

# Heifer Grower: Early Health Means Long-Term Calf Success

**ANDY ANDREWS**  
Editor

**BELLEVILLE (Mifflin Co.)** — Lynn Neer watches his calves carefully — so carefully, in fact, that if they blood test for low immunity and aren't eating well, they are sent to the yards or the "owner keeps them."

The strategy for early success can pay off in healthy, productive cows, according to the Mifflin County farmer.

In late April this year, the Neer farm was a tour stop for about 40 attendees of the Pennsylvania Agricultural Credit Conference, conducted at the Penn State Nittany Lion Inn.

Problem calves, noted Neer, are created "mostly from management, at least from where I get them," he said.

Neer's heifer calf operation is



Neer credits blood checks on calves with a way to monitor their overall health. He uses an ear tag ID system to track where the calves were born, and who may be responsible for initial calf health problems.

located on about 78 acres. Neer farms with wife Margaret and daughters Katie and Charity. They manage about 200 acres total, including rented land on three other farms, and have a custom field business encompassing up to 3,000 acres.

Lydia Yoder, with Clint, also helps with the colostrum bottles for the calves.

Neer receives heifers from "babies to eight weeks" old, he noted, providing growout for five farms in the region, including three in Blair County and others in Williamsport and Cogan Station.

At one time, Neer milked from 300 to 1,400 cows, but decided about four years ago to pursue the heifer calf raising business. He cares for about 780 or so calves, with the help of one full-time and three part-time employees.

As of April 22, there were 101 calves on the bottle, with others about a month old.

When drawing blood, if the IGG levels (which indicates the immunity the calf receives from colostrum) are suspect, then

those calves are separated. If rejected, Neer believes that's one stimulus for the farm owners "to get their workers to do a better job," he said.

Neer can track a particular farm by ear tag, which includes date born, time, and other information.

The tag lets him know "who was the guy responsible — the tags with the right signature provide the guy to deal with," Neer said.

For better health, a gallon of colostrum is fed to each calf the first six hours of its life. Usually that is enough to promote good calf health.

Neer wants to know about any potential traumatic experience at birth, which can affect cow productivity when they reach the 2-year-old stage.

Neer's goal: to have the heifer home at 22 months of age so they can calve at 23-24 months, he noted.

Vaccination programs begin with the dry cow. Then, when the calf is born, that vaccination program provides the "roof" for the calf, "a foundation" he noted for



Lynn Neer, Belleville, spoke about his heifer raising operation to an ag credit conference tour group in April. Photos by Andy Andrews, editor



The ag lender tour group inspects calf hutches at the Neer Farm in April.

immunity to allow the cow to go anywhere.

Mycoplasma vaccination occurs before dry cow stage and before calving. A calf is provided a booster at weaning. The same program occurs at the springing stage, a nine-way BVD, PI3 (modified live), and five-way leptospirella program. By providing those types of precautions, "rarely do we lose a calf," said Neer.

A calf with BVD has no immunity, noted the heifer grower. Calves are on bottles instead of

buckets to avoid any potential cross-contamination. The calf's natural way to get nutrients is to "suck it - the digestion is better," said Neer and, because the calf works harder to feed, they are healthier when weaned.

Neer sets up his fees depending on how far to truck the animals, what the dairy farmer is looking for in terms of age and conditioning, and a per-day rate. Neer keeps careful cost accounting information, knowing all his input costs to determine his fee structure.

# Graziers Battle Low Feed Values Caused By Wet, Dreary Weather

**ANDY ANDREWS**  
Editor

**ELIZABETHTOWN (Lancaster Co.)** — Dairyman Mark Garber tried to make light of a grueling situation for most farmers around the region.

In the morning, at the beginning of his speech about grazing to more than three dozen producers and agri-industry representatives, it began to pour. A steady rain became a heavy rain. Within 45 minutes, about three-quarters of an inch of rain fell and continued to fall well into the afternoon.

Garber nodded to the downpour making its way from the roof of the maintenance shed, drops falling on some of the bystanders. "Maybe the topic for the day should be wet weather management," he said. "That would be the appropriate topic, I guess."

Huddled beneath parkas and

umbrellas, some in the crowd looked around and smiled at each other. Garber pointed to some cows standing around, many not eating any of the grass, in the distance.

Garber noted, "This spring has been a real challenge for managing things," he noted. It's important for the cows to eat and not "destroy the place," he said.

The unusually rainy and cool spring — in stark contrast to the heatwave from April through the entire summer last year in the county — has contributed to some real paddock and feed area management problems for graziers.

The pasture walk, sponsored by Penn State and industry, featured a tour of the Garber Farm. Herbert and Sharon Garber manage the farm with their sons, Mark and Joel. Mark also farms along with Tricia and Joel with Kelly.

Mark noted, "Sunshine is the

only way I know of making sugar." At the time, it was the fifth day in a row of gray skies and general dreariness, with some reluctance of the cows to eat the grass. Garber noted that about three weeks ago, the sugar (or NFCs) registered 26 percent. The previous week, with the persistent rains, the sugars were at 9 percent, a third the level.

And at 9 percent, the "cows don't want to eat it," he said.

Garber said that the dairy maintains about 140 cows on grazing with 80 acres in pasture. The farm also feeds a TMR of corn silage, baleage (from hay on the Garber and other farms), and other items. The family farms a total of four separate locations.

The dairy milks 55-60 pounds per cow with a butterfat ranging from 3.7-3.8 percent and protein at 3 percent.

When the weather cooperates, feed and breeding programs have worked well. The Garbers contin-



Mark Garber, in center with umbrella, spoke in between steady rain during a pasture walk at his Elizabethtown dairy.

ue to take pasture samples every two weeks and watch to make sure the rations are balanced.

Garber explained the feeding programs at the farm. He emphasized that the animals are not on a total grassed-based diet, but grain is incorporated into the TMR.

Garber said this was the second year of grazing for the farm. "We're still learning as we go," he said.

Paddocks vary in size and the ways they are rotated and used, depending on the age of the animals. When they began, with moderate success, Garber noted about 35 acres were in alfalfa and about 15-20 in old fescue. Many acres were in contour-stripped rows.

Last summer proved mostly successful, despite the drought, with the animals grazing all summer long. As part of the rotation, the Garbers mowed ahead of the cows, about an acre each night.

Some of the alfalfa had more than 200 RfV straight through the fall. The interesting thing was, the grass was brown and 2-3 inches in height, and about a

week after the rains came, the grass bounced back, grazed at 8 inches high.

Garber said, "if we get sunshine, things will really fill out."

For spring tactics during a good year, a 30 pounds per acre seeding rate works well for earlier stands. "But if we have wet weather like this, it can get torn up pretty quick," noted Garber, with cows tramping on it.

Because of the lack of sunshine, the stands are not returning nearly as thick as they did. But with warm weather and sun, the stands can grow about an inch a day, Garber said.

Garber emphasized the importance of a good, thick stand. "It can take more abuse, whether it's dry or wet," he said.

But "if we don't get sun soon, we may have to feed the cows" some stored hay.

One standout management challenge: cull rates, which stood at 22 percent last year. Feed expansion and not buying young stock have helped them manage better.

"We haven't bought a single heifer since," noted Garber.



The Garber family from Elizabethtown hosted about three dozen producers and agri-industry representatives at their farm on another rainy day last week. From left, Mark, Herbert, and Joel Garber.

Photos by Andy Andrews, editor



One of the many narrow laneways leading out to paddocks. Umbrellas were the norm during a rainy pasture walk last week at the Garber Dairy Farm in Elizabethtown.