

Calf Care

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Larsons consider the calf when considering calf housing

"When making decisions on calf housing, consider what is right for the calf." That's the advice of Mike Larson of Larson Acres Inc., who recently constructed four calf nursery barns on his family farm in Evansville. Mike consulted with a team of university and extension professionals in addition to conducting his own research and farm visits for nearly a year before deciding on the final barn design and what calf pens to use inside. In the end, it was Calf-Tel, manufactured locally by Hampel Corp. of Germantown. That provided the expertise and product to help the Larsons achieve their goal of doing what is best for their calves. The Calf-Tel pen system provided Larson Acres with the ability to provide their calves a healthy living environment, convenience in daily work and overall management ease.



Healthy calves housed in new nursery barn at Larson Acres.

HEALTHY LIVING FOR YOUNG CALVES

"You have to keep the baby calves comfortable, warm, dry and well-nourished," says Mike. Ventilation was Mike's first concern when deciding how to keep calves comfortable in the new nursery buildings. There are four barns total, each measuring 36 feet wide by 132 feet long, housing about 60 calves in each. A combination of natural ventilation and supplemental air has proven to work well with the structure and the Calf-Tel pen system. Meanwhile, the Larsons have been able to maintain their feeding program without any setbacks in feeding

efficiency during the transition.

Both isolation and socialization are important factors in calf health. Isolating individual calves pre-weaning helps minimize the spread of disease from calf to calf during this particularly vulnerable time of low immunity and high disease transmission. At Larson Acres, calves are housed in individual pens for the first six to seven weeks until they are weaned, says Mike.

Larson's calves also are given access to free choice water and complete feed. The pen system easily accommodates both bottles for pre-weaning feeding as well as pails to keep feed

and water separate and available at all times.

At weaning time, the pen system makes it easy to allow the calves to socialize in pairs by simply removing one of the panels in between each pen. "We like to get calves together before we move them on to the next barn," says Mike. "Some people move calves straight from individual huts to group pens, and those calves seem to take a step back when they have to compete with other calves."

Keeping calves dry also is important to raising healthy calves. When designing the nursery barn, one decision they had trouble making was how to

slope the floor, says Mike. In some facilities they toured, the drain was in front of the calves, requiring them to make sure the drain location was as close to the calf pens as possible to keep employees from stepping near the drain and tracking moisture from calf to calf. Meanwhile, some farms had pens sloped to the back, but that didn't allow spilled water or milk from pails to discharge. Their solution? Two drains for each row of calves. "We sloped the pens to the rear so there is no moisture coming from the bedding and put a drain in the front to catch spilled

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water and milk,” says Mike.
“So far it is working out
very well.”

CONVENIENCE EQUALS CONSISTENCY IN CALF CARE

When it comes to calf care, “if it is not easy and convenient to do, the chances of getting it done right every time are significantly less,” says Mike. “Choosing a pen system that was convenient for our workers was important,” he adds. “We needed to have something easy for them to break-down, move, clean out, set-up, bed down and sanitize.”

“We designed the nursery barn to be an all-in, all-out facility,” says Mike. The nursery barn was strategically built smaller for their herd size so that it is full in about 10 days, he adds. When they move calves out to the next group, another barn full of 60 calves moves in. The modular, free standing design of the Calf-Tel pen system allows the workers to disassemble the pens piece-by-piece. Constructed from a non-porous thermoformed plastic, the pen system can be easily sanitized using pressure washers. “We then sanitize the barn and allow it to sit empty for several



Larsons built a metal rack that holds the pen panels upright for cleaning. This allows both sides of a panel to be cleaned at once.

days to ensure that any bugs die off before we bring in the next batch of calves,” says Mike.

The Larsons took the convenience factor one step further when they built custom metal holders to use when sanitizing the individual pen panels. “It is a very simple looking device that can hold four panels,” says Mike. “The workers just slide the panels into a stand and wash both sides at one time so they don’t have to lean them against a building or

on the ground. It is a very simple approach to make their job easier.”

Finally, the Larsons wanted a system where they wouldn’t have to scrape around permanent posts or structures when they were cleaning out the barn. “After we disassemble the pen system, it is totally wide open and easy to get a tractor or skid loader in to clean that barn,” says Mike. “Our workers agree that the pen system is convenient, easy-to-clean, light-weight

and washes up well.”

MANAGEMENT EASE

“Transitioning from the old calf hutches to our new nursery barn went well,” says Mike. “We were able to duplicate our current procedures and update the calf housing, uninterrupted. It was great for our calves and our workers to be able to do the same things we did in our old facility such as feeding, bedding and calf care,” he adds. “We’ve been able to maintain the level of calf health we’ve come to expect. We didn’t have any calf health issues before and still don’t,” says Mike.

Mike feels that it is too early to determine if they have reached all their goals for the new facility because they haven’t been through all four seasons. This winter, the Larsons will focus on determining the best way to feed the calves and manage the curtains in these new facilities. “The decisions we’ve made with ventilation, dimensions of barn and using the Calf-Tel pen systems have proven to be the right ones,” he says. “We’ve been able to cost effectively provide a healthy life for our calves and convenience for our workers,” says Mike.



Employees sanitize the nursery barn after pens are disassembled and calves are moved onto the next group.