**Media Release**

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**Cow with calf dairy farming viable at scale**

A three year pilot by an organic dairy farm to test a radical new approach to dairy farming has concluded. Rainton Farm in south west Scotland, run by David and Wilma Finlay, has now committed to continuing with their cow with calf dairy farming system permanently after being satisfied of the long term financial and environmental viability of the approach.

In conventional dairy farming calves are removed from their mothers, usually within 24 hours of birth, and are reared separately. At Rainton Farm, whose products are marketed as The Ethical Dairy, the calves are reared by their mums till five to six months of age. During this time they can suckle, develop maternal bonds and express natural behaviour.

David Finlay said:

“We have been working towards this system for more than a decade, and in late 2016 we gave ourselves a three year deadline to either prove it could work or to quit. Cow with calf dairy farming has been done on a small scale before, but to the best of our knowledge we are the first dairy farm in the world to make this work at a family farm scale. It hasn’t been easy, but it has been worth it.

“Three years in I can say with absolute certainty that this system works. It works for the cows who have demonstrated a marked reduction in stress, improvement in health and higher than expected levels of productivity. It works for the calves who thrive being reared by their mothers, growing twice as quickly as before. It also works for us and the farm staff, with reduced input costs and a highly motivated farm team.

“In simple terms what we are doing is simplifying and de-intensifying dairy farming. We’re working with nature and with the animals’ natural instincts to create an ecological, grass-based farming system, producing highly nutritious food with a positive environmental impact.”

The Ethical Dairy brand launched in 2018 and the Finlays have seen interest in their farming system rocket. Earlier this year David was named Farmer of the Year at the prestigious Ceva Animal Welfare Awards, and the farm hosted the UK’s first Ethical Farming Conference to showcase international best practice in regenerative and ecological agriculture. Consumer interest in their cheese was so high they had to bring forward a planned production expansion to meet demand.

To mark the conclusion of the three year pilot, The Ethical Dairy has released a video and a blog telling the story of their farming system through the experience of one cow. The 3 year old heifer was one of the first cows born into the system and raised her first calf this summer. The video can be viewed on The Ethical Dairy’s social media channels and on You Tube at <https://youtu.be/lAT9mVjyNMk> .

Wilma Finlay said:

“We didn’t embark on this journey as a marketing stunt or in response to topical concerns. Ten years ago very few people were talking about the challenges in dairy farming, in fact it’s only very recently that we’ve seen a surge in public interest in farming practices and a resulting increase in veganism.

“We developed this system because we were deeply concerned about the environment and the direction of travel of the industry. We wanted to see whether it was possible to create a different system of dairy farming; one that puts the environment, high animal welfare and job satisfaction at the very heart of everything we do.”

Dumfries & Galloway, where the Finlays’ farm is located, is home to 45% of Scotland’s dairy industry. Introducing a radically different dairy model in the heart of one of the UK’s biggest dairy regions has not been without challenge. David added:

“We know that many people in the farming industry think we’re crazy - in fact they’d probably use much stronger language than that. I understand their annoyance at us, but the industry needs to respond to public concern. There are powerful, global vested interests who are currently demonising all beef and dairy. Sticking our heads in the sand in the hope it all blows over is just not going to work.

“Grass-based regenerative farming systems can deliver incredibly positive environmental outcomes, as well as nutritious, high quality food. Scotland needs to lead the way in pioneering a grass-based regenerative system of agriculture that is as sustainable, in all senses, as it is productive. We now have very exciting results from our cow with calf model, and we are looking forward to sharing our findings with the wider industry.”

Rainton Farm is now working with a cross-sectoral innovation project that will undertake an audit of their system and disseminate key aspects of their cow with calf system to other farmers. The project will explore aspects such as overcoming barriers, financial modelling, benefits and market information to support potential new entrants to the system. Farmers who are interested in finding out more about becoming involved in the project are invited to contact David Finlay directly.

More information about The Ethical Dairy and its products can be found at [www.theethicaldairy.co.uk](http://www.theethicaldairy.co.uk) on Twitter on @theethicaldairy and on Facebook @EthicalDairy

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Article by David Finlay published as a blog today:

**Three years to prove it. So does this system work?**

We gave ourselves three years to prove our cow with calf system can work. That three years is now up, so does it work? To answer that question I’d like to introduce you to a cow called One-Forty-Four, because that is her name.

