

Herd Interaction Positive On Calf Health, Performance

WOOSTER, Ohio — A little motherly love goes a long way when it comes to keeping beef calves healthy.

Two Ohio State University researchers have found that the performance and health of newly arrived feedlot calves improved when they were allowed to interact with adult cows, rather than being isolated.

Although the four-year study showed some inconsistencies, the results could be a marketing strategy for producers willing to try a new technique.

"It's a challenge for the industry to keep calves healthy in feedlots. They don't grow as well if they don't eat or they get sick," said Steve Loerch, Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center researcher. Loerch and OARDC researcher Francis Fluharty, conducted the study. "It costs the beef industry

millions of dollars a year."

About \$500 million annually to be exact and poor calf performance, morbidity and mortality is to blame. Previous studies focusing on these aspects have pointed to psychological stresses the calf suffers from when faced with environmental changes, new feed and the exposure to potential pathogens in the feedlot.

"Calves go through a two to three day period of stress after being weaned, transported and placed in a feedlot environment. It is during this brief period that they don't eat and are susceptible to respiratory diseases," said Loerch.

He and Fluharty found that by placing cows and calves together in feedlots improved the calves' appetites and cut down on the risk of illness by nearly half. A seven-day observation of

calf behavior showed increased feeding on the first day, which leveled off by the end of the week.

"The effect cows have on calf behavior is very transitory and short term," said Loerch, adding that the cows act as mother figures to the calves, reducing calf stress by just being present. "The calves follow the behavior of the maternal figure, which includes feeding. It's stresses from the initial exposure to new environment that the calves need to overcome in order to prevent illnesses and the cows help with that transition."

The adult cows serve another role, as well — by providing a better market sale for producers.

The researchers suggest using "open" cows or heifers that never became pregnant during the breeding season and have been tagged for the market.

"Producers pregnancy check their cows at the same time calves are being weaned," said Loerch. "By placing the adult cows in the feedlots and letting them feed on the grain, they'll

gain weight, hence be better quality because they would have more meat on them."

Loerch said that such a technique is cost effective and some farmers have adopted the novel idea. "Calf performance may not be consistent every year, but the process may have potential benefits," said Loerch.

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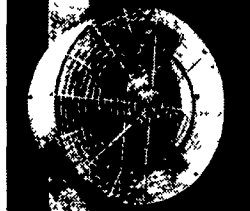
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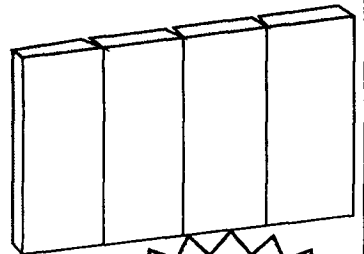
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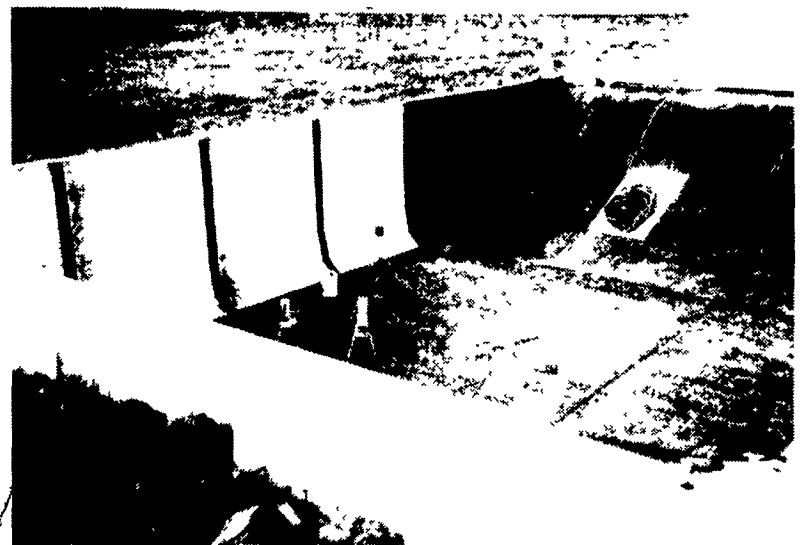
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