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Focus on EFFICIENCY
Producing the right number of cows and keeping them alive will boost production efficiency

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AS WE ENTER A new year we are faced with the tightest budget of home grown forages and the highest prices on purchased feeds in recent memory. Adversity should be used to motivate change. Before calving season gets started set a target for number of calves or pounds of calf weaned in the fall. To maximize your efficiency you need every cow to have a calf and then keep them alive.

Next to conducting a breeding soundness examination of your bull prior to breeding season, pregnancy checking your cows is the most cost effective decision you can make on your farm. you realize a return on your investment when you make a management decision with the open cows. There are lots of reasons that producers use to keep open cows around, but for the record my 'favorite' cow is one that will give me a calf this year.

With production efficiency as your goal culling cows that consistently produce poor calves, cows with poor udders, or that are lame should be kept in mind. If you have a target number of cows that you want to calve, purchasing replacements that fit your production cycle is an option but remember to be cautious when bringing new animals into your herd. Ask questions regarding their vaccination history and the overall health of their herd. Protect your herd from potential problems by asking the right questions or test newly purchased cows before they enter your herd.

Now that you are certain that every cow is going to calve, plan to keep these calves alive. The most common causes of sickness and death in the first month of life are diarrhea and navel ill that will sometimes progress to joint ill. Although we can often keep these calves alive, treatment is expensive and sick calves will not gain as well as healthy calves. Prevention requires a plan to maximize the calf's ability to fight off infection while limiting exposure to the 'bugs' that cause the disease.

The calf receives all of it's protection from the cow through colostrum, the first milk the cow produces. This milk contains antibodies to prevent infections as well as lots of energy and some growth factors that have been shown to improve health in newborns. Feeding your cows to support colostrum production is a very important first step. This requires that the cows are in good body condition and that you supply good forages and trace minerals including selenium and vitamin E. The cow will start production of colostrum as early as four weeks before calving. Make the appropriate changes at least four weeks before calving.

Next you can improve colostrum quality by vaccinating cows with the right vaccine. This will increase the amount of antibodies to reduce the risk of diarrhea in calves. There are several different vaccines that serve this purpose. Each one has a slightly different vaccination schedule for time when the first and second dose should be given in the first year and when the annual booster should be given in the following years. Choosing

between these products is a conversation best had with your veterinarian. In some situations this vaccine can be given at the same time as other management routines like deworming or pregnancy checking.

Knowing that the first milk is loaded with antibodies against the bugs that cause calf diarrhea means that you just have to make sure that the calf gets fed within six hours after birth. Calves that are born without human assistance are consistently on their feet faster and have more opportunity to suckle the cow quickly. If you have to help the calf to be born plan to assist with colostrum feeding as well. Keep frozen colostrum or a dried colostrum replacer on hand for those situations where you can't get fresh colostrum into the calf. If you are not sure how much colostrum the calf received then there are colostral supplements that you give to the calf orally that can assist in reducing the risk of diarrhea. Colostrum is more than just diarrhea prevention so make every attempt to get this into the calf before opting for the other products.

Now that the calf is on the ground and fed the next step is making sure that the opportunity for exposure to the bugs that cause diarrhea and navel ill is minimized. This is easier said than done. The most common bugs that cause these conditions are everywhere there is manure. Minimize manure build up in your calving barn or pasture by keeping the cows out until you are ready to start calving. This will keep the cows cleaner and help protect your calves. Calving in the cold of winter will often favour healthy calves until the inevitable freeze-thaw cycles begin in early spring. Keeping lots of bedding and removing excess manure from around feed bunks will assist in keeping calves healthy. Dipping or spraying the navel with a strong iodine solution and supplying injectable vitamin and selenium to calves will help protect calves from infection as well.

Despite your best efforts there are inevitable failures in our prevention strategies. The symptoms newborns give us are generally non-specific. They range from overt signs like diarrhea or swollen wet navel to decreased activity, depression or even lameness. Plan ahead for these complications and have a strategy for starting treatments or calling for assistance. At minimum every sick calf should be kept hydrated. Assess hydration status by pinching the skin on the neck or above the eye. If the skin stays tented for longer than five seconds you must replace fluids. Oral electrolytes are part of the solution in addition to milk. If the calf is unable to stand then oral rehydration will not be enough and intravenous therapy will be required. In any sick calf there is a component of pain. Providing a suitable pain-killer has been shown to increase the amount of feed consumed in the days following therapy.

Antibiotic therapy, when indicated, is the next step. Developing protocols for these basic conditions with your veterinarian is a great place to start. When treating navel ill and especially joint ill you need to plan to continue therapy for at least 10 to 14 days. Choosing the right broad spectrum antibiotic for the right duration will give you the best chance for success.

Start this year's calving season confident that every cow is going to calve and knowing that you are ready to prevent common diseases. B