

Prepare your calf housing for winter

Use these tips to get your calf housing ready for winter

Before you know it our Wisconsin winter will be in full swing. But before the snow starts to fly it's important to evaluate your calf housing to make sure it's ready for the cold.

"Just as you likely take steps to prepare your house for the impending cold weather, your calf housing system also requires preparation," says Aaron Eaton, calf housing specialist with Calf-Tel.

It is important to understand how calves react to cold weather. Calves start to feel cold stressed at 60 degrees F. But keep in mind that the thermometer may say one thing and the calf could be feeling another. The temperature the calf feels is dependent upon several factors including bedding, sunlight, moisture and wind.

To protect the calf as much as possible, it is essential calves are provided clean, dry and deep bedding. Bedding provides insulation and helps the calf to retain heat. Research from the University of Wisconsin shows that calves allowed to nest in bedding that is deep enough to completely hide their legs during the winter are less prone to respiratory disease.

"A combination of chopped straw and shavings works well as a bedding material," says Eaton. "Sand isn't ideal for win-

ter months because heat from the animal's body will be transferred to the sand itself. Straw is a much better option."

Wet bedding is a recipe for disaster in the winter months and should be removed regularly. "Wet bedding can cause calves to use more energy to evaporate moisture off them," says Eaton. The additional energy required takes away from the energy being used for growth.

Consider how often you may need to add bedding. How will you handle discarding old bedding and adding new bedding to the pens? If you are in an area that is prone to a lot of snow, how will you handle snow removal? Where will the snow be deposited? What happens after it snows inside the hutches? "Think through how you're going to handle these situations, so you can continue to provide calves with a

clean, dry and warm environment no matter how bad the weather gets this winter," notes Eaton.

"While you're thinking about how to handle snow, think about where the water will be discarded," says Eaton. Be sure to discard water or ice from buckets in a place that's safe for the calves, yourself and your employees. The water should be changed at a minimum of every 12 hours, if not more frequently, whether calves need it or not. This will help prevent the water from freezing and keep it fresh. Make sure to provide warm water so the calf does not have to expend energy to heat the water to its body temperature (102 degrees F).

Free choice water is also important because it helps to drive calf starter intakes. Calves that eat starter generate more heat, which can help in with-

standing colder temperatures. Calf starter is also an additional energy source. A small amount of starter should be offered at a feeding time, so the starter is fresh and not frozen.

If you are dealing with indoor calf housing, proper ventilation should be monitored carefully in the winter months. It is important to have a ventilation system in place to promote air movement and remove moisture and ammonia build-up, which can prevent respiratory problems.

Cold air drafts increase body heat loss and therefore, should be prevented. "You can check for drafts with your bare hand," says Eaton. "If you feel more than a slight air movement, you may have a draft."

If your dairy is subject to high winds, you may consider adding a wind-break near the calf housing area. Straw bales or round bales can make an effec-



Photo submitted

It is important to keep your calf housing well-bedded in the winter to allow calves maximum protection from the cold weather.

tive windbreak and provide additional protection to your calves. Some calf hutches come with front doors, providing an excellent wind break particularly during extreme nighttime temperatures.

“Having windbreaks is most important during very cold and windy nights, especially for newborn calves,” notes Eaton. “Although calves are meant and built to be outdoors, newborns can be affected by the cold temperatures more than a mature calf.”

Outside of preparing calf housing for winter, a feeding program that provides additional energy to the calf should be considered.

Start now to prepare your housing system for exceptional growth and health in your calves this winter.