

Calf Notes.com

Calf Note #57 - The need to feed colostrum

Introduction

Calf Notes.com is designed to provide the reader with unbiased, useful, and scientifically based information related to calf management. Most are based on studies published in the scientific literature. But this one is different. It is a simple observation and opinion. Here goes...

I had the opportunity to attend a conference recently with a number of calf raisers and dairy farmers in the same room. Our topic for the evening was (of course!) raising calves. Many of the dairy producers did not actually raise their own calves, but contracted with commercial calf "ranches" to raise the calves until they were a couple of months prior to freshening, when they would return to the home farm. As is typical for these types of meetings, we spent quite a bit of time talking about the challenges associated with colostrum feeding and the importance of colostrum quality, dry cow management and its effects on colostrum quality, timing of colostrum feeding, and amount of colostrum to feed.

During our discussion, one calf ranch manager pointed out that colostrum feeding was actually out of their control, since the calf raiser didn't actually receive the calves until after the calf was a day old. However, he had to deal with the *consequences* of the lack of colostrum feeding - increased disease and more death. His concerns were countered by the dairymen, who argued that they could not afford the increased costs (labor, facilities) associated with feeding colostrum to animals that would be on their farms for only a few hours.

Unfortunately, the statistics indicate that we do a rather poor job of providing colostrum to our calves. Over 40% of heifer calves in the National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project conducted by the USDA failed to consume sufficient colostrum in the first 24 hours of life. And the situation is worse with bull calves. Producers that raise bulls estimate that 50 to 75% of bull calves are fed nothing while on the dairy farm.

My own personal opinion regarding the decision not to feed colostrum is that **choosing not to feed colostrum to a calf - for any reason - is wrong. It is immoral and unacceptable.**

Remember, colostrum is not only an important source of immunoglobulins that the calf needs for passive immunity, it is also an important source of nutrients. Colostrum is chock-full of vitamins, minerals, energy and protein the calf needs to survive and prosper. The decision not to feed colostrum to calves sets the calf on the path of poor nutrition, recurrent disease, and increased risk for death.

The bottom line is this -- if you are involved with the management of calves during the first 24 hours of life, you **MUST** feed colostrum to calves. Heifers, bulls, freemartins, it doesn't matter. We have been given the responsibility of serving as "surrogate parents" to these young calves. Feeding

colostrum within the first 12 hours of life is the right thing to do. This is one management practice that should not be scrutinized to reduce costs. **Do the right thing.**

Written by Dr. Jim Quigley (07 June 1999).
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