

Dairy & Livestock

Calf care affects herd's later value



By TINA KOHLMAN

HEIFER calves are an investment in the future milking herd and the second-largest expenditure on a dairy farm. A successful calf enterprise is defined by animals that are alive, healthy and growing well. Starting calves right and raising them right helps ensure that they become productive members of

your milking herd in two years.

What does it take to achieve these goals? Calf chores must be done properly, the same way, every day! Establishing best management practices helps make sure the tasks are completed consistently. Follow these BMPs to achieve your goals of a successful calf enterprise.

Before the birth

Proper calf care begins before the calf is even born. Never overcrowd close-up

pens. Maternity pens should be single-use to minimize the spread of disease. The dam should be clean before she goes into the pen because the calf may nuzzle her in search of colostrum.

Be prepared to remove the calf from the dam and maternity pen immediately to avoid disease transfer. This happens primarily through "manure meals" via nose dives into the bedded pack while attempting to stand, sucking on the cow's manure-laden body searching for colostrum, or ingesting manure-con-



taminated colostrum.

The dam should be up-to-date on booster vaccinations. These vaccinations allow her to transfer passive immunity through colostrum to her calf.

Caring for newborns

After delivery, attention shifts to the newborn calf. Process the calf by stimulating it to breathe, check its general health status and dip the navel in a strong (7%) iodine tincture solution. Remove the calf from the dam and provide a clean, dry resting surface to ensure its hair coat stays dry, helping insulate against the cold ground, low air temperatures and sudden temperature changes. Provide at least 6 inches of bedding as a cushion to minimize physical trauma. House calves in individual pens to reduce the spread of disease.

A sound colostrum program is essential in raising healthy calves, which are born without an immune system. Colostrum allows a calf to develop an immune system, protecting it from disease until it can produce its own antibodies within four weeks. Because colostrum is essential to a healthy calf, be prepared to feed colostrum 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Feed high-quality (at least 50 grams immunoglobulins per liter) fresh, refrigerated, or frozen colostrum from a second or later lactation Johne's-negative cow. If colostrum is not available, feed a colostrum replacement product with 50 or more grams of immunoglobulins per liter.

Timing is everything

Once the calf is on the ground, feed 3 to 4 quarts of colostrum ideally within one to three hours after birth and again 10 to 12 hours later. Any later reduces the chance of passive transfer occurring.

Keep an eye on calves. Monitoring them daily means more than simply feeding them or walking past where they are housed. The objective is to catch problems before they happen. When monitoring calves, use your eyes, ears and nose. Learn what a normal calf looks like so it is easier to identify calves that might be a little "off" on a particular day.

Sanitation is critical in breaking the disease cycle. Always pick the right disinfectant for the job. Does the disinfectant work only against certain pathogens, or is it a broad spectrum? Make sure to disinfect anything that comes in contact with calves, such as buckets, pens, ear taggers, thermometers and your boots.

To ensure calves stay alive, healthy and growing well, establish and follow BMPs. Not only will you have a successful calf enterprise, but also you will start them right toward being productive members of the milking herd!

Kohlman is the Sheboygan County Extension dairy and livestock agent.

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