

# BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR YOUR DAIRY'S FUTURE

Constructing a new calf facility may seem like a big investment, but your calves will give you better results in the long run.

By Kayla Jentz

Calves are the most valuable future assets on a dairy, but too often get thrown into poorly ventilated, poorly lit and poorly designed facilities. The temporary, make-shift retrofit turns into a permanent problem, and “poof”, calf health takes a dramatic hit, leaving the producer asking, “What went wrong?”

While retrofitting may work in some situations, Lewis Anderson, Calf Management Consultant with Calf-Tel, advises producers to ask themselves, “What will it really cost me?” “More often than not, I see these so-called temporary good intentions become permanent, leading to complications such as poor animal health and labor inefficiencies,” he said.

The primary culprit seems to be the old milk barn or shed that can’t be used for adult cattle anymore, so it gets turned into the new home for calves or youngstock.

“In some cases, the future of the herd is being put into an existing older building that’s poorly ventilated,” said Anderson, “and the producer expects that young calf to be healthy and grow up to be the best cow in the herd..”

#### Ten questions to ask yourself

No matter what your intentions are for your calves, Anderson advises asking yourself some questions prior to moving your calves into a new environment.

1) Can I exchange the air in the building every 15 minutes without creating a draft?

2) Is there enough natural sunlight to examine and work on the calves during the day without turning the lights on?

3) Can those caring for the calves care for them without causing undue stress or harm?

4) Is this a safe environment for the workers?

5) Will these young calves be in the same



Derek and Ken Verhasselt, Verhasselt Farms, Kaukauna, Wis. made the decision to get their calves and employees out of the elements, bringing calves indoors into one of three calf barns.

air space as adult animals?

6) Will I be able to use labor saving methods in feeding, bedding, and cleaning in day-to-day care?

7) Can I expand without interruptions to the current building?

8) Will extreme weather conditions affect the regular routine or functions of the building?

9) Will I be able to contain waste to limit impact the environment?

10) Will this raising method allow the calf to meet or exceed the Gold Standards set by the Dairy Calf & Heifer Association (DCHA)?

#### Making the investment

Pagel’s Ponderosa Dairy, Kewaunee, Wis., and Verhasselt Farms, Kaukauna, Wis., both found themselves in need of new calf facilities and decided to make the investment for the sake of calf health.

Prior to building new, Pagel’s had been sending their calves to be custom-raised, but wanted to have more control over the calves and decided to bring them back home.

Verhasselts’ had been raising their calves on-farm in outdoor hutches. “We really liked the hutches and natural ventilation,” said Ken Verhasselt, co-owner of Verhasselt Farms, “So we basically took both of those pieces to indoor facilities for the sake of our calves and employees.”

Both farms currently have numerous indoor calf barns with individual hutches, adequate ventilation, open sidewalls in the summer, good lighting, and an open alley for ease of feeding and cleaning.

“Our main goals in building were to have good calf comfort, and also provide a good environment for our employees, keeping everything out of the rain and snow,” said Chris Szydel, herd manager at Pagel’s

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Ponderosa. Another added benefit to building was increased efficiency, according to Szydel. The farm currently uses an ATV-mounted automated feed system which can easily be driven down the alley of each calf barn to dispense milk to the calves. “We do whatever we can to make the farm more efficient so we either try to build or create to make our employee’s jobs easier at the facility,” said Szydel.

Verhasselt’s also see benefits of having an open alley in the calf barn. “My son, Derek, or I can walk down the barn and get a good feel for how the calves are doing, which was a little more of a challenge with outdoor hutches,” said Verhasselt.

#### Do your research

But everything didn’t just fall into place for the calf facilities at these farms. The farms did extensive research and sought consultants to help decide what would work best for their operation. Verhasselt used recommendations from Brian Holmes and Dave Kammel, professors of Biological Systems Engineering at UW-Madison, and Sheila McGuirk, a professor at the UW-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine. “They gave us our ventilation concept and helped us make decisions on curtain sidewalls, air exchange, and putting sand under the hutches,” said Verhasselt.

For Pagel’s, Szydel says, “We toured calf facilities at other farms to get an idea of what was out there. We were also learning while we were building. Every time we build a new facility we try to make it a little better than the last.”

As for contractors and builders, Szydel said they do research to find out who will come in at the best price while producing the highest quality building.

Szydel also mentions that “you find things that work better once you’ve tried other options out.” Pagel’s had the opportunity to complete some of their first buildings, and then try to improve certain pieces for facilities built after that. “One of the things we changed from one barn to another was building the back wall lower. That allows us to drop the side curtains lower and get better ventilation,” said Szydel. Some of the first ventilation installed were air tubes which, Szydel said, would sway back and forth, were very noisy, and didn’t get air to



No matter if you decide to retrofit or build new, you should always take time to do research and consider what’s best for calf health and your operation’s efficiency.

the back of individual hutches. Now, Pagel’s have changed over to an industrial PVC pipe air duct. Another major change was the style of hutches, switching from doors that swing into the hutch to doors that swing out into the alley.

#### Conclusion

While hutch style, ventilation and all the other details are still important, it still comes down to making the decision to keep what you have and make it work, or build a new facility. Just be aware that “making it work” doesn’t always mean you’ll get good results, and it’s your decision if calf health is something you’re willing to sacrifice. If you decide that building new is the best option, take a day or two to visit other operations. Ask questions of the calf or herd manager to see if they have suggestions or things they would do differently. And, of course, do the research on calf barn design, picking a proper site for your calf barn, and finding a trusted contractor and builder.

## FYI

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■ For information on the **Dairy Calf & Heifer Association’s** Gold Standards, visit [www.calf-and-heifer.org](http://www.calf-and-heifer.org).

■ For virtual tours of other calf and heifer facilities, visit the **University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine’s** “Dairyland Initiative” website at [http://thedairylandinitiative.vetmed.wisc.edu/prv-virtual\\_tours.htm](http://thedairylandinitiative.vetmed.wisc.edu/prv-virtual_tours.htm).

■ For bonus coverage, including a video of Pagel’s Ponderosa Dairy’s 72-cow rotary milking parlor in action, visit DairyBusiness Communication’s Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/DairyBusinessCommunicationsInc](https://www.facebook.com/DairyBusinessCommunicationsInc)