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Taking service to another level

Managing Dairy Calves and Heifers During Winter Months

Attention to dairy calf/heifer management is important for maintaining growth rates, minimizing health issues, and optimizing future profitability of the dairy farm. The winter months are ahead, and with most of the harvest completed it's time to prepare for these upcoming winter months.

Pre-weaned Dairy Calves: Dairy heifers account for about 30% of the feed costs on a dairy farm, and the most costly period for raising heifers is before weaning. The animal's susceptibility to disease is often greatest during this time and the cost/unit of dry matter (DM) consumed is the highest. Energy requirements for calves housed in unheated facilities increase in the winter months, due to cold stress (lower critical temperature for newborn calves of 8°C vs. 0°C for older calves), and cold stress can increase the risk for disease. Unfortunately, the death rate sometimes increases in winter, and/or the growth rate plummets unless we provide additional energy to these calves. Additionally, we need to realize that small breed calves (e.g., Jersey) have about a 20% larger surface area/unit of body weight than large breed calves (e.g., Holstein). Feeding strategies for optimizing growth of dairy calves in winter months include:

- Feeding a milk replacer with at least 20% fat.
- Solids content of the milk replacer can be increased from 12.5%-16% (from 0.4-0.6 kg/gallon).
- Increase feedings/day from 2 to 3 times, while holding the amount/feeding the same.
- Feed more milk/feeding (e.g., increase from 2-3 qt two times a day).
- Use a combination of strategies so that small breed calves consume at least 0.6 kg of DM (milk replacer powder is approximately 95% DM; whole milk 13% DM) with 0.13 kg of fat; large breed calves consume 0.9 kg DM (0.22 kg fat)/day.

These strategies should be used in addition to offering a high-quality calf starter free-choice and plenty of water. Water can certainly be a limiting nutrient during the winter months due to freezing or the calf not being offered adequate amounts.

Hypothermia is [also] a major risk for neonatal calves, and housing, feeding and hydration are key considerations for minimizing hypothermia. Consider these strategies to reduce the chance of hypothermia:

- **Position hutches** for calves in a well-drained area (slope and gravel are important), and make sure the prevailing wind is not blowing into the front of the hutch. A windbreak upwind from the hutches can help reduce the wind chill on calves.
- **Bed hutches** deeply with dry, organic bedding, preferably straw, so the calves can nestle in the bedding for warmth and reduce heat loss by conduction that would occur with inorganic (e.g., sand)

bedding. Wet bedding greatly increases conductive heat loss.

- If **calf coats** are used, check the inventory and have them cleaned before use (research supports the use of calf blankets/coats during winter months to aid the retention of body heat, etc.).
- Keep an **ample supply of electrolytes** on hand in the event of scours to help keep calves hydrated.

Weaning Dairy Calves: Calves should be slowly weaned (e.g., reduce the milk allowance in half and feed once/day for a week) and placed into groups of 6–8 calves of similar age and size. Minimize other stressors like vaccinations and dehorning, at this time.

Housing for Dairy Heifers: Proper housing of dairy heifers during the winter is also important. The housing system should allow for adequate air exchange without becoming drafty, and yet protect heifers from extremes of the environment. Often, respiratory problems increase in calves/heifers during the winter because the housing facilitates inadequate or excessive air exchange. Always monitor breathing and coughing in heifers. Accepting as 'normal' that only a few heifers are coughing is not justification to avoid facility modifications. If health problems occurred last winter, facility modifications should be occurring now. Heifers housed outdoors need to have access to either natural or constructed windbreaks. Water sources need to be evaluated for continuous availability, and to minimize slippery surface(s) around the water supply.

Summary: Management and housing strategies need to be in place to reduce the maintenance energy requirement of calves during winter months by providing ample clean, dry bedding; windbreaks; and other improvements to the housing to lessen the cold stress without increasing the risk of respiratory problems. Feeding of calves and heifers during the winter needs to be changed in order to provide adequate energy for continued growth rates achieved during other times of the year.

(Edited from article by M. Eastridge, Professor/Extension at The Ohio State University; presented in Dairy Herd Network – 2012)

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THE TEAM FOR RESULTS



Merry Christmas!

*Wishing you & yours
the best this Christmas &
throughout the coming
New Year ~ 2013!*

*Thank you for your
Business and support this
past year.*

*It is my pleasure to work
with you... and to be part
of your team!*

“The Weather Outside is Frightful...”

If your cows could sing, would they celebrate the Holidays with a song like this: “The weather outside is frightful... but our stalls are so delightful”? Winter weather brings cold and often damp, wet conditions. Whether your cows are in a free stall facility or in tie stalls, the environment in which they live is critical to their health and ability to produce at an optimum level. Take time to evaluate your facility this winter before the cold really sets in, with the goal of ensuring your cows are in a draft-free, well-ventilated building with clean, dry bedding. Cows can handle cold weather, as long as they are kept comfortable and well-fed! Wet conditions in a facility can contribute to air quality concerns, which may lead to health-related problems, particularly respiratory disease. This winter, keep your cows’ well-being in mind. They are, after all, an essential part of the farm. When cows are comfortable – they will perform time after time! It might not seem like much, but cow comfort is worth your time and their well-being. And if they could sing, they would serenade you with carols of contentment... and the pleasant sounds of making more milk.



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Merry Christmas!

December 2012...

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CHECK IT OUT!