

The Forgotten Calves

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During a normal late winter/early spring season many people in the dairy industry spend some time reflecting on the year that was and planning on improvements for the year ahead. Even though Covid -19 has turned industries upside we can still look to each dairy operation and check our benchmarks and see if we achieved our goals for 2019.

Historically we have focused heavily on reproduction, production, transition health, udder health, and preweaned calf parameters. For many of these the Ontario industry is steadily improving. I suggest we need to look for other opportunities on our dairy farms. One such area for improvement is our post weaned calves. This group is often forgotten unless we have a health outbreak or they are not big enough come breeding time. So what do we know about this group??

The 2007 NAHMS study from the USA had stillborn rate at 8.1%, pre weaned mortality at 7.8% and post weaned mortality at 1.8%. More recent, smaller data sets from Ontario show stillborn rates in the 5% range, preweaned mortality in the 2% range and post wean mortality in the 2% range. If Ontario was similar to USA in 2007 our stillborn rates and prewean mortality have improved nicely, but the post weaned calf has not changed much. Again, the post weaned calf is a group where we have an opportunity to improve.

The 2007 NAHMS listed the top cause of post weaned mortality as respiratory disease at 46.5% of the death. Following respiratory disease are: a) unknown; b) injury/lame; c) scour/digestive. Each of the next three were in the 12 – 15% range. Interesting only 8.0% and 7.1% of herds did post mortems to determine cause of death in preweaned and postweaned calves respectively.

BIG DEAL. Is this old USA data or smaller recent Ontario data sets important? **Yes**, as I feel it should make us all look at our own herds.

Questions we should be able to answer are:

- What is my stillborn rate?
- What is my preweaning mortality?
- What is my post weaning mortality?

Questions that would be nice to answer are:

- What is my stillborn rate for heifers vs bulls?
- What is my stillborn rate by lactation groups?
- What is my treatment rate in preweaned calves?
- What are my treatments for in preweaned calves?
- What is my treatment rates in postweaned calves?
- What is my treatments for in postweaned calves?

If our herd is not achieving our postweaning calf goals what do we do? Each herd will be different on the exact factor to change but general categories we need to address are and highlights from each category are:

The Weaning Process

Ideally weaning should not start before 42 days old and should take at least 14 days to transition from liquid feed to calf starter. Are they eating enough calf starter at weaning? Are they offered free choice clean water? Do they stay where they are for a week after weaning?

Are we regrouping them in pairs? Ideally we also do as few changes on the same day. If you are not sure about your process please talk to your advisors to discuss potential improvements.

Nutrition

Dry TMR or calf starter and hay are the common choices for the post weaned calf. Please feed enough to ensure optimal growth. The post weaned calf grows best on a dry grain based ration. Please ensure with either system (dry tmr or hay/starter) that the calf is consuming at least 2.75 kg of grains. Calves need to be on a “dry” feeding system until at least 4 month old and preferably 6 month old. Again please talk to your advisor.

Calf Comfort

The industry has done lots to improve milking and dry cow comfort. Now is a good time to look at our post weaned calves. Ideally they are on a dry pack with lots of resting space (30 – 40 square foot) per calf. Appropriate eating and drinking space are a must. With a hay/grain program can all of our calves eat at the same time? 18 inches of useable trough length per calf will let them all eat at once. For the just weaned pen, weight difference between the largest and smallest should not be over 100 pounds.

Ventilation

Ventilation rates in air exchanges per hour are assuming **normal stocking rates**. If we over stock it is much harder to achieve optimum results. We have many ways to ventilate, again discuss with your advisor how to achieve appropriate air exchanges while not creating a draft.

Intervention

There are times even with good comfort, ventilation and nutrition our results are not reaching our goals. There are various interventions (vaccines) to help prevent respiratory disease and various feed additives to help prevent coccidiosis. Again please talk to your advisors what may help you on your farm.

If we address all of these broad categories, we will be able help this forgotten group of animals. Happy heifer raising.