

# Little Things Make Big Differences



**By Bob James, PhD, Department of Dairy Science, Virginia Tech University, Blacksburg, VA.**

As I work with dairy producers and calf ranches, it has become increasingly obvious that there are many factors that we take for granted that are vitally important to successfully raising calves. Too often we become so enamored with the latest technological advances, additives and gimmicks that we forget the importance of some of the fundamentals so important to calf health and growth. Take a look at your calf enterprise and see how you stack up:

**Calf housing.** If you are using hutches,

are they shaded in the summer or do calves bake in the hot sun? Erecting shade cloth over the hutches can reduce temperature and heat stress on calves. Insert a block under the back of the hutch to allow some ventilation. Orient the hutches so that the opening faces the southeast. Due to the lower position for the sun in the winter sky, this orientation will warm the calves in the morning and dry the bedding. During the summer, the higher position of the sun in the sky will result in optimum shade. Energy requirements can increase dramatically for calves housed in hutches facing the wrong way. On too many operations, hutches are oriented for the convenience of the feeder and not for health of the calf.

**Clean, fresh water.** How do you feed water? Is it placed in the milk bucket immediately after feeding milk or milk replacer to the calves? This is convenient,

but it can grow a wonderful cocktail of bacteria between feedings, especially during the summer. Is there a divider between the calf starter bucket and the water bucket? If not, the calf will drag grain into the water bucket and drool wa-



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## HERD HEALTH

ter into the grain bucket, making a mess in either direction. Expensive calf starter grain spoils and must be thrown away, and intake of calf starter grain is delayed. The answer may be to have three buckets - one for starter, one for milk and a large one of water. Most water buckets are too small, resulting in empty water buckets during the heat of summer. What's the quality of water? Is it potable water or does it contain excessive levels of minerals such as iron or sulfur compounds? Would you drink it? If you wouldn't, don't expect the calves to!

**Feeding consistency.** Do your calves receive a consistent diet every day? Here are some sources of variation:

**How is milk replacer mixed?** That cup in the bag is rarely filled consistently with replacer. It's either heaping or below the measured level. How much water is added to the powder? What temperature is the water and how well is the powder mixed with the water? The best way is to weigh out all powder and liquid, then there's less chance for error. Most manufacturers recommend that replacer powder be diluted to

12.5% to 17% solids. Keep a thermometer in the milk replacer mixing room to monitor temperature of the mixing water.

**Are you using waste milk?** There's probably no place for use of unpasteurized waste milk on the dairy unless you maintain a closed herd and there's little risk of Johne's or Mycoplasma infected cows. Waste milk used for calf feed should be handled just as you would saleable milk. It will grow bacteria rapidly if stored unrefrigerated in unclean containers, even after pasteurization.

**How much milk or milk replacer is fed daily?** One reason bottles are used on many calf ranches is consistency. A full bottle always contains the same amount of liquid. However, when buckets are fed

there's a great opportunity for variability. If buckets are not firmly anchored, calves are notorious for dumping that bucket full of milk on the ground. That can be a real problem during cold weather if the vigorous calf dumps the bucket soon after being offered its meal.

Many of these items are common sense, but it amazes me how often they are ignored. Evaluate your calf feeding enterprise and see how it stacks up. Where can your operation be improved to reduce losses and costs?

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