

## **Common Pitfalls in Heifer Raising Programs**

by Donna M. Amaral-Phillips

Dairy replacement heifers represent the future of your dairy operation. As such, care must be taken to insure that they are raised properly and economically.

For a dairy operation, 15 to 20% of the costs are associated with raising replacement heifers. Studies have calculated that it cost almost \$2.00 per day to raise heifers. The sooner heifers enter the milking herd and become money makers, the sooner the owner can start recouping the costs associated with raising this heifer. Thus, the recommendation is that heifers calve around 24 months of age. To be productive once they calve, heifers need to be of proper skeletal size and weight. We realize that heifers grow during their first lactation but they still need to calve at 85% of their mature weight. For example, Holsteins should weigh around 1150 to 1200 lbs after calving. To accomplish these goals, it is important that we do not encounter any bottlenecks in a heifer raising program. Take a few minutes and review these common pitfalls I have seen in heifer raising programs.

### **Baby Calves Pitfalls**

First and foremost, baby calves need to get off to a good start. This starts by feeding colostrum within the first couple hours of life. Calves are born devoid of antibodies that help them fight off diseases. These antibodies are supplied in colostrum and must be absorbed early in the first day of life. At 4 days of age, calves should be fed a small amount of calf starter and water. Both water and calf starter are needed to convert the calf from a simple stomach animal into one that can digest forages.

### **Weaning Time Pitfalls**

Weaning time and the few weeks after weaning are critical to getting these heifers off to a good start and a time frame we often abuse. It is important to minimize stresses on these calves by making changes slowly and changing one management practice at a time. For example, we do not want to move heifers into groups and change their grain mix within a couple of days after weaning. Just weaned heifers should be kept in very small groups of less than 6 heifers. Bull calves should be housed separately from heifers.

### **Pre-breeding Heifer Pitfalls**

Holstein heifers need to gain 1.7 lbs daily in order to calve at the proper size and weight. To achieve this goal, we need to feed these heifers the appropriate amount of grain and quality forages. The better the quality of forages fed, the less grain that needs to be fed. With the recent increases in grain costs, putting up quality forages for heifers will be critical on your bottom line. These forages need to be tested and a grain mix formulated for these heifers. This management practice can save you dollars by feeding the appropriate amount of grain, a grain mix that is least cost and a ration that allows these heifers to grow and milk well after calving.

### **Breeding Age Heifer Pitfalls**

Heifers should be bred when they are 55% of their mature size. For Holsteins, this means that they should be bred when they weigh 750 to 800 lbs. It is important that we breed heifers within this weight range. I have seen heifers bred when they were a lot heavier than these guidelines

resulting in increased feed costs associated with the heifer rearing program. We need to remember that these heifers will grow in the 9 months that they are carrying their calf.

By taking some time to review some of the common bottlenecks in your heifer raising program, you can improve your bottomline.