

# RAISING CALVES

## Good Care Grows Good Cows



If the staff at Dream Farms in Newburg, Pa. had to sum up their calf care philosophy in only a few words; **colostrum, cleanliness and commitment** would just about cover it.

Of course, growing quality calves isn't quite that simple. Dream Farms has an extensive vaccination program along with well-researched testing and feeding protocols designed to head off possible problems before they occur.

Dream Farms (previously owned and operated by Agway) is starting its' second decade in the heifer-raising business. Staff there currently cares for 6,000 animals belonging to 35 different dairy operations. Calves typically are picked up one day to one week after birth and brought to the facility. Agri-Basics nutritionist Tim Rutledge handles Dream Farms nutrition work from the time calves reach four months of age until they return to their home farms as bred heifers. We spoke with Farm Manager Lane Sollenberger about the tenets on which Dream Farms has built its success.

### Colostrum

"We like to see two feedings of a good quality colostrum in the first eight to ten hours" of life, Sollenberger says. Dream Farms staff obviously isn't on a client's property when calves are born. But they cannot emphasize enough how important colostrum is to starting a calf out right. The farm advises:

- ◆ **Feed two to four quarts of colostrum** as close to birth as possible. Colostrum absorption decreases dramatically as hours pass.

- ◆ **Score colostrum with a colostrometer** to ensure only the best quality colostrum is used. This does take a little extra time. But the effort is rewarded as the calf absorbs the much-needed antibodies.
- ◆ Studies have shown that first- and second-calf heifers tend to have lesser quality colostrum. Mature cows may also leak some of their colostrum before birth. **Evaluate your colostrum** with this in mind and use only the highest quality colostrum for feeding heifer calves.
- ◆ Colostrum saved for a second feeding may be refrigerated. "Longer than that and **it needs to be frozen**," Sollenberger says.
- ◆ Dream Farms provides large zip-closed plastic bags to its clients for freezing colostrum. Labels on the bag note cow identification number/name, what lactation the cow is in, the colostrum's quality score and the date. Bags should be clean and **colostrum should be frozen quickly**.
- ◆ When thawing colostrum, place the frozen bag inside another plastic bag to guard against leaks. Place both bags in a bucket of warm water, replacing the water as necessary until the colostrum is thawed. **Colostrum should be thawed slowly** by this method so that the antibodies remain intact.
- ◆ In situations where quality colostrum is not available or a farm does not have enough colostrum to go around, Sollenberger suggests working with a veterinarian to **find a high quality colostrum replacer**. Dream Farms uses Calf Choice Total, which is made from an "all-natural" bovine globulin protein. According to its label, this colostrum replacer does not contain blood serum, eggs, whey or other "fillers" which research shows do not benefit the calf.
- ◆ **Conduct total protein tests** on calves to monitor how well colostrum has been absorbed. A blood sample is taken and "spun" into blood serum and scored. Sollenberger says Dream Farms looks for a total protein score of 6.0 or better, which shows the calf got good passive immunity from the colostrum it was fed. Sollenberger said calves that receive two feedings of good colostrum within the first eight hours of life typically have high TP scores.

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## Committing To Your Calves Pays Off When They're Cows

The TP score is used as the basis for Dream Farms' death warranty. Up to the first 21 days at the facility, the home farm assumes the risk for death and disease and there is usually no reimbursement if a calf dies. When the 21 days are up, however, calves that scored 6.0 or higher on their TP test are covered at 100 percent reimbursement. Animals that scored in the 5.5 or 5.9 range are not covered at 100 percent reimbursement until 90 days have passed. Calves that scored 5.4 or less are not covered under any warranty during their time at Dream Farms unless the animal is injured.

- ◆ Once a calf has successfully competed its initial colostrum feedings, switch to **whole milk or a high quality milk replacer**. Dream Farms uses a 22 % protein, 20 % fat, all-milk milk replacer at a rate of 12 ounces of powder mixed with two quarts of water for each feeding. Sollenberger says the farm has recently seen positive results in tests that mixed gamulin with milk replacer to help boost calves' immunity.

### Cleanliness

By its nature, dairying is a dirty business. Staying ahead of bacteria and dangerous microorganisms is a constant battle. But the benefits of keeping things clean far outweigh the time it takes to clean up. Proper calf care begins even before a calf is born. Dream Farms suggests the following:

- ◆ When at all possible, **calving should take place in a clean, well-bedded, dry pen**. Calves born in a dirty pen or out in the elements begin life at a disadvantage that even the best quality colostrum may not be able to overcome.
- ◆ **Keep calf pens clean**. Dream Farms staff rebeds hutches with dry sawdust that is followed by a layer of straw in cold weather. The key is to stay ahead of the mess. "You don't wait until they're wet and sloppy because they'll just stomp the new bedding down into the mess," Sollenberger says.
- ◆ **Offer clean food and water daily**. That's the

best way to encourage calves to drink and eat. Sollenberger says water buckets at Dream Farms are routinely cleaned and leftover feed is removed daily and replaced with fresh feed.

- ◆ **Consider using calf blankets** in colder months. These are an inexpensive way to keep calves both warm and clean, Sollenberger says.

### Commitment

Dream Farms has developed an extensive vaccination protocol to try and prevent health problems before they occur. Sollenberger says "good people" can make all the difference when growing good calves. "Observation is a major management skill when it comes to taking care of calves," he notes. "Looking at your calves, spending time with them and knowing how they behave goes a long way." Dream Farms commitment to calves includes these principles:

- ◆ Farmers should **have a regular vaccination schedule** for their herd, administered under the guidance of their veterinarian. Dry cows in particular should receive ScourGuard or a similar product prior to calving. Calves at Dream Farms receive vaccines for clostridia, salmonella, pinkeye and pasturella. They're dosed with selenium to make up for a selenium deficiency they might have. And they receive an intranasal vaccine to protect against Bovine Respiratory Disease (BRD). Each calf is tested for Bovine Virus Diarrhea (BVD) with an ear notch that is taken upon arrival at Dream Farms. Animals that test positive are re-tested. If they test positive a second time, the calf is put down.
- ◆ **Identify stress factors and eliminate them** as much as you are able because stress can lead to sickness. At Dream Farms, this means that calves are weaned and then moved to group pens rather than undergoing both changes at the same time.
- ◆ **Know your calves**. Keep good records of their care. It will pay off as they grow into strong animals that add to the quality of your herd.