

CALVING EASE

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Editors

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Calves and Cold Weather in Wisconsin

Our guest editor, Anna Zettle, raises calves on their home farm near Monroe, Wisconsin (located in the south-central part of the state). This is a good distance west of Lake Michigan so she doesn't see the lake-effect snows so common in this part of Western New York. Of course, in the upper Mid-West we would expect them to have colder weather. Anna says they have Januarys where the temperature rarely if ever goes above zero. In the text below, "I" is Anna writing and "our" is their farm, Ivan and Anna Zettle's.

I really don't know what to tell you about raising calves here in Wisconsin in the winter. We have lots of snow. It can get COLD for days on end; that makes problems for taking care of calves - think of it as a challenge. Now, we don't have a big herd, sixty-five to seventy milking cows. This January I have ten calves on milk and another eleven weaned waiting to be moved to pens outside.

For housing I have seven hutches outdoors and fourteen individual stalls in our heifer barn. If at all possible, the cow is put into the maternity pen to calve. This way each calf starts out with as few bacteria as we can manage. After birth I give each calf a dose of nasal vaccine and injectable antibody booster. If we currently have E. coli problems I may also give oral colostrum supplements, too.

We also do the recommended navel dipping with seven percent tincture of iodine. Colostrum. We feed a bottle of colostrum as soon as possible - especially urgent in cold weather. The heifer calves are tied temporarily outside the maternity pen. We tie them far enough apart so they can't suck each other or chew ears.

Just an aside, I'm not saying we catch every cow to put her into the maternity pen to calve. I'd be lying. Now and again one fools us and calves in the springer pen. If the calf is all "you-know-what" I take her to the barn and wash the filth off with warm water. It's a lot of extra work but what can you do? Get her clean and dry so she gets a good start.

In cold, winter weather the newborn heifers are usually moved to the calf/heifer barn into the individual stalls. These stalls are cleaned daily. I bed them with dry wood

shavings. Unless it is beastly cold, this move is done in a day or two after birth. I still can't bring myself to throw a newborn, dry calf out into a hutch when I have so many clothes on I can barely move. One of these days I assume I'll be put to the test. Maybe later this winter I'll need to since we have a number of calves due in February.

If the weather is very cold and I think there is a bit of a draft on a newborn I put a calf blanket on her. I saw there was a need for something like that so I got to work and sewed up some. I feel that they have saved several calves that might have otherwise died had I not been able to keep the chill off of them.

I feed the calves AM and PM. Each calf gets two quarts of milk replacer/waste milk mix at each feeding. I feed the same amount from day-old to weaning. I never wean before six weeks of age. Our usual weaning age is about eight weeks. In especially cold weather I tend to keep calves on milk replacer a little longer. I start offering starter grain to calves when they are a couple of weeks old. Sometimes I put a handful of grain in their mouth. I hold their mouth shut so they can't spit it out right away. When they find out how tasty it is I don't usually have to coax them like that again. I try to fuss with smaller calves; to wait a little longer before weaning and to encourage them to eat more dry feed. I have even tried sprinkling some dry milk replacer on their starter grain to entice them to eat a little more.

In the winter time I offer water to the preweaned calves unless the weather is so cold that the water nearly freezes as quickly as I pour it into their pails. I usually watch grain consumption closely. With the calves in individual stalls/hutches I can see how much each calf is eating. As a heifer eats more grain, I keep increasing the amount I offer her each day.

Calf Feeder's Tip

Cold winter days challenge us to feed warm milk/milk replacer to our calves. One day in January at 7AM it was -4F at the barn with a wind chill estimated at -34F. Question: If there is a substantial delay before the last calf is fed after we leave the barn with the milk replacer on the 4-wheeler, how warm does the container of milk replacer need to be mixed so that the last calf gets one-hundred degree milk? Answer: On a day like this? If you have fifteen gallons of milk in a twenty gallon uninsulated plastic barrel, heat losses average about five degrees every ten minutes. If it's a thirty minute wait, plan on at least a fifteen degree drop - wouldn't hurt to mix at one hundred and twenty degrees. An inexpensive, rapid-read thermometer is a good guide rather than trying to guess at milk temperatures with chilled fingers. At Noblehurst our last calves are fed seventy-five minutes after we leave the barn. On this January day, the last barrel to be fed was mixed at one-hundred and thirty-five degrees - it was one-hundred and five when we started feeding out of it an hour later.

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