

## LEARNING FROM THE LEADERS: PANELISTS FROM DAIRY CALF & HEIFER ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE SHARE CALF MANAGEMENT INSIGHTS

To become the best at something, you often have to learn from the best, and it's no different with calf management. Strong, healthy calves are the ultimate goal for any calf raising operation, so we reached out to the 'experts' to give us their thoughts on calf rearing. J Hall, Hall's Calf Ranch; Michael Larson, Larson Acres; and Joel Sutter, Fertile-Ridge Dairy shared their views with us. These three Wisconsin producers were recently featured on a producer panel at the Dairy Calf & Heifer Association Annual Conference held April 1-3 in Green Bay, Wis., where they discussed calf health and housing.

### Hall's Calf Ranch, Kewaunee, Wis. J Hall, owner

J Hall started managing calves with 13 rented hutches in the backyard. That was in 1995. Today, 19 years later, J and his wife have around 25,000 calves going through their facility each year. At any given time they have around 6,800 calves housed in 4,000 hutches and 18 barns (accommodating the other 2,800). Both heifers and bulls are raised from 26 different farms, but not all of the bulls are raised through weaning. Generally the makeup of the calf herd is 10% bulls and 90% heifers.

Every calf going to Hall's is tested for BVD, and serum protein is tested to see if they've received colostrum from the mother. The calves are tagged, navals are dipped and then they are picked up from the client farm. The furthest client is around 70 miles away and range in size from 40 to 3,000-cow dairies. In addition to J and his wife, they have 46 full-time employees taking care of everything from hauling calves, to feeding, to bookwork and more.

The ranch feeds pasteurized whole milk and uses milk replacer when whole milk quantities



Three top Wisconsin calf raisers share their best calf management tips including "starting at the beginning," working with your farm consultants and taking top-notch care of newborns.



Hall

are not sufficient. Calves are on milk 7 to 8 weeks receiving a gallon of milk every morning and night. They receive free choice water and 18% starter. Calves are normally taken off milk at 7 weeks, remain in hutches on a water and grain diet for 2 weeks, and are then moved to group pens of 10 calves at 9 weeks. In the group pens, they receive a TMR consisting of corn silage, haylage, dry hay and high moisture shell corn. Calves are on TMR until they are 5 months of age, when they either return to their respective dairies or move to a heifer raiser.

J says that one of his main management challenges in the past has been getting quality calves in that are fed good colostrum. This starts before they arrive at Hall's Calf Ranch, so J says they've learned to work with and train employees at client dairies. They teach employees how to take care of a calf on day one – making sure they receive colostrum right away, getting calves dried off, navals dipped

and getting them ready for transport. "It really makes our job so much easier if we're getting a good, healthy calf," said J.

J comments that it's also critical to train his own employees to immediately identify a sick or potentially sick calf because you only have a certain amount of time from the point when a calf gets sick until they've hit the dehydration stage. This fairly rapid process requires a good eye for all employees monitoring the calves. Hall's take pride in having a yearly death loss under 2%.

One management practice that the ranch has benefited from throughout the years is that they IV fluids directly into the vein instead of tubing calves. "We will IV a calf as soon as we see them off feed or sick," said J. "What kills a calf most of the time is dehydration. We started IVing calves close to 10 years ago, and we dropped death loss from 3% to 1.5% immediately. Hall's also have employees walking the calf rows twice a day to identify problem

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## Learning from the leaders

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calves sooner.

While J admits he's always interested in new products and research, he says, "I'm really old fashioned – when I go to other facilities to help, it seems that we always go back to the basics." J provides calf management consultation for other herds, and he says it's always about keeping hutches/pens clean and fresh and providing quality colostrum.

As for new technology, J says they are currently doing some trials with boluses implanted in the calf's stomach which tell you the consistent temperature of the calf at all times. J comments that, "It's interesting. You can tell when a calf spikes a temperature within a few minutes, but we'll see if it's feasible down the road." J is also looking into hydrolyzed wheat and soy protein in milk replacers because it's a "cheaper feed that maintains your quality."

As for advice for other calf raisers, J recommends "starting at the beginning." "If you start out with a calf that was born in a clean environment with good, clean colostrum, naval dipped, where the calf is dry and warm – you have all of the ingredients you need to create a good calf and heifer for the future. If you start with a calf that got cold or dirty or one that missed the colostrum window – you'll play catch up it's entire life." J says that really focusing in on day one and spending a lot of time on calves when they are born is well worth it and usually "the rest will fall into place."

J also credits his employees and clients, and says, "It's really the men and women working for me and the farmers that bring us good calves. That's what makes us a quality calf raising facility."

