

Custom Calf Raiser Fills Need While Marketing Skills

JAYNE SEBRIGHT
Lancaster Farming Staff

TELFORD (Montgomery Co.) — For many dairy farmers, feeding calves is the most dreaded chore they have to do. However, Glenn Moyer of Westfield Lane Farms in Montgomery County enjoyed raising calves so much that he made a full-time job out of it.

He's done a pretty good job at it, too. In the last five years that Moyer has been custom raising calves, he has maintained a calf mortality rate of less than 1 percent, far below the state average of around 10 percent. He hasn't seen a case of scours on his custom calf raising operation in more than three years.

Moyer raises 1,200 calves a year from the age of one to three days old to five months old. He custom raises these calves for five dairy operations, ranging in size from 150 cows to 1,200 cows, located in Chester, Berks, Lebanon, and Lancaster County.

"Part of the reason my custom calf operation works so well is because I really enjoy it," said Moyer. "When I decided to go back into farming, I evaluated our assets. Through custom calf care, I am marketing my skills, not just crops."

Moyer purchased his farm in 1985 after working as a truck mechanic for 25 years. Located in Montgomery County and surrounded by development, the farm came with very limited acreage.

To bring income to the farm, Moyer raised his own calves on a part-time basis for 10 years, buying beef and dairy-crossed calves and then selling them at local auctions.

Then, when beef prices fell in 1995, Moyer called around to area dairy farmers, asking them to raise their calves temporarily until beef prices improved. The temporary measure became so successful that Moyer quit his job as a mechanic and became a full-time custom calf raiser.

Moyer's father Raymond comes to help Moyer with the calves every day. Two high school boys also work part time at the farm. Moyer's wife Nancy works at a local doctor's office.

Every Monday and Thursday, Moyer heads out with his custom-designed truck and trailer for a 200-mile, six-hour trip. He stops at each of the five farms, picking up newborn calves and delivering the five-month-old calves. Once the calves arrive at the farm, they are weighed and placed in individual calf hutches.

192 calf hutches line Moyer's farm. The calves in the hutches are fed a 20/20 all-milk milk re-

placer formula from a bottle twice a day until they are six weeks old.

A 20 percent protein calf starter and water is introduced shortly after their arrival to the farm. They are weaned at six weeks, but remain in the hutches until they're eight weeks old to make sure they're weaned properly.

"Bottle feeding encourages the calf to arch her neck in such a way that it closes the esophageal groove," said Moyer. "Bottle feeding also prevents the calf from gulping too quickly and stimulates the production of saliva, which contains an enzyme that aids in digestion."

Moyer feeds the milk at as close to 100 degrees Fahrenheit as possible. He also feeds 8.8 ounces of milk powder to each calf as opposed to the recommended eight ounces.

"It's important for outdoor housing to give the calf more energy," said Moyer. "Especially in the winter time."

Once the temperature falls below 32 degrees Fahrenheit, Moyer adds an additional one percent powder for every degree below freezing.

"Feeding more powder increases the energy provided to the calf to keep warm during cold weather," said Moyer. "That way you can get the same performance from the calves in the wintertime as in the summer."

While the calves are in the hutches, they receive early-calfhood vaccines, including Clostridium, H. Somus, Pasturella H#, and Nasalgen. Once they're weaned properly and eating the grain well, the calves are moved into groups of 14 animals.

An advantage to custom calf care is that each group includes animals all within one week of age. The calves are kept in group housing on the home farm for four weeks and then moved to a rented farm about a half mile up the road.

"We keep the younger groups on the home farm so we can better observe the calves and their progress in group housing before moving them up to the other farm," said Moyer.

Calves that are between three and five months old are kept at the second farm and stay in their original groups of 14. Moyer rents the pole building and second floor of the bank barn on the second farm from the Ruth family, who retired from the jug milk business several years ago.

When he rented the buildings, Moyer removed the free stalls from the pole barn and made several pens that the calves



Fresh air, fresh straw, and fresh water are Moyer's first three ingredients to raising healthy and productive heifer calves at his custom calf raising operation.

progress through during their stay at Westfield Lane Farms.

The calves at this facility are fed an 18 percent protein calf grower mix and alfalfa hay. The alfalfa hay is purchased from a Cumberland County crop farmer and tests between 20 and 24 percent protein.

Shortly after arriving at the second farm, the calves are dehorned. A catwalk enables Moyer to monitor the calves' progress at the second farm while he is feeding them. Before they leave to go back to the owner at the end of five months, Moyer gives the calves a nine-way vaccine and weighs them.

