

# CALVING EASE

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## Mama's White Bread Recipe

What's the rule? Face calf hutches to the south to allow for best air movement and winter sun to shine into the hutch. Written on stone tablets, no doubt about it. Just like Mama's white bread recipe, follow it exactly and always get the same result. Never better. Never worse. Just always the same.

When ten new calf hutches were added to the hutch area at Offhaus Farms the area sandwiched between two driveways became overcrowded. Moving hutches to a new site farther away was considered and rejected as impractical. We already have a crushed-stone base at this location. The current site was close to the utility building, grain and bedding storage areas and the calving barn. Naturally, sacrificing or moving a driveway was definitely out of the question.

The ten new hutches were put on the space that had been the "empty" row. Previously the "empty row" was always allowed to rest between the moving of calves and their hutches. Now with the extra hutches, when calves were moved out the hutches were merely lifted, cleaned beneath and reset in the same spot. Newborn calves were greeted by the strong odor of ammonia. The threat of increased rates of pneumonia, cryptosporidiosis and coccidiosis resulted in the unheard of decision, "Change Mama's white bread recipe."

Of course the idea of facing hutch rows north, back-to-back with south-facing hutches to save space was like questioning Mama's white bread recipe. Surely calves housed in north-facing hutches would be cold and unthrifty with nasty cold chilling winter winds constantly blowing into their hutches. Any dairy farmer driving by, seeing the hutches facing both north and south all year round, would snicker.

## We Changed the Recipe

So, in 1997 we changed the recipe. We put the hutches in rows back-to-back. One row faces south and the one behind it faces north all year round. Summer sun shines into hutches facing south while north-facing hutches have shade created by the hutch for most of the day. With five rows of hutches now every other row of fourteen is facing another one. We have drive lanes in-between for the six wheeler to deliver milk, water, grain and bedding.

One benefit is seeing two rows of calves at milk-feeding time. It's just like a greenhouse or pole barn arrangement. We feed or bed one end of the two facing rows before moving the

six wheeler. Then we go to the opposite end to finish our work. Grain feeding can be done efficiently by walking back and forth between two rows of back-to-back hutches.

Hutches are lifted, cleaned and moved between calves. The bedding is removed by a skid-steer. Then the former drive lane becomes the hutch area. We do this about every two weeks all year. The soiled hutch areas are exposed to the weather while we use them as drive lanes for the next four weeks and sometimes up to eight weeks.

Our winter storms tend to come from either the northeast or the southwest. When these storms happen they blow into the fronts of the hutches. This arrangement of hutches keeps one-half of them clear while the others have grain pails filled with snow and piles of snow in hutch doorways. Coming from the same directions summer rainstorms soak bedding and grain pails. Again, only one-half of them get soaked so the work at one time is a lot less.

### **Calves in North-Facing Hutches were Unthrifty?**

Individual calf weight gains and pneumonia cases at Offhaus Farms have been monitored since 1995. Since 1997 we also included in each calf's record the direction her hutch faced, either north or south.

We have seen no significant difference in weight gains between north- and south-facing rows of calves. In 1998 the average daily gains for north and south were 1.4 and 1.5. For 1999 the same average daily gain figures were 1.4 (north-facing) and 1.4 (south-facing). The average daily gain for the two years combined was 1.42 for both north and south facing hutches. In addition, there has been no difference in rates of pneumonia between calves raised in the two kinds of hutch locations.

We feel that with similar outcomes in terms of health and rates of gain and improvements in labor efficiency the change in hutch orientation has been positive. This just goes to show that sometimes changing what you do or how you do it can be improvement. But it certainly is hard to let go of Mama's white bread recipe - it's so comforting to know that it will turn out the same every time even if it isn't terribly good. So, if you think your favorite recipe for healthy calves can't be changed, throw caution to the wind and try something new. But, keep good records and share your results with others, maybe here in *Calving Ease*.

Reference: Personal communication from Tom Cannon regarding "Mama's White Bread Recipe."

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