

## **Extended lactation, flexible systems for the future**

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Dairy farmers are using extended lactation (EL) in many and varied ways to suit their farming systems. Split calving systems in particular are well suited to the use of EL as the majority of modern cows will maintain a lactation for an 18 month calving interval with very little loss of milk solids.

Some farmers are concerned that they may be breeding for infertility if they continue to join cows that are not conceiving and calving within the traditional 12 month calving interval. However, if the heifers are still getting in calf, then the fertility problem in the herd is not inherent infertility.

The later in the calving period a cow calves, the less chance she has of getting in calf for the same calving period next year. Results from the InCalf project showed that cows that calved in the first three weeks following the planned start of calving had a six week in calf rate of 71% while cows that calved six to nine weeks from planned start of calving had a six week in calf rate of only 51%.

A cow that has more days open (days since calving) is more likely to be cycling and therefore get in calf. Cows calving late have less days open before mating start date and therefore have less chance of getting in calf early in the mating period.

If you have a seasonal calving pattern and carry cows over for a 24 month calving interval, you will find that as many as half will be able to maintain solids production over the period. Those that don't get in calf and don't maintain production, obviously don't have a place in the herd.

Why do people use EL? Listed below are some of the reasons people using EL have given:

- A preference for a tight calving pattern without using induction. EL is used to move late calving cows to the start of the next calving period
- A belief that they are culling their best cows with the best genetics when they cull high producers that are not in calf for a 12 month calving interval.
- A preference for two tight calving periods rather than one drawn out calving period
- The ability to join everything to AI and not run bulls with the herd
- Less culling of high producing cows for reproductive performance means that they can cull more heavily for other things such as cell count
- EL has been used to move from split calving to autumn-only calving
- With changing weather patterns and water availability EL can be used to move the calving pattern, for example, from spring calving to autumn calving by having a once-off 18 month calving interval.

Those farmers who are using EL successfully have established a few rules for their system regarding culling decisions and which cows to carry over. These include:

How many chances do they get?

- One example is the farmer who will continue to join them during every mating period up until a 24 month calving interval (this may be two, three or four opportunities depending if they have a seasonal or split calving system). After this point they will be culled when their production drops below a certain level.

What production level is acceptable?

- Some people have a cut off for joining. For example, if she's doing less than 25 litres she doesn't get joined.
- Another way is to have a culling level. For example, she will stay in the herd until she drops below a production threshold more than a set distance from calving (assuming she's in calf), for example if she's more than 100 days from calving and her production drops below 1kgMS/day, then she is culled.
- These rules can be used together

To join or not to join? Some high production herds have rules such as:

- If she's doing more than 44 litres I won't join her this time, I'll carry her over to the next group
- She must have been calved at least six weeks before I will join her
- Everything is joined for the first time for a 15 month calving interval (three-way split calving herd)

Many people are using EL successfully in their herds. They find it suits their system and it allows them to meet their goals. More information on extended lactation can be found at [www.dairyextension.com.au](http://www.dairyextension.com.au) or contact Ann McDowell at DPI Camperdown 5575 805 or Ashleigh Michael at DPI Leongatha on 5622 9901.

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