Folk think that by identifying an animal by a number we are removing that animal’s individuality. Well, for us at least, this is far from the truth. Sure, we could give them all names like Daisy or Esmerelda, or whatever, but when you have 140 of them, the names are quickly forgotten. That’s not to say we don’t have pet names for some of them but mine are probably different from Charles’s and they’re not always complimentary! Oh, oh, here comes Old Grumpy – 117, or Wee Sweetie – 17 (she’s due next week and we reckon on twins, she’s like a barrel!). And in case we forget their number, there’s a freeze-brand on their rump and an electronic ID bracelet on their front ankle that speaks to the computer in the parlour and this pops up on the parlour screen. When you’ve been working with them from birth, it’s the character you relate to, not the number or name.

Anyhow, back to 144. She was one of the first calves to be born into the revolutionary cow-with-calf dairy system we are developing here at Rainton. She was born on the 5th November, Guy Faulks Day, 3 years ago and her mum was old 130, a steady, middle-of-the-road, Montbeliarde-cross cow. Her dad was a Swedish Red breed and she was conceived by artificial insemination. It is almost invariably the case that the calf out of a cross-bred cow takes on the characteristics of the pure-bred father and true to form, she looks like her dad.

She wasn’t referred to as 144 at this time because she hadn’t yet entered the milking herd, but every calf needs to be double tagged and registered with ‘the authorities’ who then issue a passport. Her official tag number is something or other…1719, or nineteen for short. And that was how we knew her in her early years.

Nineteen stayed with her mum, who we milked once-a-day, until early April 2017 and, as it was winter, she had never been outside. She didn’t get to be with her mum 24 hours a day all of this time. For about 6-8 weeks she was but after that we start separating them overnight. They’re not taken out of the mums’ sight or hearing, just separated by a rail fence. The cows get a wee feed at night and we tidy the cow beds and put the calves into their quarters while their mums are distracted.

To be honest though, that first group of cows in the new system didn’t entirely trust us – this radically different way of doing things was as new to the cows as it was to us! Initially we had to lock the cows into the feed barrier to stop them running about and fussing over the calves, but as the winter wore on they soon learned and understood the new system and stopped bothering. They have never bothered since.

The reason we separate the cows and calves is two-fold. Firstly, when the calf is young they can’t drink all of their mum’s milk, so we can be sure of getting some, but after a couple of months they can. If their mum is a sharing cow, we can continue to get a reasonable share of the milk, but if she isn’t she will hang onto as much as she can. Separating overnight means we get at least some milk. The other reason is that when the calf is with its mum 24/7, they don’t eat solid food. Why would they, with mums milk on-tap whenever they want it? Overnight, when separated, the calf gets hungry and begins eating solids, this is good for developing their digestive system. They also build stronger peer-bonds, which helps greatly at weaning. This gradual transitioning at every stage of their lives is a key part of the success of this system. We depend on the cow and calf (and us!) being happy and content. This reduces stress and improves the productivity and efficiency of this method of dairying.

So, when 19 went out to grass she was fully weaned but stayed with her female peer group. We separate the males and females at this point because the young cattle can reach sexual maturity at 6 months and accidents can happen! Back then, in year one, we didn’t give them any supplementary feed so they grew much more slowly than when they were suckling their mums. That was a mistake and we now give the young cattle a mineralised (with balanced vitamins and minerals) Lucerne-based forage nut, which is a pellet made from alfalfa. We haven’t fed cereals for almost 2 years now to any stock on our farm.

When 19 was aged 18-20 months we introduced a young dairy bull to her group and 9 months later, in March of this year, out pops a beautiful little Monty calf whose tag number ended in 2001, so we called her One for short. We spend quite a bit of time getting the young heifers used to the milking parlour before they calve. Giving birth is a big enough stress on its own, so if they know the parlour noises and routines, that keeps the stress to a minimum.

Nineteen is now known as 144 and she has entered the milking herd for the first time as a young heifer and is as good as gold. She’s a real pet, but then she always was. She reared her calf through the summer and they were fully separated in late August. After weaning we milk the cows twice a day for a couple of months because the calves had effectively been doing the second milking when they were suckling.

One-Forty-Four, one of the first cows to be born in our cow with calf system, is now one of our top heifers. In fact, she and her peers are noticeably more productive than last year’s intake. Was this because they were reared in the new system and knew the ropes? I don’t know. Maybe somebody will tell us someday. Her calf is a wee cracker too and will join her mum in the herd in 18 months time.

So does this system work? I’m delighted to say with absolute certainty that it does, both for the cows and calves and for us! As for the bank manager? There is a bit to go before we get back to healthy profit, but after a pretty rocky start, we’re back on track and are increasingly confident, with your support, this could be a game-changer!

Blog Ends