

CALVING EASE

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The Challenge of Variations in Maturity and Size

Wouldn't life be simpler if there was less variation? More uniformity? Probably pretty dull, too. This letter takes as a fact of life that we will see quite a lot of variation in (1) size of heifers when born and (2) growth rates as we raise dairy replacement heifers. And, we also assume that we want to keep our stress levels for the heifers low enough to allow them to stay healthy.

Making Decisions to Reduce Stress

Experience tells us that whenever we make a change in a heifer's environment some stress will occur. Changes in housing, amount of feed or kind of feed are all examples that commonly cause stress. As calf managers these are stresses that we control. If we make the changes in feed and housing when the calves are mature enough to handle them the heifers seems to do just fine. They don't get sick. They keep growing.

These changes made before the calf is mature enough to deal with them often lead to bad news: sick calves that stop growing or even go backwards. These less mature, smaller heifers may be the result of conditions such as low birth weights, new-born care that resulted in low antibody levels in their blood, and illness such as scours or pneumonia. At seven or eight weeks of age calves like this may not have sufficient rumen development to supply enough energy even for maintenance. Or, even if a calf is effectively weaned, she may be so much smaller than other heifers her same age that she can't compete for space and feed in a group pen.

As calf managers we also know that breaking decision-making into too many small pieces can result in too much work and paralyze an operation. Think of the complexity if we were to weigh each calf weekly and individually feed each one exactly according that week's weight! Or, if we were to try to vaccinate every heifer on the exact day she was 5, 7 or 8 weeks old? Or, to move heifers into group housing only when they were exactly the same size (weight, height)? It would be enough to drive one to milking cows!

The tough management question for each calf manager is how to accommodate large variations in maturity and size without adding a whole lot of extra work and expense.

There is little question that either weaning or moving calves when they are not ready has a high price in terms of heifer health. One problem is stress-induced pneumonia. A secondary problem may be a stress-induced outbreak of coccidiosis. These conditions, even if subclinical, both result in heifers "standing still." That's our quaint way of observing that they have stopped growing and not admitting that we made a poor management decision. In Sam's situation a rough guess of the percentage of calves that need more time to be ready to wean or move than those around them is twenty percent. For example, compared to the other four calves about one out of five calves isn't eating enough grain to make the transition to straight starter without a high risk of pneumonia or, at the very least, having a major drop in growth rate. Because they wean later, the same holds true for moving from hutches to group pens; about one out of five is just a lot smaller than the other four calves.

What to do with the Smaller Calves?

Why some calves are smaller isn't the issue here. But they may not be as mature as the calves around them when we are ready to either wean or move a batch of calves. One approach is to stick to a fixed schedule, make the change and watch the smaller heifers extra carefully. The extra attention may result in earlier diagnosis of health problems if these heifers truly are not ready for the change.

Another approach is to look for ways to accommodate them without messing up the system. Some extra effort is acceptable when weaning if you end up with fewer sick heifers to fuss with every day. One farm, for example, flags hutches of calves still on milk in weaned rows with the little flags used by utilities to mark underground cables and pipes. Another farm clips old cow tags on hutches to mark unweaned calves in weaned rows of hutches. All weaned calves on another farm are marked with a piece of duct tape on the pen so they can be skipped when feeding milk.

Calf managers have several ways of handling "left-back" calves. One place just leaves them in their hutch until the next batch of calves is moved - no moving at all, just keep caring for them in the same place. Another farm leaves some behind but moves them along so there are no empty hutches in between calves (when the hutches are full what else can you do?). Yet another method is to set aside a separate row of hutches for the smaller calves and move the "left back" calves there.

Another solution might be called "catch-up." Suppose you have a calf that is small at birth. One way to have her ready to wean and move with the other larger calves born at the same time might be to feed her more. We haven't tried this method. But, why wouldn't it work? Maybe it would cost no more for the extra feed than for medicine if she is weaned too small and gets sick as a result.

In all these examples the goal is the same. Wean calves when they are ready rather than when the caretaker is ready. Move calves into groups of as nearly equal size as we can manage. Manage stress rather than treat sick heifers.

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