



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Management Section

786

Artificial Rearing of Calves on Milk Replacer Diets

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Calves are raised without their mothers for several reasons. Occasionally, a cow dies during or immediately after parturition, leaving an orphan calf to be raised. Also, sometimes a mother fails to give a sufficient quantity of milk for her newborn. Sometimes, multiple births occur.

Commercial dairies routinely raise heifer calves on milk replacer diets. In other cases, cattle producers purchase calves and raise them for sale or meat. These small animals are excellent for 4-H and FFA youth member projects.

Where to Obtain Calves

Preference should be given to obtaining calves at the farm. However, this is not always possible. In some locations, dealers pick up calves at the farm and deliver them to calf raisers. These people, by experience, learn how to protect calves in transit. If this service is available in your area and you use it, patronize those who keep their trucks clean and demonstrate that they protect the calves.

Livestock auction barns are the easiest markets for both the buyer and the seller but may be the poorest as far as the calf is concerned. Expect calves from auction barns to have been exposed to every disease organism in the area. Too often, care at the originating farm for calves sold through livestock auction barns was poor. These calves often become sick and dehydrated at the sale barn.

Adequate Facilities Are Important

Before purchasing a calf be sure you have adequate facilities to house and raise it. Calves should have individual housing. Individual pens are the best way of housing calves until they reach weaning age. The separate pens keep the calves from sucking one another

and reduce the spread of calf disease. They require 15 to 20 square feet of barn space if they have access to an outdoor lot. If they do not have access to an outdoor lot 20 to 30 square feet of barn space is required.

Calf pens must be clean and properly ventilated. If these two requirements are met, most facilities are acceptable. Preferably, cattle producers should arrange for barns or pens that can be emptied completely for brief periods before housing more calves. When a calf is removed, clean and sanitize the entire pen before housing another calf. The intent should be to return the pen to a sanitized condition.

Ventilation must be good enough that calves have plentiful supplies of fresh air at all times, but direct drafts must be avoided. Both points are critically important. The smell of ammonia or fecal odors indicates that more fresh air is needed. The ability to supply enough fresh air without creating drafts can be a challenge.

Outdoor calf pens (Fig. 1) must be partially covered and walled to protect the calf from excessive heat caused by the sun and to guard against cold winter weather conditions. Pens that open to the south absorb more heat than those set in any other direction. However, on the West Coast those pens facing southward would also take in too much rain. Those directed eastward would gain the warmth of the morning sun and provide shade during the warmer parts of the day. For more information on protective shelters for beef calves see 790.

Individual calf housing allows cattle producers the capability to accomplish most of the important considerations mentioned previously. It enables accurate appraisal of the calf's daily feed intake and an assessment of feces consistency, which is a primary indicator of the calf's health.