull calf euthanasia is a practice that has been widely criticised, both within and outside the industry. There are also concerns about the management of dairy bull calves when farmers are required to rear them, and difficulties for farmers when trying to integrate them into the red meat supply chain.



The GB Dairy Bull Calf Strategy has set a goal of eliminating euthanasia of healthy calves by 2023. Before this, farmers will need to comply with Red Tractor's new assurance standard (in place autumn 2021) which requires a written breeding and management policy to be in place and implemented to ensure that there is no routine euthanasia.

Given the relatively short time frame- at least of the Red Tractor standard- a survey was conducted to gauge the number of farmers who are already compliant, and what are the major barriers to achieving a level of bull calf management which is equal to that given to heifers.



### Survey Methodology

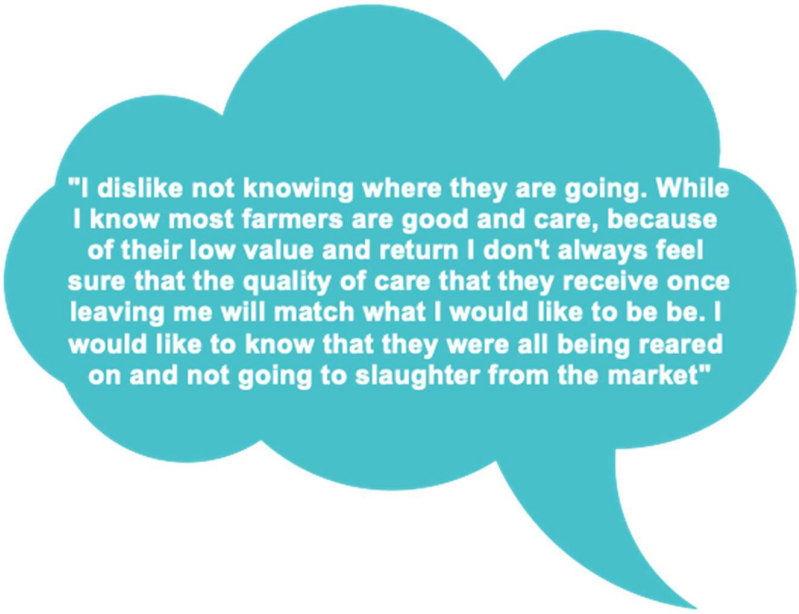
An online survey was set up in the spring of 2021, and distributed via social media. 409 valid responses were collected (6 responses were excluded due to insufficient information, the respondent not being in the UK, or failure to consent to results being analysed).

The survey asked a range of questions covering herd size and system, milk buyer, awareness of the new Red Tractor standard, whether calves had been euthanised in the past 12 months, care of bull calves, and use of sexed semen. Free text boxes asked for suggestions for actions that could help farmers sell dairy beef, and improve the ethics of dairy bull calf management.

### Results

- 15% were not aware of the new standard, 76.4% were already complying, and 4.2% thought they would struggle to comply
- 85.6% of farms had not euthanised any healthy calves in the previous 12 months- there was no significant difference when Arla farms were excluded

- Of the 58 farmers who had euthanised calves, 29.3% responded that they were already complying with the standard, suggesting that they had stopped the practice during the last 12 months
- 17.2% sold calves direct to slaughter pre-weaning (60% of these were or had been under tuberculosis restrictions), and 12.3% sold calves pre-weaning and were unsure of the destination
- 1.2% had sold calves for export
- The biggest challenges in selling dairy bull calves for beef were price and profitability (36.9% of respondents), tuberculosis (18.8%), animal type/breed, and emotional factors (both 14.3%)

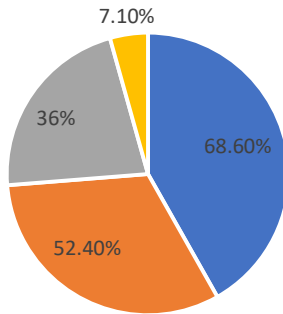


**"I dislike not knowing where they are going. While I know most farmers are good and care, because of their low value and return I don't always feel sure that the quality of care that they receive once leaving me will match what I would like to be. I would like to know that they were all being reared on and not going to slaughter from the market"**

- When asked for solutions to aid sales, the four main suggestions were better price, better promotion/marketing, greater demand, and options for tuberculosis restricted herds

