

Educational Tools for Calving and Calf Care on Dairy Farms

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In the dairy industry, where the primary revenue source is milk production and sales, calf delivery and newborn calf management are undervalued as areas of concern. The problem of dystocia has been almost ignored. Very few dairy producers incorporate breeding strategies to decrease dystocia occurrence, or have delivery management and newborn calf management protocols that specifically address the problem. Despite, or perhaps a result of, the inattention the dairy industry has paid to calving difficulty, the rate of dystocia in dairy cattle is higher than in beef cattle. Some studies have found the dystocia rate in dairy cows to be as high as 18% and 32% in dairy heifers compared to 2.4% in beef cows and 20.5% in beef heifers. In a study performed here at CSU through the Integrated Livestock Management program, local dairies were evaluated and it was found that 29% of calves required assistance at delivery and of those calves 37.2% died while only 15.9% of calves born without requiring assistance died. The impacts of dystocia in dairy animals will logically include increased death and disease in calves, reduced productivity in the dams, increased disease in the dams, and the economic impacts that accrue from increased treatment costs, reduced calf performance, and reduced reproductive efficiency. An effective calf care program must include an understanding of dystocia; what it is, how to recognize it and what to do when it occurs as well as newborn calf care protocols.

We feel that the best way to inform producers of effective dystocia and newborn calf care management programs is through educational seminars that provide the producer with the tools necessary to implement such programs on his/her operation. Our goal this summer was to create an easy to follow guide on calving and basic calf care that could be used in conjunction with these seminars.

A CD was created that includes small video clips, pictures and text to explain calving and calf care procedures. The information is broken up into 4 main subjects. 1) Management guidelines on how to prevent dystocia problems, including information on breeding, nutrition and heifer development. 2) How to recognize dystocia by understanding the stages of normal calving. This section includes information on facilities for calving, and guidelines on when and how to intervene. 3) Care of the newborn calf, including techniques on warming, stimulating, and feeding colostrum. 4) Care of the dam after calving, including recognition of trauma, prolapse and retained fetal membranes.

In the future, we hope to make this information available on the ILM website, and translate it to Spanish.

It is our hope, that this information will help dairy producers and their employees to better recognize the importance of calf care on their operation in order to produce a healthier replacement heifer and to decrease costs accrued with difficult calving.

