

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

- **Breeding records allow us to accurately predict sustained surges in calvings.**
- **These sustained surges in calvings can overload the calf care system creating sub-standard care.**
- **It is better to manage overloads rather than just “muddle through” and have compromised calf care.**
- **Choose between decreasing the calf population, increasing resources or some combination of the two.**

Make use of breeding records to predict surges – no surprises!

A significant “surge” is not a few extra heifer calves on one day. It is a sustained, continuing heifer birth rate well above the annual average for the dairy.

These surges do not have to be a surprise. 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 is set up with labor and facilities to provide newborn and preweaned calf care for about twenty calves per week.

Lowest month? Last year they projected 105 total calvings during February. Taking into account the use of sexed semen (2/3 calves are females) and a few calves born dead (eight percent DOA rate) they probably will have about sixteen calves per week. The actual number of live heifer calves during February was sixty or fifteen a week – a light month for the calf care crew.

Highest month? Confirmed pregnancies for this same farm projected 200 total calvings in July. When taking into account heifer:bull ratio with sexed semen used in heifers and mortality at birth the projected live heifer births were 125 July heifers.

Again, this farm’s calf care facilities and labor force are set up to provide quality calf care for about twenty heifer calves a week. What to do with the 125-130 live heifer calves actually born during July? How to deal with the extra eight to ten calves every week, week after week in July?

Sam Leadley, Calf & Heifer Management Specialist

sleadley@yahoo.com www.atticacows.com

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Everyone with experience with calf rearing knows about “system overload.” Sustained surges in calvings like the one described above deliver more calves than the calf enterprise is set up to handle. My on-farm 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. By the third and fourth week every bull calf born is cause for a celebration!

Once compromises in calf care take place starting in the calving pen throughout the whole enterprise, treatment rates for scours and pneumonia increase. Then 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 challenge – 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 the expected surge the dairy could begin selling the calves with the lowest genetic potential. Computer-based programs will help identifying these calves.

Increasing resources

- Expand the places to calve that are clean during appropriate seasons by going to outdoor paddocks. My client housed 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 potassium sorbate

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additive for colostrum to buy extra time for colostrum handling or 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.calfacts.com , and scroll down to “Monitoring Compliance with Protocols Checklist”.