

Consistency is key with newborn calves

A challenge that dairy producers face with their newborn calves is consistency, says Calf-Tel calf-care specialist Lewis Anderson. Anderson has more than 30 years of extensive calf-raising and management experience. He recommends developing a standard operating procedure or SOP to achieve consistency with your calves. Here are some points to include in an SOP:

- **Colostrum collection.** Clean and prep fresh cows for milking as if their milk were going into the main bulk tank. Equipment, such as catch pails, should be just as clean. Anderson suggests using a colostrometer to evaluate colostrum quality.
- **Feeding and storage of colostrum.** Try to get fresh colostrum from the cow to the calf within one hour of harvest. If storing colostrum, get it from the cow to the refrigerator within 30 minutes and cool it to between 38 to 40 degrees F. Test the colostrum with a hand thermometer from time to time to see how long it takes to cool the colostrum. Store colostrum in 2-quart containers at 38 degrees F for no more than seven days. Anderson suggests using 2-quart size, wide-mouth plastic containers that are easy to pour out of. The lids seal tight and they can be placed in a dishwasher for cleaning. Make sure your refrigerator is in good working condition.
- **Warm stored colostrum.** Warm colostrum as soon as a calf is born. Set a bottle of refrigerated colostrum in a 5-gallon bucket of 130-degree F water. Using a standard thermometer, deliver the colostrum to the calf at 101 degrees F. It is the producer's choice to tube or bottle feed. "If you choose to tube feed, make sure employees are trained," notes Anderson.
- **Separate calf from dam and dip navel.** "By getting the calf away from the cow, you eliminate the opportunity for the calf's first meal to be manure," explains Anderson. "Get the calf into dry bedding, out of wind, under a heat lamp and dip the navel." He suggests dipping the navel prior to feeding.
- **Other protocols to include.** Ear-tagging, vaccinations, information about the birth, time of colostrum feeding and by whom.

Posting and implementation of SOPs. SOPs can be written in English and Spanish and posted in the maternity area. Run through the SOP with your employees prior to posting it. Train everyone who works in the maternity pen. After training, do a review. "Too many times, dairy producers do the training, but there is no follow-up until there is a problem," says Anderson. "And, employee buy-in will provide more consistency and healthier calves." Listen to your employees who work with these newborn calves. They will provide you insight to training needs and adjustments to your SOPs. Run through the SOPs with your veterinarian and custom calf-raiser, if you are using one.

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