

Straight to the Bottom Line – 11/1/10

By: Steve Martin

Pampering Transition Heifers

During recent visits to a couple of my clients, I noted an opportunity to make a difference for transition heifers. Both of these herds had the same current approach, and for the same reasons. But after thinking through how they might adjust this approach, we arrived at an even better solution. In both cases, the first 15-20 DIM cows and heifers are kept in the same fresh pen. This pen is where all of the individual attention can be offered to the newly freshened animals. And, since all of this attention is most easily focused on an individual pen, both 1st lactation and mature cows are kept in the same pen. Based on the health of the animal and her DIM, the fresh cow manager graduates these cows out of this super fresh pen into a second larger fresh pen that in both cases was right next door. In the second fresh pen, these 15-30 DIM cows were watched pretty close, but not offered the extra attention afforded the super fresh cows. My suggestion to the producer was to split these 1st calf heifers and the mature cows and have 2 super fresh pens. We know that newly fresh 1st lactation animals can be bullied by older cows and this change would help these heifers. But, could we split these pens and still offer the same attention to a now larger population without increasing labor.

A few potential issues were discussed, but all seemed to be manageable. The first question was about the size of the two pens and the number of heifers versus cows calving in the future. We addressed this by allowing as many smaller and/or second lactation fresh mature cows to be placed in the fresh heifer pen to keep both pens 85% full. As well, in an attempt to equalize the lockups available, with the use of an existing back fence and a temporary stock panel, a couple of section of the heifer pen lock ups could be “robbed” from the heifer pen and given to the cow pen. Another concern was the use of the fresh cow temping program for cows <10 DIM and how hard it would be for the guys to look through twice as many cows to find these super fresh ones. We decided on a tail or hip chalk color change for animals that have either passed 10 DIM with good health, or whenever a problem animal clears up, no matter what her DIM. To be sure,

we like to have every animal in this larger pen evaluated daily, but only temp the ones that need it.

Now for an obvious positive result from this change; currently both dairies make a fresh cow ration that is fed once per day to this small super fresh pen. Not only is once a day feeding not ideal, it is only around an 8,000 pound load in a mixer wagon designed for a 25,000 lb capacity. This is not an efficient use of the wagon as well as offers the question regarding accuracy on mixing such a small load. So, by splitting the fresh pens, and holding these animals here until almost 30 DIM, we had enough animals to either keep making the smaller load, but go to twice a day feeding, or make one bigger load that would possibly mix better and probably save a load of feed in the days total feedings.

The other big positive for this change is that it reduces the total moves for that animal by one during her lactation. We know that moves are potential negatives for milk flow and other issues. As well, if this move is at a low DIM, I think it is potentially more detrimental.

So, in summary, providing a fresh heifer and a fresh cow pen should pay dividends to these two herds. It should allow for a better start for the fresh heifers, reduce the pen moves by one for both heifers and cows, and maybe save a load for your feeder or allow the preferred twice a day feeding for the high priority animals.