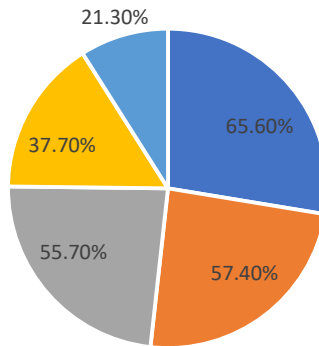
*Reasons For and Against Euthanasia*

### Reasons for Not Euthanising Calves



- I have a market for dairy bull calves
- I am ethically opposed to the euthanasia of dairy bull calves
- My milk buyer does not allow the euthanasia of healthy calves
- I did not have any dairy bull calves

### Reasons for Euthanasia



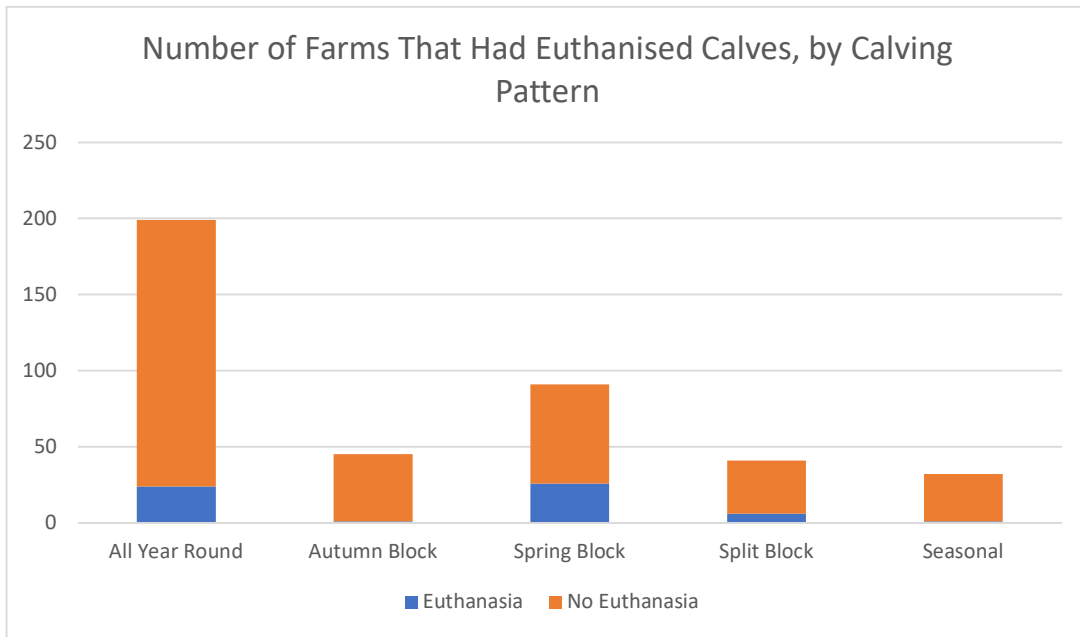
- The sales value is less than the cost of rearing
- Restrictions on housing
- No market for dairy bull calves
- Limited labour availability
- Other

Of the farmers who cited “other” as a reason for euthanasia, the main comment was issues resulting from tuberculosis restrictions. 43.7% of farms reported that they had been under tb restrictions at some point in the previous 12 months. **Of the tb restricted farms, 20% had euthanised a healthy dairy bull calf, compared to 10% of farms who weren’t under restriction.**

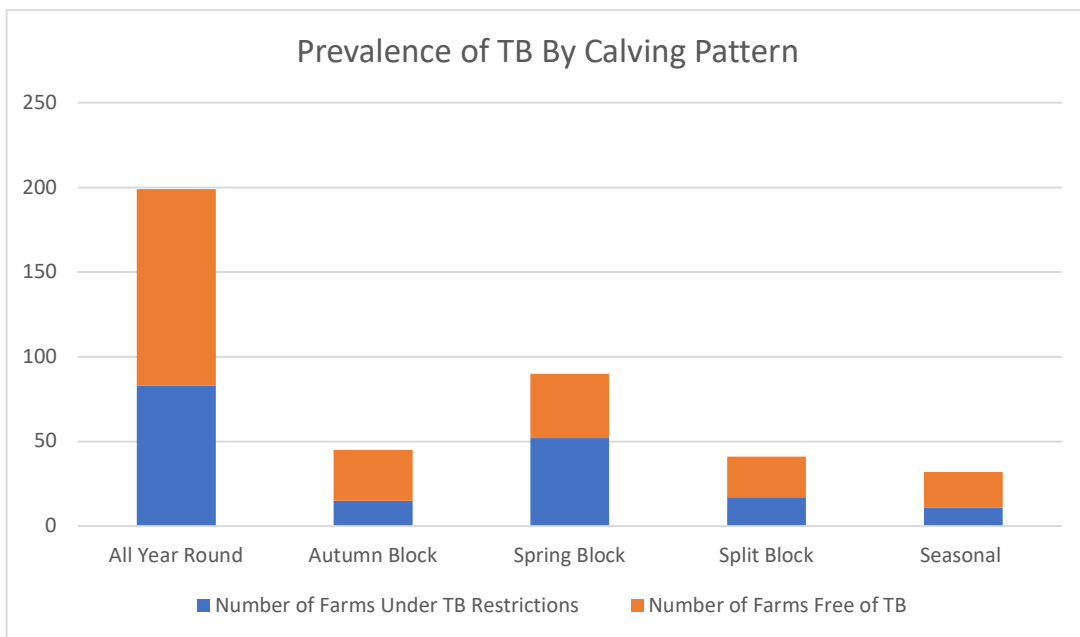
The free box comments also reflected tuberculosis being a major challenge. When asked what was needed to improve the ethics of dairy bull calf management, one farmer responded *"Control bTB. Control bTB. Control bTB."*



