

CALVING EASE

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Time Saving Tips for Calf Raising

More for less! That's what everyone would like. That's what most of us never see. Is it possible to get "more for less" when raising calves? Or, is it actually possible to accomplish more in less time?

Think of your work areas. Analyze them. The milkhouse, storage areas for grain and bedding, newborn pen(s) and calf hutch or pen area. How can these be made more user friendly? What changes would be needed to make working in that area more efficient?

Keeping frequently used equipment where it is used.

Newborn area - a newborn calf care bucket saves steps. Put in it all the essentials used on your dairy. Pam and Sam keep items such as injectable medications, syringes, needles, alcohol pads, navel dip, ear tags, tagger, tag pen, weight tape, tail docker, halter, pencil and a writing pad in their buckets.

Milkhouse/barn - We always use syringes and needles when we vaccinate calves. If space permits, in addition to the vaccines that must be refrigerated you might want to keep needles and syringes next to them in the refrigerator. A small bottle of epinephrine can be stored there for us to carry along when we vaccinate.

Washing up - we keep soaps and acid/sanitizers as close as we can to the sink. Our drying racks are next to the sink as well.

Mixing - Many of our vaccines and medications require mixing. Pam keeps a plastic photo page in the refrig with mixing details plainly written out. This saves time on CRS days (Can't Remember Stuff). The photo page can also save money (for example, avoiding mixing 4 gm Naxel with 80 ml of saline and ending up with a jelly mess).

Pen/hutch area - With his tether-style hutches, Sam saves steps by keeping extra snaps in his six-wheeler. Also kept there are sick-calf identifying tags and non-refrigerated medications. Having these right with him saves many a trip back to the barn, especially appreciated on rainy or very cold days. We both keep extra clean pails in the wheeler (a) for milk feeding to replace the ones

that are stepped in, rolled in mud or manure, or broken and (b) for grain feeding to replace ones that are soiled with urine and/or manure. No extra trip back to the barn to get replacements.

Scheduling and thinking ahead

If you have just finished washing up dirty pails from calves who have been moved from pens/hutches, take the clean, wet pails back where they came from. Place them in the empty hutches that calves will soon occupy. If your pail holder permits, turn the pails upside down for storage.

Leftover bales from routine bedding can be placed in the back of nearby empty hutches/pens instead of returning them to the storage area. When a new calf moves in the bedding is already there and needs only to be broken open and spread.

How are your pens or hutches laid out? Would it make sense to combine jobs? Given her hutch arrangement, our friend Peggy realized that if she fed grain and did bedding on the same trip she finished much sooner than doing these tasks separately.

Pam's hutches are laid out in parallel rows. Experience has shown that parking her six-wheeler between rows will allow faster feeding and bedding than parking to work on one row at a time.

Regardless of whether you have pens or hutches, chasing calves to give medication is a real waste of time. Several of us combine that step with feeding. The calf is easily accessible. All we have to do is think ahead about which calf gets what and take the medication with us when feeding.

Both Sam and Pam have an erasable board in a central location. We list tasks to be done. Pam can see at a glance before she leaves the milkhouse on her way to the barn to feed colostrum that extra navel dip is needed there, a calf that was born early needs a calf blanket, and she needs to leave a note for the driver who picks up bull calves for market. One trip rather than four.

Pam uses colored highlighters on her hutch map. For example she marks calves that have been weaned and vaccinated. With the colored marks, a quick look from across the room tells you in a glance which calves need attention today.

Where do labor saving ideas come from, anyway?

Many of us read Hoard's Dairyman, Dairy Herd Management and other dairy magazines. Lots of their tips apply to calf raisers. Here in Western New York some of us attend group meetings on raising calves and heifers. We learn not only from the speaker but also from the persons sitting around us. If you have a computer with Internet access, you may want to go to Hoard's web page (www.hoards.com). Subscribing to the free services of DAIRY-L and/or DAIRYNEW may be helpful, also.