One of the reasons why Moyer only raises the calves to five months old is because that age group requires mostly purchased feeds. "We don't have a lot of land here," said Moyer. "Once the calves reach six months old, the farmer can start introducing forages, which we don't grow."

In addition to weighing at arrival and departure, Moyer also weighs the calves monthly. This is how he invoices his clients. Charging by the pound, Moyer said that the average cost to raise a calf in his operation is around \$300.

In their contract, Moyer and his clients agree to fulfill certain responsibilities. The calf owner is responsible for feeding the calf colostrum, dipping the navel, and putting eartags in the ears for identification.

Moyer handles all feeding, vaccinations, and care of the animals from the date they're picked up until when they arrive back at the owner's farm at the end of five months. He also figures transportation into his costs for raising the animals.

Although his calf mortality rate stays below one percent, Moyer agrees to maintain a mortality rate of less than four percent in the contract. If the mortality rate rises above four percent, Moyer pays the owner the cost of the lost calves. If he loses a calf but is within the four-percent mortality rate, he still reimburses the owner for his charges to raise the animal.

"My three favorite health products are fresh air, fresh water, and fresh straw," said Moyer. "Too many people raising calves rely on antibiotics and ignore those first three products."

While Moyer does use a variety of antibiotics to treat illness,

he only uses them on an as-needed basis. "We had one of the harshest winters ever this year, and I only treated one calf who suffered from respiratory problems," said Moyer.

According to Moyer, the benefits in custom calf care to the dairy farmer are endless. Here are a few.

1) More attention is paid to detail than the dairy farmer can provide.

2) The farmer has better started calves than they would if raised at home.

3) A mortality rate of less than one percent provides a definite economic benefit to the dairy farmer. The state average for calf mortality ranges between 10 and 12 percent.

4) Calves are grouped closer age groups, so the housing and care is given to more uniform groups.

5) The focus is 100 percent on raising calves. Moyer is not involved in milking cows or raising crops, so he is giving the calves the attention they need.

Moyer has a waiting list of 12 farmers who want to have him custom raise their calves. However, he hasn't taken on a new client in more than three years. Moyer doesn't do preliminary testing on the calves before accepting them from his clients because he knows he can depend on the farmer to provide him with healthy calves.

"I only work with progressive dairy producers," said Moyer. "If I couldn't be absolutely certain that they fed the calves the recommended amount of colostrum, then I would be dealing with the wrong clients."

"They need to care about the calf's welfare as much as I do, or it wouldn't be worth their investment to get me to raise the calves," said Moyer.

The major advantage to Moyer's custom calf care operation is that both the producer and Moyer benefit from the calf's performance.

"Since my fees are performance-based, both the client and custom raiser benefit when the calf does well," said Moyer.

Another benefit Moyer finds in custom raising calves is the ability to pool the ideas and suggestions from one client to benefit all of his clients.

Several of Moyer's clients have come to him by the recommendation of their veterinarians. "In addition to working closely with our own vet, I also work closely with the veterinarians of the dairy farmers who supply the calves," said Moyer. "One of the veterinarians came to our farm and liked what he saw so much that he recommended me to other farmers."

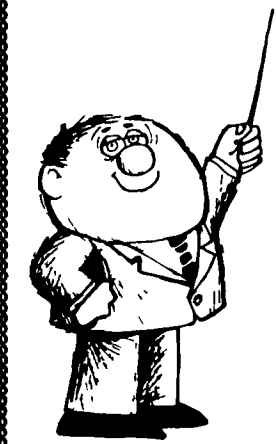
Although Moyer isn't interested in taking on any more clients, he does see custom calf raising as a tremendous opportunity for someone looking to get into farming in an alternative enterprise.

"It's really hard to believe that in agriculture there is such a need for a service and so few providing it," said Moyer, who is not aware of anyone else in Pennsylvania specializing in custom calf care.

"It does take a lot of care and attention to detail," said Moyer. "Your calf raising skills really have to be honed in before going into custom raising."



Glenn Moyer of Montgomery County travels 200 miles each Monday and Thursday to pick up and deliver calves that he custom raises for five area dairy farmers.



**A LESSON
WELL
LEARNED...**

**Lancaster Farming's
CLASSIFIED ADS
GET RESULTS!**

Phone: 717-394-3047
or 717-626-1164