

## Calving Older Dairy Heifers Doesn't Pay

BY LISA RISSER

LANCASTER — Raising heifers is often the second largest cost on a dairy farm. Farmers whose heifers freshen later than at 24 months of age are spending more money than they have to, according to Arlyn J. Heinrichs, associate professor of dairy science.

"Increasing the age of calving can cost \$50 to \$80 per animal," he told farmers who attended the second day of Lancaster Dairy Days this week. "The age of calving is where the profitability of raising heifers comes in."

The average age of calving for Pennsylvania dairy heifers is about 26 and a half months. "The average farm with heifers that freshen at 26 months spends about \$2,025 to \$3,240 per year due to poor replacement, feeding, and management."

Some farmers increase calving age because they know older heifers produce more milk. "The older heifers do produce more milk, but there's not much of a difference (in milk production). Twenty-four-month-old heifers produced slightly below 14,000 pounds while 26-month-old heifers produced slightly more than 14,000 pounds."

Calves from 27 to 32 months of age produced just about the same amount of milk as 26-month-olds, he added. A similar increase occurred in butterfat production.

Heinrich estimated that the out-of-pocket cost of feeding a 1,000-pound heifer that is gaining 1.5 pounds per day is about \$34.80 a month.

"If your feeding costs are \$34.80 per month, to hold a heifer until 25 months (of age before calving), the increased milk from this older heifer must be at least \$34.80," he said. "When I looked at the feed prices of raising heifers, 23 months was the break-even point. People raising 25-, 26-, or 27-month-old heifers are losing money."

Decreasing the age of calving means taking a look at the operation's current replacement-heifer program. "But you can't work on your program without monitoring," Heinrich stated. "Look at your heifers' growth rate."

A weight tape is a fairly accurate measurement tool, according to Heinrichs. Charts are available

from Penn State and extension offices that match ages with weights. Height also is an important measurement because it indicates the heifer's skeletal growth.

"Don't rely on the weight tape exclusively," Heinrichs warned, "you might just have fat, short heifers."

He also advised looking at heifers from other herds such as at shows. "If you don't get out and see other animals, you may not know what a young, healthy heifer looks like."

If a farmer notices that his heifers are calving past 24 months, feeding should be the first area of concern. Calves that are six months older or younger could be receiving improper nutrition because they're not drinking enough milk or milk replacer; the milk or milk replacer is being diluted; low nutrient content of the grain mixture; improper age when grain and forage are fed; improper types of forages fed; low intakes of grain and forage; or poor water quality or availability.

Hand in hand with good nutrition for young calves is starting the rumen functioning as soon as possible. "Grain and forage are most critical at this young age," Heinrich said. "Get the rumen functioning by limiting the milk fed at 10 percent of body weight maximum on Day 2. And a maximum of 10 percent of body weight of milk should be fed by weaning day. As the calf's appetite increases, increase the amount of grain and forage; at the same time increase the water supply, which encourages greater grain and forage intake."

Heinrichs recommended weaning at three to eight weeks: whenever the calf is eating 1 to 1.5 pounds per day of concentrate because it is at this time that they will not lose weight due to weaning. They may not gain weight, but they won't lose weight.

At 12 months, a heifer may not be gaining because of a lack of quality forage or a low forage intake, a poorly balanced ration, and low water quality or limited water availability.

Ionophores such as Bovatec or Rumensin have been proven to increase the energy efficiency of an animal by 5 to 8 percent. In other words, it better utilizes feed

for growth. "If you use an ionophore, you can feed less of a ration and maintain the same growth or feed the same ration and improve growth," Heinrichs said.

The average rate of gains for dairy heifers is 1.7 pounds at six

months and 12 months and 1.4 pounds at 18 months.

Heinrichs challenged the farmers not monitoring their replacement herd to go home and weigh six heifers: two six-month-olds, two 12-month-olds, and two 18-month-olds. "Weigh them

today and one month from today reweigh them and figure out their rate of gain," he directed. "If their rate of gain isn't close (to the figures above) by one-tenth of a pound, I'd be concerned that they won't calve on time."



(Continued from Page A3)

in the day linked to cash market weakness and sluggish fed cattle sales. Reports that fed cattle trade

in the Texas Panhandle was at a standstill fueled additional selling interest along with expectations for lower cut values and light boxed beef movement. The discount futures hold to cash supported along with light commodity fund buying. Spillover weakness from live cattle along with another 21 point loss in the cash index pressured feeders to close 17 to 40 points lower.

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ACRES HOG UPDATE: Live hog futures closed out today's session mixed with the spot option unchanged and the others from 20 lower to 8 points higher. Today's session was featureless with pressure attributed to ideas of increased marketings and lower wholesale values. Support this morning was generated by firmer cash hog prices and lower than expected receipts yesterday.

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## Regulate Manure Usage

(Continued from Page A1)

however, a similar one has been re-introduced.

Farmers in townships that adopt the sample manure ordinance, or one similar to it, would be required to submit a nutrient-management plan to the township before expanding a current operation or beginning a new one. If the plan is approved, the farmer would receive a permit.

Expansion, according to the sample ordinance, can be an increase in the number of animals when the ordinance went into effect, an increase in the base number on the nutrient-management plan, or when, in one month's time, the herd is 10 percent or more larger than the average from the last five years.

Nutrient-management plans can be drawn up by the conservation district or Penn State extension agents with soil samples, yield goals, and the results of a manure test.

"It's not costing anything at this point (to have a plan drawn up)," said Heistand. "Buff it becomes a

state law, it could cost you."

Nutrient-management plans often involve building manure storage or changing the farm's configuration to avoid barnyard runoff. The cost of some of the changes required in a nutrient-management plan, as well as soil conservation practices, can be shared by LCCD conservation districts. Cost sharing plans include permanent vegetative cover, 50 percent of average cost; animal-waste management system, 50 percent of average cost; stripcropping and contour farming system, 80 percent of actual cost up to a maximum cost share of \$8 per acre and 50 percent of obstruction removal cost; diversion system, 75 percent of average cost; waterway system, 75 percent of average cost; stream protection system, 50 percent of average cost; sediment retention and erosion or water control structures, 50 percent of average cost; soil and manure analysis, 80 percent of actual cost approved by district; and excess manure transportation, percentage determined by district.

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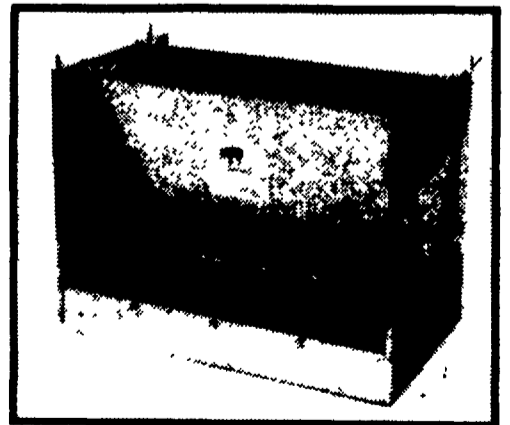
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