*Systems and Size*



The rate of euthanasia was highest in spring block calving herds (29%) and lowest in autumn block calving herds (2%). 24% of all year round calving herds had euthanised, 6% of split block herds, and 3% of seasonal calving herds. However, spring block calving herds were considerably more likely to be under tb restriction, and this had also been linked to an increased rate of euthanasia.

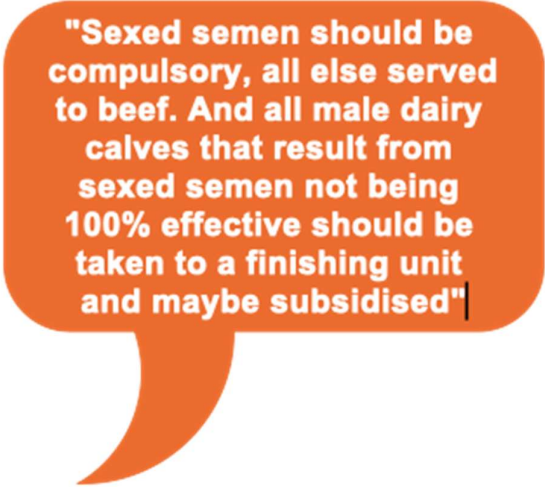


*Care*

- 89.7% of farmers stated that their colostrum management was the same for all calves
- 85.7% said that heifers and bulls were given the same level of care and attention

### *Sexed Semen*

- 83.8% of farmers had used sexed semen in the previous 12 months, and 49.7% stated that avoiding dairy bull calf euthanasia contributed to that choice
- Of those, 56.2% regarded sexed semen conception rates as comparable to conventional, and 33.4% rated it as poorer
- The biggest challenges of using sexed semen were cost of straws (57.6%), comparable conception rates (45.5%), and impact on the tightness of the calving block (27.5%)
- 15.4% were concerned about over production of heifer calves, and 5.4% found the dairy x beef calf market a challenge
- Sexed semen use was highest in All Year Round calving herds (93%) and lowest in Spring Block Calving systems (70.3%)



**"Sexed semen should be compulsory, all else served to beef. And all male dairy calves that result from sexed semen not being 100% effective should be taken to a finishing unit and maybe subsidised"**

- 14.3% of farms who had used sexed semen had euthanised healthy calves in the last year, compared to 13.6% of farms who hadn't used sexed semen

## Conclusion

This initial report finds that the vast majority of British dairy farmers sampled are already compliant with the new Red Tractor standard, or have the ability to do so. There appears to have already been a shift away from euthanasia in the last year, which may be influenced by the requirements of some milk buyers.

In order to achieve total compliance, farmers require a market for dairy bull calves- or higher confidence in sexed semen in order to produce dairy x beef calves. Bovine tuberculosis is a major barrier to compliance, and both its eradication and an increase in Assured Finishing Units would improve the ethical credentials of dairy farming.

Spring block calving herds face a dual threat of a higher prevalence of bovine tuberculosis, and smaller framed calves. However, cross bred calves were not the only breed facing challenges on the market, as several comments stated that farmers were struggling to sell Holstein calves, or had benefitted from producing a more traditional British Friesian type.

## Industry Actions

- Take further steps to eradicate bovine tuberculosis
- Establish additional Assured Finishing Units
- Work to gain farmer confidence in sexed semen- research is particularly needed on the financial impact on block calving herds
- Explore options around different breeds e.g. former dual purpose breeds, British Friesian types, to increase the value of dairy bull calves
- Integrate the red meat and dairy sectors so that dairy farmers have access to buyers and can produce calves that better meet requirements
- Look at options around marketing dairy beef- environmental impact, welfare, and taste



- All farmers to ensure that dairy bull calves receive the same care and attention as dairy heifer calves