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## ***Managing Dairy Calves and Heifers During Winter***

Attention to dairy calf/heifer management is important for maintaining growth rates, minimizing health issues, and optimizing future profitability of the dairy farm. The winter months are ahead, and with most of the harvest completed it's time to prepare for these upcoming winter months.

**Pre-weaned Dairy Calves:** Dairy heifers account for about 30% of the feed costs on a dairy farm, and the most costly period for raising heifers is before weaning. The animal's susceptibility to disease is often greatest during this time and the cost/unit of dry matter (DM) consumed is the highest. Energy requirements for calves housed in unheated facilities increase in the winter months, due to cold stress (lower critical temperature for newborn calves of 8°C vs. 0°C for older calves), and cold stress can increase the risk for disease. Unfortunately, the death rate sometimes increases in winter, and/or the growth rate plummets unless we provide additional energy to these calves. Additionally, we need to realize that small breed calves (e.g., Jersey) have about a 20% larger surface area/unit of body weight than large breed calves (e.g., Holstein).

Feeding strategies for optimizing growth of dairy calves in winter months include:

Feeding a milk replacer with at least 20% fat.

Solids content of the milk replacer can be increased from 12.5%-16% (from 0.4-0.6 kg/gallon).

Increase feedings/day from 2 to 3 times, while holding the amount/feeding the same.

Feed more milk/feeding (e.g., increase from 2-3 qt two times a day).

Use a combination of strategies so that small breed calves consume at least 0.6 kg of DM (milk replacer powder is approximately 95% DM; whole milk 13% DM) with 0.13 kg of fat; large breed calves consume 0.9 kg DM (0.22 kg fat)/day.

These strategies should be used in addition to offering a high-quality calf starter free-choice and plenty of water. Water can certainly be a limiting nutrient during the winter months due to freezing or the calf not being offered adequate amounts.

Hypothermia is [also] a major risk for neonatal calves, and housing, feeding and hydration are key considerations for minimizing hypothermia. Consider these strategies to reduce the chance of hypothermia:

**Position hutches** for calves in a well-drained area (slope and gravel are important), and make sure the prevailing wind is not blowing into the front of the hutch. A wind-break upwind from the hutches can help reduce the wind chill on calves.

**Bed hutches** deeply with dry, organic bedding, preferably straw, so the calves can nestle in the bedding for warmth and reduce heat loss by conduction that would occur with inorganic (e.g., sand) bedding. Wet bedding greatly increases conductive heat loss. If calf coats are used, check the inventory and have them cleaned before use (research supports the use of calf blankets/coats during winter months to aid the retention of body heat, etc.). Keep an ample supply of electrolytes on hand in the

## **SEASON GREETINGS**

Wishing you all the best this Christmas Season. We want to thank you for your business and support in 2014.

## **FUTURES MARKET**

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DECEMBER	169.25
FEBRUARY	169.67
APRIL	168.30

### **PORK**

DECEMBER	90.65
FEBRUARY	90.45
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and January 1, 2015.**

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## Managing Dairy Calves and Heifers....cont'd

event of scours to help keep calves hydrated.

### Weaning Dairy Calves:

Calves should be slowly weaned (e.g., reduce the milk allowance in half and feed once/day for a week) and placed into groups of 6–8 calves of similar age and size. Minimize other stressors like vaccinations and dehorning, at this time.

**Housing for Dairy Heifers:** Proper housing of dairy heifers during the winter is also important. The housing system should allow for adequate air exchange without becoming drafty, and yet protect heifers from extremes of the environment. Often, respiratory problems increase in calves/heifers during the winter because the housing facilitates inadequate or excessive air exchange. Always monitor breathing and coughing in heifers. Accepting as 'normal' that only a few heifers are coughing is not justification to avoid facility modifications. If health problems occurred last winter, facility modifications should be occurring now. Heifers housed outdoors need to have access to either natural or constructed windbreaks. Water sources need to be evaluated for continuous availability, and to minimize slippery surface(s) around the water supply.

Management and housing strategies need to be in place to reduce the maintenance energy requirement of calves during winter months by providing ample clean, dry bedding; windbreaks; and other improvements to the housing to lessen the cold stress without increasing the risk of respiratory problems. Feeding of calves and heifers during the winter needs to be changed in order to provide adequate energy for continued growth rates achieved during other times of the year. As temperatures begin to drop it is important to ensure your calves get the energy and nutrition they need to maintain body temperature and growth.

## Uncontrolled Electricity Awareness On Farms

Experiencing production challenges or caring for livestock with health problems is never easy on the farm. It's even more difficult when farmers and veterinarians struggle to identify the source of the problem. Now, more Ontario farmers are becoming aware of an environmental challenge that has a significant impact on animal health—the issue of uncontrolled electricity. Also called “ground current” or stray voltage. Uncontrolled electricity occurs when there is a constant underground electrical current flowing in the ground or barn. Animals can be exposed to shocks transmitted through barn floors, milking equipment and water bowls. Livestock exposed to uncontrolled electricity may have lower production, stop eating or drinking or exhibit other odd behavior. Some cases even result in death. It's important that farmers educate themselves on how to recognize the signs of ground current challenges on the farm.

That's why the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) is helping to raise awareness about uncontrolled electricity. OFA belongs to a working group of agricultural organizations in Ontario that is looking to identify the severity of the problem and work with utility companies to address the issue. The OFA also has launched a series of online videos to help raise awareness about the issue. For farmers who suspect uncontrolled electricity is at play on their farm, their first phone call needs to be to a licensed electrician. The electrician should visit the farm to test for ground current and work with the farmer to fix any problems. Uncontrolled electricity can also come from off-farm sources beyond a farmer's control, such as the farm's electricity carrier. If the licensed electrician discovers the problem is from an off-farm source, they will work with the farmer to contact the local utility to file a report. It is important that farmers document all reports of uncontrolled electricity so that all parties are aware of the extent of the problem.

The OFA is working with other agricultural organizations and Hydro One to address ground current challenges on Ontario farms. Gaining more control over this and other issues will go a long way in helping to enable prosperous and sustainable farms. (Barrie Examiner)

