

CALVING EASE

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Surges in Calvings: Respond Positively Rather than “Muddling Through”

- Breeding records allow us to accurately predict surges in calvings.
- Surges in calvings usually overload the calf care system.
- It is better to manage overloads rather than just “muddle through” and have compromised calf care.

Make use of breeding records to predict surges.

All breeding record systems allow us to predict quite reliably how many animals are due to calve at least six months in advance. For example, one of my client’s dairy expects 104 total calvings this month, February. That is the lowest calving rate in any month this farm anticipated for 2012.

Confirmed pregnancies for this same farm project nearly 200 total calvings in July. When taking into account heifer:bull ratio with sexed semen used in heifers and mortality at birth the projected heifer births next July are between 108 and 112. This farm’s calf care facilities and labor force are set up to provide quality calf care for about 15 to 17 heifer calves a week. What to do about this surge? Nearly 26 to 28 per week!

Everyone with experience with calf rearing knows about “system overload.” Surges in calvings like the one described above deliver more calves than the calf enterprise is set up to handle. My experience suggests that the quality of calf care doesn’t suffer too much the first week of a surge. By the second week if one is trying to just “muddle through” significant shortages appear in labor to care for newborn calves, calf housing, labor to feed calves, time to observe calves for sickness and to treat sick calves, labor to bed, vaccinate and dehorn calves.

Once compromises in calf care take place starting in the calving pen throughout the whole enterprise, treatment rates for scours and pneumonia increase. Even more time is diverted from quality calf care to sick calves. Mortality and growth rates suffer.

Alternatives to managing surges positively rather than “muddling through.”

1. Know your enemy – use the breeding records to project when the tsunami wave or “surge” is going to hit.
2. Decide how to maintain quality calf care. Choose between decreasing the calf population, increasing resources or some combination of the two.

Decreasing the calf population

- Get someone else to raise the extra calves. A few of my clients have a “trigger” threshold for the number of calves they raise on the home farm. When calf numbers go above this level the extra calves go to a heifer raiser.
- Sell the extra calves. On one hand, one could just sell the “extra” calves as they are born. On the other hand, if one anticipates the “surge,” during the weeks before it calves with the lowest genetic potential could be culled. My client will be using the RELV item in DairyComp 305 to select calves to sell in May and June.

Increasing resources

- Expand the places to calve that are clean during appropriate seasons by going to outdoor paddocks. My client will start housing some of their close-up cows on grass paddocks in June to provide cleaner environments for calvings during the July surge.
- When not enough time is available to properly collect, handle and store colostrum so that it can be delivered wholesome and clean, consider using colostrum replacer as the first feeding after birth.
- Cross-train one or more employees who normally do not work with calves to feed colostrum, dip navels and tag newborn calves, or feed milk, water or grain to preweaned calves.
- Hire one or more temporary employees – this may be crucial in providing newborn care and to provide timely colostrum feeding.
- Use unlikely spaces to house overflow calves. I have seen calves housed in wire pens set up in straw barns and machinery sheds or even under shade trees when the weather is favorable.
- Contract with a veterinary service to maintain timely vaccinations and dehorning.
- Review standard operating procedures for all aspects of calf care. If monitoring compliance for these SOP’s reveals problems, set up re-training before the “surge” so that calf care quality is optimal before the system is overloaded. [See www.atticacows.com, Calf Facts section, “Monitoring Compliance with Protocols Checklist.”]

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