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## Philosophical Thoughts on Growing Dairy Heifers – Part 2

The article last month focused primarily on the early growing heifers, primarily between weaning and entering the pre breed pens. This month will generally outline our approach to these older heifers and how to monitor gains and ration changes while still making sure the heifers are getting bred and maintaining the pregnancy.

All of the heifer yards that we work with care for cattle from multiple farms. Each farm is unique in many ways but one specific difference is commonly their genetic selection. We talk and publish a lot of data based on feeding animals based on a percentage of mature body weight. The truth for many dairy managers is that they really do not know how much their cows actually weigh. If we don't know mature cow weight then how do we set realistic goals for a percentage at breeding and a percentage at calving? It is not possible so the reality is that we often underfeed some heifers and overfeed others. This is not efficient use of our resources and dollars.

We make sure to get some weights on cows from each farm so we can make an effort to feed their heifers correctly. We have seen over 250 pounds of mature weight differences between farms. This data is crucial to set accurate goals for the heifers from each farm.

We begin the weight goal setting by ration when the calves enter the yard. We have several rations that the calves move through as they grow. Each ration change is determined by age and weight. We are fortunate that most of our heifer clients are converted beef yards so there are scales available. Most of the weights are by groups but the data is still accurate at evaluating how the heifers are moving through the rations to insure that they end up at the breeding pen at a minimum of 65% of their mature body weight. We also discussed last month that our strategy is to have an energy savings account of fat on each heifer to compensate for growth spurts to make sure we have adequate energy in the bloodstream at all times to maintain the growth requirement and still support reproduction.

It does take effort to collect weights on these animals and I am convinced it is absolutely essential to know for certain that the heifers are meeting the gain objectives. Body weights allow us to recognize body condition changes likely before they would be observable by a subjective BCS determination. I pride myself in being able to "see" cattle and body condition and I will quickly admit that I do not think I would be able to pick up a 15-20 pound deficiency in a group of heifers changing to a new ration. But the scale can and we may decide to leave that pen of heifers on the higher energy ration for an extra 2 weeks so they can catch up. Otherwise they could move on to the next ration and potentially lose a little more ground then end up in the breeding pen 75 pounds light which could mean they are not cycling and would be in the breeding pen eating a more expensive ration longer which costs more money. This problem could easily have been avoided by knowing sooner when we needed to make a management adjustment to keep the heifers on track to accomplish the gain goals.

We also use the opportunity to get weights when there is normal working of the animals when possible so that work is not duplicated. Often heifers are worked through the pens for vaccinations or preg checks that make great opportunities to walk across scales and get a weight. A manager may have to be creative and think about opportunities but weights are a great tool. If the yard does not have scales, there are many manufacturers now that are building excellent portable units that could easily be set up in alleys and then removed when not in use so they are not in the way.

The system we have developed is not rocket science but it has been extremely successful. A third party examination of breeding rates and age at one of our yards revealed that the average days of age at pregnancy was 397. In order to get heifers bred that young successfully, we have to be able to track their progress beginning when they first enter the yard. This very close monitoring and tracking of weight and average daily gains, has helped us help the yard to enhance their bottom line.