Calf Feeder's Tip

When is 8 ounces not 8 ounces? When measuring milk replacer powder by volume this can be a problem. Many different processes are used in manufacturing milk replacer. Each process results in powder of a slightly different density. Thus, 8 ounces of Brand X milk replacer powder occupies more volume than 8 ounces of Brand Z milk replacer powder. Moral of the story? Unless you measure milk replacer powder by weight, always use the volume measured by the cup provided by the manufacturer - all cups are not equal!

Know how well your calf program is doing now.

Sounds simple. "How's things?" "Okay, I guess." Not very helpful. Written records of deaths is a first step. Number of heifers that died divided by number of heifers we tried to raise. How many of them did we have to treat for pneumonia out of the last 10, 50 or 100 calves? If you're really ambitious, how many pounds did they gain from birth to weaning?

Know where you want your calf program to be in 6 or 12 months.

What level of heifer calf mortality are you aiming for? No more than 20 percent, 10 percent or 5 percent? Is treating a third of the heifers for pneumonia before 3 months of age to high for you? Or, is one-tenth the maximum treatment rate you want to accept? If you wean at 8 weeks (56 days), are you willing to settle for 56 pounds gain (1 pound per day)? Or, do you want to average 75 or 90 pounds in 8 weeks? Or, how much did they increase in height?

Money-saving tips for keeping calves alive.

While it may be nice to worry about rates of illness and gain, none of that information is of value if the calves die. Recall that survival during the calf's first two weeks is often the balance between pathogens (bacteria, viruses, parasites) and antibodies from the dam's colostrum. Therefore, the first tip is simple. Get antibody-rich colostrum into the calf as soon as possible after birth. Reduction in antibody absorption rates can be measured as soon as 30 minutes after birth. Research reported in 1995 estimated that absorption rates in the early hours after birth may decline as much as 5 percent per half-hour! This probably applies most to calves born when the regular calf raiser isn't around. But how much does it cost on your farm for someone other than the calf raiser to feed a calf colostrum? Antibodies in a calf's blood are dollars saved. Dollars that are not spent on labor treating sick calves, not spent on electrolytes, and not spent on medication. And, the calves live.

Second money-saving tip: either have the calves born in a clean pen or get them off the "springer-pack" as soon as possible after the dam licks them off. Survival is often a balance between pathogens and antibodies. Attack from the pathogen side. In a small calving pen, spread an extra bale of straw. With a big calving bedded pack, get the calves off the pack ASAP. Why do so many calves born between 10 PM and 6 AM get sick? Not only delayed colostrum feeding but often exceptionally high exposure to bacteria, viruses and parasites. Recall, straw drenched with calving fluids may appear "clean" but really be crawling with microscopic pathogens. Pathogens we can prevent from entering the calf's system are dollars saved. Dollars

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Third money-saving tip: save, segregate and feed transition milk. Transition milk is usually defined as a cow's milk from the second milking after calving up to 72 hours (3 days). This tip refers to just the second and third milkings - especially valuable milk for very young calves. This milk still has about one-third the antibody content as colostrum. If this milk is saved and kept separated from other waste milk it can be fed to the youngest calves (not newborns that get colostrum but older ones). These antibodies won't be absorbed into the calf's blood. But, they can help in the battle against the huge numbers of pathogens in the digestive system. This milk may be the most overlooked resource on a dairy that may be relatively inexpensive to harvest and feed. Early transition milk in the stomach and small intestine represents dollars saved. Dollars that are not spent on labor treating sick calves, not spent on electrolytes, and not spent on medication. And, the calves live.

If you know of someone that doesn't currently receive **Calving Ease** but would like to, tell them to **WRITE** to **Calving Ease**, 11047 River Road, Pavilion, NY 14525 or to **CALL** either 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or 585-343-8128 (Offhaus Farms Office) or **FAX** (585-591-2898) or **e-mail** sleadley@frontiernet.net or pams91@2ki.net. A limited number of back issues may be accessed on the Internet at www.calfnotes.com and clicking on the link, Calving Ease.