### Larson Acres, Evansville, Wis.

#### Michael Larson, general manager

Larson Acres is a 2,900-cow Holstein operation with a 29,000 lb. Rolling Herd Average. They have two parlors – a double-22 and a double-20, and the operation consists of 5,000 acres. At any given time, the dairy has approximately 175 calves on milk.

Larson's feed pasteurized whole milk with a Land O'Lakes protein powder three times per day. The volume fed ranges from 6 to 9 quarts per day depending on age. Calves are fed milk for 6 to 7 weeks and are moved to the weaned barn at 8 weeks. The nursery barns are 2-row with curtain sidewalls and a



Larson

positive pressure tube ventilation system. The calf barns are managed as all in/all out facilities.

Michael says that one of the challenges they've faced is transitioning calves from starter feed to TMR. To remedy this, Michael says, "We have tried to minimize any stress during that time. For example, we moved dehorning away from that time window and took another look at our vaccination schedules."

A practice they've really seen benefit from is switching to 3x feeding two and a half years ago. "Although we didn't necessarily see more rate of gain (we delivered the same volume per day), we did notice less health issues," explains Michael.

Michael admits that he's intrigued by the research and practices behind long day lighting and cryptosporidiosis prevention and treatment. And, although it's not new, automated calf feeders also intrigue them.

The Larson's best advice for other producers is to develop a team of trusted advisors that can help with decisions that need to be made.

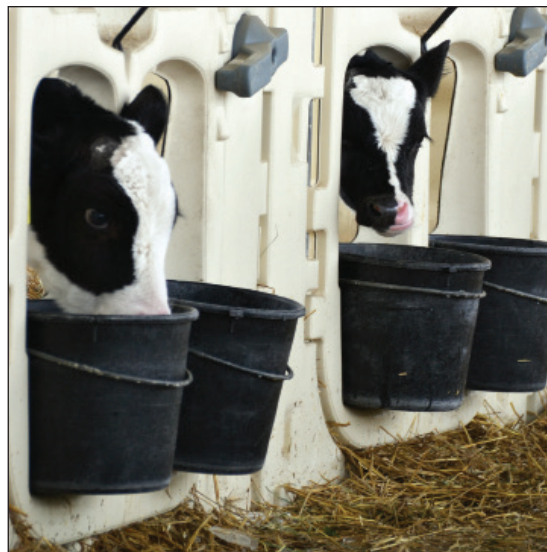
### Fertile-Ridge Dairy, Mount Horeb, Wis.

#### Joel Sutter, herdsman

Fertile-Ridge Dairy houses 600 Holsteins in a freestall operation. Cows are milked in a double-12 parallel parlor, and the farm runs around 1,400 acres of crops. They typically are raising around 80 calves year-round.

Calves are moved to individual hutches in a 2-row calf barn immediately after birth. The barn has individual hutches with ventilated backs and tube ventilation. Calves are fed pasteurized colostrum at birth along with a First Defense calf bolus, followed by another feeding of colostrum 12 hours later. From there, calves are fed twice daily on 12-hour intervals. They feed Land O'Lakes Cow's Match milk replacer for the first two weeks, then the calves start on pasteurized waste milk. A 22% starter is introduced at a couple days of age and feed intake is monitored, increasing amount fed based on individual consumption up to 8 lbs. of feed per day.

Joel admits that they've faced some challenges with respiratory issues, salmonella and cryptosporidium, but says they've overcome these issues by using a wide variety of solutions. "We've introduced more vaccinations to the herd, and we also started using some disinfectants in the calving area. But, the one area of change that we feel made the biggest impact is colostrum - testing the quality of colostrum,



The calves at Fertile-Ridge are moved to individual hutches in a 2-row calf barn immediately after birth.

pasteurizing the colostrum and doing a second feeding of colostrum," said Joel. They've seen less sick animals, a lower death rate, better response to medications and an overall healthier animal since changing their colostrum protocols.

Feeding calves 3x is one of the practices that the farm is looking into. "Our calf care still has room for improvement, and we feel that



Sutter

by adding a third feeding our animals would see a lot of benefit," said Joel. The added benefits would be balancing out feeding more throughout the course of the day and getting another set of eyes on the calves one more time during the day, adds Joel.

Joel's advice for calf raisers is to keep the calving area clean, move newborns immediately into a clean area after birth and feed the necessary amounts of high quality colostrum.

Hopefully these calf raisers gave you something to think about regarding your own operation and management. Everyone's goal is a strong, healthy calf, and we should all be working toward that goal every day!

■ For more information on these farms, visit **Hall's Calf Ranch** on Facebook (<http://goo.gl/ecTAc2>), the **Larson Acres** website ([www.larsonacres.com](http://www.larsonacres.com)) and **Fertile-Ridge Dairy's** website ([www.fertileridge.com](http://www.fertileridge.com)).