

Vet's Corner:

How does a dairy farm cope with the high cost of dairy replacement heifers?

Three strategies can be considered to reduce your dairy farm's dependence on purchasing high-priced replacements. An individual dairy operator can have little influence of the purchase price currently asked for quality replacement heifers. National surveys report that the U. S. dairy cattle population has a slight increase and with no Canadian imports allowed due to the BSE barrier, prices for replacement cattle are predicted to remain high. To maintain proper culling levels and profitability, three management areas need attention.

1. Improve newborn calf survival rate

If ten cows calve on the farm this month, can you expect to have 5 live, healthy baby heifer calves to leave the maternity pen? About 10% of all mature Holstein cow births are twins so we expect to throw out one freemartin heifer this month. Surveys based on dairypersons' memories indicate that 5-10% of calves are lost at birth, while surveys done University and Institute herds with dedicated record-keeping indicate that 25% of first-calf heifers' calves died at birth and 10% of mature cows delivered dead calves. If maternity pens are monitored more often, one death prevented today, can help to avoid a \$1,800 bill in two years for a replacement heifer.

2. Lower the age of heifers at first calving

Every month, overhead cost and feed cost for a growing heifer is estimated at \$25 for each expense; so lowering age at first calving from the national average of 28 months to 24 months will save \$200/heifer. If milk income over feed cost for these extra four months is added to this overhead/feed cost savings, the incentive to calve heifers earlier is stronger. Another way to look at the profitability of earlier calving is to consider that in a 100 cow herd there will be a slug of 13 extra milking heifers available after the transition to earlier calving.

3. A. I virgin heifers to calving-ease sires or sexed semen

If the herd does not raise crossbred heifers, there is an opportunity to raise about 15 extra baby calves annually in a 100 cow herd. The AI rep can recommend high repeatability calving ease sires or same-sexed semen to avoid dystocia cases. The Iowa State University herd adopted breeding Holstein heifers to Holstein sires in the 1970's; computerized search revealed that 53% of the current milking cows are daughters of first calf heifers.

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