

NEIL'S TOP 10 GUIDE TO CALF REARING

1. Select the right calf.

Do not take induced or twin calves. Select calves that are at least 5 days old (dry umbilical cords) and are known to have been fed sufficient colostrum. Look around the shed they are coming from. Are they housed in a dry, draft free shed? Are there any sick calves in the same shed? If in doubt don't take them.

2. Take care when transporting calves to your shed.

Transport should be in a draft free trailer or truck. Chilled stressed calves get sick very quickly. Do not over feed calves when they arrive. It is often a good idea to give them electrolytes on arrival.

3. Your shed.

Sheds must be dry and draft free at floor level. Untreated dry shavings at least 250mm deep provide a good base. Allow 2 square meters of space per calf when allocating numbers for pens. Once pens are set up at the beginning of the season, spray the whole shed with a broad spectrum disinfectant. Keep a separate pen for new arrivals where they can be monitored for 5 days for any sickness problems. If clear after 5 days they can be introduced to other pens of calves. Good ventilation will prevent ammonia gas levels building up. High ammonia levels can cause lung problems in young calves.

4. Clean water.

Clean water must be available to the calves at all times. Clean water containers daily as calves will not drink enough water if containers are dirty or water is even slightly contaminated.

5. Feeding milk.

Assuming you have followed point one and your calf has had colostrum, it is time to choose between feeding whole milk or a good quality milk replacer. Avoid buying cheap milk replacers – you will get what you pay for and calves never grow the same on poor quality products.

Follow feeding instructions on bags and always mix the milk powder exactly the same way. Warm water is always better than cold water. Clean milk feeding equipment well after use.

6. Feeding meal or pellets

It is usually easier to start calves on a molasses type meal and this should be available in the shed from the first week of age. It needs to be refreshed with new product daily and if any old product remains in the bins, mix it with the new product. Starter molasses type meal should be in the 18% to 19% C. Protein range (on a Dry Matter basis). Once calves move outside, it is often easier to feed pellets in cone type feeders as these will protect product from the weather.

7. Weaning calves.

When weaning calves off milk, you should be looking for a weaning weight between 55 to 65kg minimum. Smaller Jersey calves will wean towards the lower weight. Bigger Friesian calves will be towards the higher weaning weight.

Calves should remain inside for the first four weeks. If they can stay inside longer, growth rates will be better.

Don't send calves outside into bad weather conditions. Try and introduce them to "paddock life" when weather conditions are fine. If you really need to get numbers in the shed down and the weather isn't great I would suggest putting a calf cover on every calf.

The ideal weight to start weaning calves off pellets or meal is when they reach a weight level between 90 to 110kg. 90kg for smaller Jersey calves, 110kg for larger Friesian calves. Always remember to wean calves slowly. If feed is suddenly stopped, calves may stress and this increases the chance of getting a coccidiosis "hit".

8. Coccidial protection.

Most calf meals and pellets contain an anti-coccidial product. Takanini Feeds products contain Bovatec which helps to protect calves from coccidiosis.

Warning – when using products containing Bovatec, do not feed with other products containing other ionophores such as monensin capsules, liquid or pre-mix.

Do not exceed recommended dose rates – please read the label.

Do not allow dogs, horses or other equids access to products containing Bovatec as ingestion by these species may be fatal.

Do not feed products containing Bovatec if ionophores are being added to the milk replacer.

9. Worms and lice.

Lice infection at, or shortly after weaning is often one of the biggest problems calves face, and it is a problem which is easily treated. Calves with covers on are usually the first affected as infections often go unnoticed. Most farm supply stores can supply products for lice control.

Worm infections usually start to affect calves two to three weeks after weaning. A drenching programme should be started and repeat doses should be every three weeks until the calf reaches 130kg in weight. After that, drench as necessary.

10. Future value.

Remember, calves raised are your future income. Don't move them out to the back of the farm and forget about them. Your biggest cost was getting them up to weaning weight and they need to continue to grow at a steady rate throughout their early lives.

For dairy replacements, you need your animals to calve and arrive in the shed fully grown. Younger animals need to be able to compete with fully grown cows in the herd.

One of New Zealand's greatest dairy farming costs comes from the number of first calving cows that are culled due to poor production caused by lack of attention to young growing animals. Not only is it a cost and a loss of future income, it is also a big waste of time and effort put into getting the calf from birth to weaning.