

Do your heifers meet the mark?

Many calves fed less milk than needed don't make recommended height before breeding



WHEN I FIRST GRADUATED from vet school, I remember producers asking if I had brought any new drugs to treat calf scours with me from my studies.

Years later, I think many people in our industry have discovered a “product” that makes a big difference in preventing calfhood diseases, and that’s calories. Ten years ago, the industry standard was to feed 4L of milk a day until weaning. Currently, many are starting with 6L a day and moving up to 10+L by six weeks of age. As long as the milk is clean, the extra calories give the calf energy to both grow and fight off many pathogens without causing scours.

Last spring, Robert Corbett visited Oxford County to talk about current research in the area of heifer nutrition. Robert is a veterinarian and nutritionist from Spring City, Utah. He has approximately 100,000 heifers throughout the Midwest under his care. He is a big proponent of feeding a higher volume of milk, but also cautioned we pay attention to protein levels as well as calories. Feeding higher energy

rations all the way through to calving will produce shorter, rounder heifers. Conversely, increasing the protein levels fed will lead to taller, leaner animals. We can start applying these principles right from birth. By feeding higher volumes of whole milk (27% protein:30% fat) or high protein replacer (28:18), along with higher protein starter (24%), calves should double their birth weight by 60 days. This can be easily tracked with weight tapes or repurposed pig scales.

Dr. Corbett also recommended breeding heifers based on height instead of age. Under the current US dairy climate, they strive to breed as soon as possible to lower expenses. Using this feeding guide, many heifers will reach their breeding target by 12 months.

Many heifers in Ontario get bred based on age, with size being somewhat considered.

With this in mind, our practice decided to see how local heifers measured up to those in the Midwest group. The goal of 52 inches at the withers by breeding age was used. Approximately

2500 heifers were measured. Many veterinarians recommend breeding by 13 to 14 months, so I was shocked to learn most didn’t reach the goal until 16 months. To reinforce the research, some farms that had been following the higher feeding levels were reaching 52” by 12 to 13 months.

Increasing the protein levels all the way to calving does increase the cost of feeding somewhat, but research has shown faster growing animals also produce more milk in first lactation. One of the easiest ways to tweak the ration is to feed more alfalfa based forages and less corn silage. Another important step is to avoid using your heifers as the farm’s garbage disposal, where that hay that’s really only suitable for bedding is fed to your future milkers.

Based on our findings I would recommend you discuss your current heifer feeding strategies with your nutritionist and veterinarian. Measuring calves and heifers will give you a good idea if your current system is working or not. One easy way to monitor heights is to place a mark on the headlock and gates in your breeding pen at 52”. This way, you can quickly see which heifers meet the mark. If they don’t measure up, there may be other bottlenecks to consider, but reassessing your feeding strategies is a great place to start. Remember, if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it! **Ⓢ**

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