

LABOR'S ROLE CRITICAL FOR NEWBORN CALF PROGRAM

The best newborn calf management program won't ensure success unless it's properly carried out.

Top dairy managers realize the importance a good newborn calf program has on the success of their dairy enterprise. They usually work with veterinarians, nutritionists and consultants to develop newborn calf



FYI

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programs and systems to help reduce DOAs (dead on arrivals) and mortality and morbidity rates during the first week of a calf's life.

However, having the best newborn calf management program doesn't guarantee the best results. The proper implementation of the program is a critical aspect of any system, and labor plays a key role. I spend most of my time working with dairies in reducing DOAs and calf mortality during the first week of life.

Here are some tips to improve your newborn calf management:

1) Develop good standard operating procedures (SOPs).

This may seem time consuming, but it will bring a lot of benefits. SOPs will reduce errors and variation between employees. Have your key and/or most experienced employee help develop SOPs. If you have Spanish-speaking employees, make sure you translate protocols into Spanish. These SOPs will also be helpful during new employee training. Critical SOPs that should be part of any newborn calf program are:

- **Calving assistance.** This should include when to move cows to individual pens; how long to wait to assist cows and heifers; tools and materials they should use; and when to

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seek help.

- **Calf care during first hours.** How soon should they move the newborn calves? What are the first steps they should take with a newborn calf? How should they report a newborn calf?

- **Colostrum management & feeding.** Storing and thawing colostrum; evaluating colostrum quality and defining what to do depending on its quality; time of feeding; tubing calves; and other calf treatments.

- **Newborn calf evaluation.** Define standard procedure of what to look for, and how to report this.

For more information on how to develop customized SOPs for your dairy, visit www.apndairy.com or go to Dr. Sam Leadley's website, www.atticacows.com.

2) Define a training program. A good training program will reduce the chances of costly mistakes from new employees, and ensure consistency among employees taking care of newborn calves. Have your consultant and veterinarian help develop a good training program, and make sure everyone involved in training new employees is properly trained themselves. Train the trainer, or the training will fail. Training should be done in the native language of the employees. For more information on newborn calf care employee training programs, visit www.apndairy.com/Services_TrainingPrograms.

3) Define clear goals and expectations. To make workers accountable, spell out expectations up front and in clear terms. How is their performance evaluated? I recommend developing a series

of simple, yet effective Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). You should be able to monitor these KPIs daily, and they should have an impact on performance and profitability. Examples of KPIs would be DOAs (preferably broken down by employee), weekly or monthly calf mortality rates, and weekly or monthly treatment costs. Every employee should understand the importance of these KPIs and the impact their job has on them. Also, it's your job as manager to give them all necessary tools to succeed at their job.

4) Communicate with your employees periodically. Communicate at least weekly with the employees involved in newborn calf care and feeding. Refresh importance of their job, share performance numbers, and ask them questions about the job, their issues and things you can do to help them succeed. Giving feedback is a crucial part of success. Don't wait to talk to employees only when performance numbers are not good. Let them know if their DOAs are going very well, or the calf mortality rates are better than ever. This will help them stay motivated and focused.

5) Correct failure and reward success. Do you have anyone in your team not performing to your expectations? If so, what are you doing about it? On the other hand, whether through bonus programs, special perks, schedule preferences, or all of the above, make sure high performers are properly rewarded and compensated.

If you are not able to evaluate individual performance, a team approach may be required to help pinpoint problem areas. You may be able to identify performance of the day crew and the night crew, separately. This will help reward the teams doing well, and retraining teams that are not.

Do not manage "by special occasion." Keeping periodic, consistent communication with every employee, as well as monitoring and documenting performance, will help address problems as they come up. Address small problems early, before problems grow. □