

Dry Cow Care for Healthy Calves

Every dairy producer knows the value of replacement heifer calves. That is especially the case with the increased use of gender selected semen. Successful calf raisers can grow internally at a faster rate, or they can augment their cash flow by selling excess replacement heifers to other dairies. Pure economics demands success in raising baby calves.

New born calves are the future of our herds. Not only do they replace older cows, they also bring better genetics and production potential into the herd. Much has been written about how to care for them. Clean maternity pens, iodine on navels, quality colostrum consumed soon after birth, sanitation with buckets and nipples, individual pens that are clean, dry and draft free, consistency of care, close observation, medications, vaccinations and consumption of calf starter are all items we work on.

As I visit dairy farms and talk with producers, I observe that some are extremely successful at raising baby calves while others struggle. I have noted one major difference that seems to separate success from catastrophe. That difference appears to be care of the dry cows. Some dairies treat their dry cows as expectant mothers who receive the best of feed and ultimate comforts. Other dairy producers are inclined to focus more on the milking string and tend to ignore cows that are in the dry pen.

I recently reviewed an article in the February 10, 2007 issue of Hoards Dairyman where four successful calf raisers, from the northeast to the west coast, shared their protocols with dry cows. There are similarities and differences with their methods. Cow comfort and proper nutrition are priorities for all four dairies, however.

All four dairies followed a well defined end-of-lactation protocol. Cows are treated with products such as Tomorrow, Quartermaster or Albadry. Typical vaccinations include such things as J5 and Scourguard. Bovashield and/or Fortress 7. Some dairy producers have been changing vaccines and spreading the shots over a period of weeks instead of giving all medications at once.

Hoof trimming and body condition scoring (BCS) are also a part of their protocol. A common goal is to have cows go dry with a BCS of 3.25 and calve at 3.5 to 3.75. Some have shortened their dry period from 60 to 45 days suggesting there is less udder edema at calving and increased quality of colostrum. Some cows calve a few days early, however, so a targeted 50 day dry period may be more realistic than 45 days.

Dry cow facilities are also a major concern for successful dairies. Where free stalls are used, managers make certain they are well bedded, cleaned and groomed regularly. Some farmers prefer keeping their dry cows in dry lots with a bedding pack, in well bedded loafing sheds or with access to pasture. Stocking rates are usually about 80 percent so expectant mothers will have plenty of space for resting and at the feed bunk. Individual calving stalls are generally used so new mothers are not interrupted by other cows while delivering their calves. All cows are closely monitored in case they need assistance. Successful managers have found that having equipment, supplies and warm water close to the calving pens enhances the ability of employees to better care for fresh cows and newborn calves.

Another excellent practice is to clean the mangers prior to feeding. Dry cows intakes are carefully monitored so proper amounts are delivered. The goal is to provide just enough feed as to not run out, but not with a lot of feed left over. Feed becomes less palatable after it has been sorted through and slobbered on. The consistency of feed is another priority. Variability in the ration is dangerous for dairy cows. Successful dairies always test their feeds in order to deliver a consistent ration. Fresh feed and an abundance of clean water always increase intake rates, thus reducing DA's and transition problems. Milk fever has been reduced by feeding low-potassium grass or alfalfa hay.

Cows like consistency. If dairy producers provide their dry cows with quality feeds, fresh water, clean bedding, adequate manger space, room to lie down, and time to lie down, there is increased likelihood of delivering a strong and healthy calf.

A final recommendation of the four successful Hoard's dairies was for owners, employees, and consultants to sit down regularly to discuss any problems and determine how difficulties can become successes.