

Calf hutch maker's products evolve to meet changing farm demands

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Calf management ideas and recommended protocols have advanced significantly over the last 30 years, as have the calf housing products made by Calf-Tel.

Hampel, a contract thermoformer, located in Germantown, first introduced the Calf-Tel hutch in 1981. Through Hampel's proximity to Wisconsin farms, there was a company awareness of existing wood and fiberglass calf housing products, and of course a strong company background in the benefits of products made with thermoformed plastic. Once the vision was in place, it wasn't difficult to create a design for a durable calf housing product that dairy farms would see a lot of value in utilizing.

"There was a veterinarian from the UW-System that played an integral role in the design of the product," says Joe Weber, marketing manager for Hampel. "Part of his mission was to improve housing for calves, and he recognized the value of our [thermoformed] hutches immediately."

One of the main values that hutches made from plastic offer is that they can be effectively cleaned with a pressure washer and disinfected to prevent spread of disease, since plastic is a nonporous material. Calf-Tel's thermoformed hutches are also incredibly strong. Weber says it's not unusual for

farms to still be using the original Calf-Tel hutches they purchased 25 years ago or more.

Plastics manufacturers can decide from the onset how durable their material is, essentially determining how long the product will last. "We decided not to build in obsolescence," Weber says. "When you order the plastic from the supplier, you're specifying how durable you want it. A milk jug [for example], doesn't have to last for 30 years. Sun is what breaks down plastic, so we decided at the outset of production to add the maximum UV protection package – that's something you either add or you don't, and it's a conscious decision."

Creating a long-lasting product for farms means

loss of repeat business, simply because farms don't have to replace hutches. Weber says, in the long term, they believed a loyal customer following would make up for hutches not having to be replaced, and it has. Today Calf-Tel calf housing is used all over the world, but all the product continues to be made at Hampel's 200,000-square-foot Germantown facility.

While Calf-Tel represents a large portion of Hampel's overall business, Hampel's "molded solutions" business or contract thermoforming is the largest business segment. "We form a very eclectic mix of parts," Weber says, "in all different shapes and sizes." Aside from Calf-Tel, John Deere is one of Hampel's largest customers. Hampel

also makes portable restroom components for the world's leading portable restroom supplier. Each product starts with engineering and design from there it goes to casting an aluminum tool that's used for forming the plastic into the desired shape and size.

Calf-Tel's hutches start as a large sheet of plastic, about 1/2-inch thick. Robots play a significant role in creating all products at Hampel, and it's a production process that's fascinating to watch. The plastic is picked up by a robot and heated nearly to the point of melting. Once the plastic sheet reaches the proper temperature, the hutch form is lowered into a single plastic sheet to form the product. According to Weber, Calf-



Photo submitted

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Tel's hutches are one of the largest products to be formed from a single sheet of plastic, and they've won plastics industry awards for their process by the Society of Plastics Engineers.

The newly formed hutch is allowed to cool completely on the form. While plastic is warm it continues to shrink, so it's left on the form while it cools to maintain exact dimensions. "If the hutch cooled off the form, all the cuts would be wrong because it would have continued to shrink," Weber says. The end product is a calf hutch with walls about 1/8-inch thick, but it maintains its durability. "You could hit it with a hammer as hard as you want and you're not going to damage it."

After cooling, a robot trims out most of the hutch openings and drills holes where the hutch fence is bolted in. Some minor trimming is done by hand. Nearly 100 percent of the scrap plastic is recycled and sent back to the plastic suppliers. Most "new" plastic materials contain about 10 percent recycled plastic. "It's a really effi-

cient and environmentally friendly system," Weber notes. Hampel produces about 20 hutches per hour, or about 160 per shift per day. Utilizing the robots ensures accuracy and minimizes human fatigue from repeated motions. "The robots will even change their own router bits to create the different cuts in a product," he points out. "There's a lot that goes into programming the robots. The timing of every part of the process is important."

Calf-Tel's calf hutch has evolved over time as management needs have evolved. "We continue to improve this housing unit and the different housing units that we offer in order to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of the calf manager's ability to take care of calves," Weber says.

Calf-Tel has introduced a number of different size calf hutches over the years, as each region and country prefers different sizes, depending on their management style and climate. "Each region has different management practices that affect their needs in calf housing. One farmer may say a particular style is

too big, it's going to take up too much space. I don't disagree with those points, but another farmer says his hutches have to be that big. Management styles and practices just differ," Weber says.

While Calf-Tel's popular indoor pen system was introduced in 2006, as building design and ventilation systems have improved to make indoor calf raising a viable option, Weber says their outdoor hutches have remained the best sellers.

Calf-Tel's sales team looks to trade shows as a source of important feedback from their customers to utilize for improving their products. "We continually introduce new products based on that feedback," Weber says. He admits there have also been products they have explored, but have not brought to market though. The trick is finding the right solutions at the right price."

While Calf-Tel's products are designed to create the best possible housing for calves, Weber points out that design improvements are also about the needs of the people caring for the calves. One of the

most recent design changes was to increase the height of bucket placement on the pens (the height is also adjustable). The original bucket placement wasn't too low for calves, but raising the height makes that repetitive stooping motion for calf caretakers slightly less stressful on their bodies. "Granted it's only a few inches difference, but if you're multiplying that over 50 or 250 calves or more, it really does make a big difference. The design goes beyond what the needs of the calves are. It's also about the people working with them."

Calf housing improvements that increase efficiency, such as Calf-Tel's rear door for ease of bedding, improve calf management for any size farm. A large facility may have hundreds of calves to care for, and in those situations calf managers likely only care for calves, but need every possible efficiency. "For small facilities, the calf manager wears multiple hats – they're not just taking care of calves all day, they're doing other things too. The more efficient you can make it, even on a smaller scale, makes a big difference."