

McMahon's EZ Acres Operation Focuses On Calf Raising

HOMER, N.Y. — From the moment heifer calves are born at McMahon's EZ Acres in Homer, N.Y., there are high expectations for their future. To ensure that the calves become productive replacements in the milking herd, the management team focuses closely on their feeding and care from day one.

"Raising calves is a very important part of our dairy operation, and a key component in our success," said Pete McMahon, who with his brother Mike, owns and operates the 1,200 head Registered Holstein dairy operation. "We are mostly a closed herd. Over 90 percent of our animals are descended from the original eight cows my father started the farm with back in 1957. We've rarely bought outside replacements, which definitely helps economically. We carefully focus on our calf raising to keep it that way."

The primary caretaker of the calves is young stock manager, Jennifer Reynolds, who has spent her entire life on dairy farms, having managed calves on several large operations in Cayuga and Cortland counties. She pays close attention to their feeding and developmental needs, which results in them growing up faster, healthier, and being ready to perform in the herd more productively.

According to Reynolds, after colostrum is fed, the calves are moved to hutches, where they are fed whole milk. Dry feed is introduced almost immediately.

"At day two or three, I put about a cup of feed in the bottom of the milk pail to get them interested, then slowly increase

the amount," said Reynolds. "They really take to it, and after a few more days I offer it to them in addition to the milk. Plus, they have free-choice water."

When she came to work at McMahon's EZ Acres, Reynolds was impressed with the performance of the feed that was being given to the calves. For the past three years, the calves have been fed Pennfield Calf Starter #50209, a molasses-sweetened feed with 18 percent protein, steam flaked corn, steam flaked barley, and medicated with Deccox.

McMahon said he had used pelleted calf feeds in the past, but found that an all-pellet calf feed is okay for older calves, but not for the youngest. "At one point, we tried feeding sweet feed to the younger calves and pellets as they got older. Unfortunately, the transition was not easy. We then tried the Pennfield feed several years ago and like the resulting performance."

Reynolds concurs: "They really like the feed, which helps them gain the weight they need. We are weaning at about 6 weeks, and by then they're eating eight to ten pounds of feed a day."

The calf-raising practices at McMahon's EZ Acres put them ahead of the curve, according to the National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project (NDHEP). The NDHEP reports that the average age for weaning is just less than 8 weeks. In addition, NDHEP reports that the age at which calves are offered grain, forage, and water will have a great impact on weaning ages,

economics, and other outcomes such as calf growth rates.

"Our average weight at weaning is around 200 pounds, with some calves weighing as high as 220 pounds," said Reynolds. "Other operations where I worked used different feeds, and the average weaning weight was 175 to 180 pounds. My care of the calves isn't very different here than at other farms, but the feed is."

At weaning, the calves are moved into the calf barn where they are offered free-choice grain and plenty of fresh, clean water. At eight weeks, they begin with forage, top dressed with the grain. This practice is consistent with those advocated by many nutrition experts, who are proponents of feeding grain early, offering free-choice water and avoiding forage until after weaning, in order to promote rumen development.

"Basically, our calf operation is the major building block for our herd replacement program, which is important for the dairy to thrive. Our calf care and feeding program contributes to the animals growing up faster and healthier," said McMahon, who noted the farm's low calf mortality rate. "With the cost of replacement heifers averaging around \$1,800 today, it's good economics to grow from within the herd."

The heifers freshen at 21 months, which is much earlier than the national average of about two years. Additionally, the heifers calve at an average 395-day interval. "Our heifers are ready for this role because they grow faster, with better

muscular and skeletal development. How you begin feeding your calves from the start — the feed and when you introduce it — has a major impact on the animals becoming sound, profitable producers."

McMahon added: "We strive to get the heifers into the milking herd as soon as possible. It's important to have the animals producing for the operation rather than costing the operation." The 630-cow milking herd has an impressive rolling herd average of 25,600 pounds.

Turning to his computer,

McMahon explained that they have been able to continually grow the herd from within their operation. The farm averages about 300 heifer calves a year and if the cull rate can be kept around 30 percent — which it usually is — the herd size will increase.

The mission statement at McMahon's EZ Acres contains the phrase: "To pursue excellence in the dairy production business." They focus on that pursuit by paying close attention to animal care, feeding, and development, beginning at day one.

Hess Wins AAMP's Highest Honor

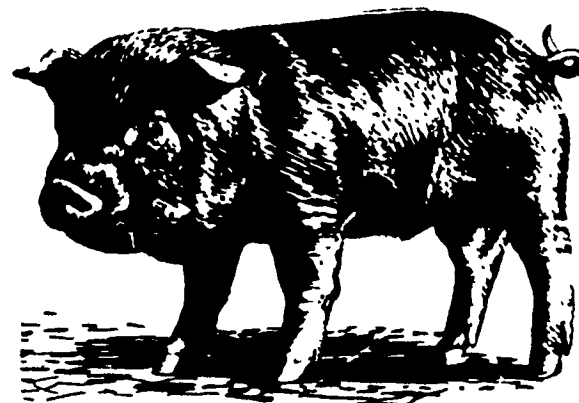
ELIZABETHTOWN (Lancaster Co.) — Lloyd Hess, Hess BBQ, and Catering, Willow Street, received the 2003 Annual Achievement Award from the American Association of Meat Processors (AAMP).

The award is the national trade organization's highest honor, which recognizes the honoree's outstanding and continuing contributions to the meat and poultry industry.

Hess received the award in

Kansas City, Mo., where he was attending the 64th American Convention of Meat Processors and Suppliers' Exhibition. The meeting is an annual educational event and trade show.

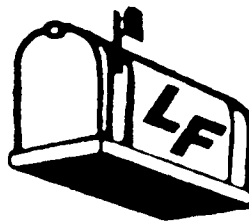
Hess has been an active member of AAMP, the country's largest national meat and poultry trade organization, which represents more than 1700 small and mid-sized meat and poultry firms and served as the technical advisor for the American Cured Meat Championship since 1990.



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