

# Calf Notes.com

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## ***Calf Note #07 –Group feeding calves (mob & computer feeders)***

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Raising calves is labor intensive. It takes a lot of work to properly feed and house calves, deal with disease and keep track of things like weaning, feed intake, age, etc. It can be a real chore when the number of calves increases. The difficulty in labor management has lead some people to consider group calves and feed them as groups instead of individually. Mob feeders and computer milk feeders have been used in New Zealand and Europe for years, and producers in the U.S. are beginning to consider their merits. Before using any method of group housing, it's important to consider both the positive and negative aspects of group housing calves.

First the downside...

Group housing calves has several disadvantages. Probably the most important is the close contact that calves can have with one another. If one calf develops a disease (respiratory, enteric, etc.), there is a greater probability that the disease will be passed to other calves through contact with other calves, coughing, contact with infected bedding, feces, etc. Reducing this contact is the primary reason that producers moved to hutches back in the 1960's. Studies have shown that the probability of disease transmission is reduced when calves are physically separated from one another. This concept of isolating calves from one another to minimize the spread of disease causing pathogens has been the cornerstone of calf raising in the U.S. for many years. By housing calves, we violate that concept. Consequently, there is an increased need for sanitation and management.

Another downside to group feeding calves is the difficulty in keeping feeding buckets, nipples, and utensils clean and free of dirt and bacteria. When group feeders are available to the calves on a continuous, cleaning and sanitation can be a real problem.

Now, the advantages...

Group housing can be very labor efficient. If you have a labor problem on your farm, and have difficulty with labor to feed calves, then group housing may be something to consider.

"Mob" feeders have been used successfully in New Zealand for many years. Essentially, a container is fitted with nipples that allow several (the number depends on the size of the container) calves to have access to liquid at the same time. Milk may be limit fed or offered continuously. Mob feeders have the advantages of simplicity, low cost, and ease of use.

Computerized liquid feeders have been used in Europe and the U.S. Research at The University of Tennessee indicated that computerized milk feeders can be very effective in feeding calves. The computerized feeder (ANI, Intersoft-Agri, Tullahoma, TN; web site at <http://www.biotic.com>) was used to feed calves for 8 weeks. Calves allowed to eat eight times a day (500 ml per feeding). If the calf was allowed to eat (once every three hours), the feeder delivered a measured amount of milk

replacer powder to a mixing bowl. Warm water (500 ml) was added and mixed. The liquid was delivered to a feeding bowl that was connected to a nipple in a feeding station. Calves had access to the feeding station at all times. If it wasn't time to eat, the calves were free to suck on the nipple until they got bored or tired. These calves were compared to calves housed in similar groups but fed by nipple bottles twice daily. The performance of computer-fed calves was quite a bit better than calves fed twice daily. The reason for the improved performance was not clear - calves in the computer group consumed the same amount of liquid and slightly less calf starter than the calves fed twice daily. If you're interested in learning more about this research, you can find the article in "The Professional Animal Scientist" (September, 1996, volume 12, no. 3).

Other research also indicates that calves with access to a computerized milk feeder do not spend time sucking on each other. This is probably because they have access to the nipple on the computer at all times. This lack of cross-nursing was observed in the Tennessee study, also.

Labor costs were much lower in the group of calves fed by the computer. The major tasks involved with the computer were maintaining the feed hopper with milk replacer and keeping the data files (calf numbers, amount to feed each calf, etc) up to date. We did spend quite a bit of time watching calves, however - remember, these calves still require a lot of observation. Calves that were observed with scours were removed from the group pen and placed in individual pens until they got better.

If labor is a significant concern, and you raise a lot of calves, you might want to consider group housing and feeding. But, remember, this is no panacea - you still need top notch management to successfully raise calves!

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