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Can pre-fresh feeding practices influence calf birth weights? (I)

By Dr. R. Tom Bass, II, DVM, PhD,
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A comment I hear on occasion from dairy producers is "I won't feed a pre-fresh ration, it causes my calves to be too big." Is there really any validity to this statement? Unfortunately, very little published research has addressed this question in dairy cattle. Studies examining the factors affecting birth weight of beef calves are more numerous, and will serve as the basis of several conclusions discussed below. Producers must remember that other factors are likely to be contributing to, if not causing the problem of high birth weight calves. In those situations where dystocia (calving difficulty) is truly occurring at unacceptably high rates, consider the following.



Animal Effects?

Is the problem occurring primarily in first calf heifers? If so, take a serious look at heifer development as a source of the problem, rather than immediately placing all of the blame on big calves. Heifers should calve at 22-24 months of age, weighing 1300-1350 pounds (immediately before calving), standing 52-54 inches tall at the hip, with a body condition score of 3.25 +/- 0.25 (1-5 scale). Heifers with smaller frame sizes and/or higher body condition scores experience a greater risk of dystocia, all other factors being equal.

Does the problem have more of a genetic than a developmental basis? Are proven, calving ease sires being used, especially in heifers? Did a change in bull usage 9 1/2 months earlier coincide with the onset of the problem? Also, don't forget that the bull is only half of the calving ease equation—the dam must be given some consideration as well. Review records to rule in or rule out these possibilities.

Weather Effects?

Extended periods of excessively cold weather can increase calf birth weight. Nebraska research in beef cattle suggests that for every 1°F decrease in average winter temperature, spring-born calf birth weight increases by 1 pound. This occurs because peripheral blood flow (blood flow to the skin and extremities) is reduced in order to maintain a normal core body temperature more efficiently. With decreased blood flow to the periphery comes increased blood flow and nutrient delivery to the developing calf, resulting in increased calf birth weights. While research data does not exist to validate this occurrence in dairy cattle, anecdotal evidence and the physiological similarities between beef and dairy breeds strongly suggest that it can indeed happen in those situations where cows are subjected to extreme cold during late pregnancy. (to be continued in next issue)

Looking ahead!

Don't wait until late winter or spring to lock in your 2004 crop program! It is important to get the information and review your planting needs for next year in the next couple of weeks. There may also be discounts available when you order early. I can help review your forage program and determine what might work best in your operation this coming year. It will involve research data highlighting starch and fiber digestibility, milk yield per acre potentials, silage varieties and much more. This can really impact your nutrition program! We offer seed hybrids

that are tested for performance time after time... **WOLF RIVER VALLEY, MYCOGEN** and **AGRICULVER**. Our agronomy office will also provide sound, professional advice that can help you next year. It can make a difference!

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Building tomorrow's herd for results...

When was the last time you seriously reviewed your calf rearing program? This is a critical area of management, which can hurt or improve the economics of your farming operation. Dr. Jan Gawthrop (DVM – CattleLink Corp) suggests six areas of concern that can influence the outcome of the dairy heifer. These include the following: a) Sanitation; b) Isolation; c) Environment; d) Immunization; e) Medication. The best place to start is the farm where heifers are born. We'll look at each of these in future issues. First – and of great importance is sanitation of the maternity pen to help in control of such calfhoo diseases as diarrhea and navel infection. Everything in the pen needs to be clean and disinfected, helping to break any cycle of infection. This includes bedding, feed equipment, transportation devices, colostrum and even the hands (and clothing) of whomever is responsible for their daily care. When the calf leaves the maternity area and is moved to a hutch or other location the same concern for hygiene applies. We'll consider other aspects in the next newsletter. Start building tomorrow's herd... review your calf program!

Interested in discussing topics in this newsletter, or feel you need to do a better job feeding your cows? Call me! My goal is to help you. That's Renaissance's commitment to you!

Renaissance -

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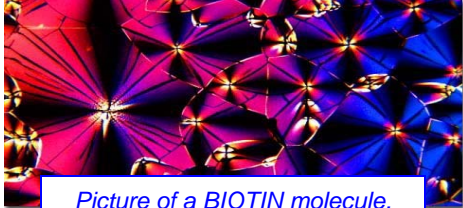
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Picture of a BIOTIN molecule.



WHAT ARE YOUR COWS & CALVES TELLING YOU?

How bio-secure is your maternity area? It is recommended that maternity areas are located away from the lactating herd, especially from any isolation pens (for new arrivals or sick animals). On many dairies maternity pens are located near animals that need to be isolated because of sickness or observation. This becomes an added concern with regard to viral and bacterial infections, and young calves are more susceptible. The potential for disease and its spread can impact your entire operation and profitability. Maternity pens and calf hutches should be positioned as far from the lactating herd as possible! It is good idea to place maternity pens and hutches away from all other cows (lactating or dry), or places where disease may more readily spread. Additional concerns in the spread of disease, which need to be considered, include farm dogs and cats, as well as birds and rodents. Young calves are best raised alone; however, when this is not possible, housing them in small groups with other calves about the same age can be beneficial. Placing young calves with older ones is not recommended. Where do your cows calve? Consider maternity and calf housing that will benefit your operation.

A POINT TO PONDER...

Fall is here! How quickly it seems that summer passed. With the change of seasons comes the added work of harvest and winter preparations. However, it is an excellent time to consider what's needed this coming winter 'round the house and farm. Being prepared for the inevitable cold temperatures, ice, snow and inconvenience can help to make things a bit easier when it actually happens. Take stock of winter needs... and plan ahead.



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Autumn...

**preparing for winter &
planning ahead for spring!**



CHECK IT OUT.

