



Starting Calves

It's that time of year to get the spring calves off the cow and cash in on the work we have been doing for the last year. When it comes to getting these calves converted from grass to the bunk, we can help you do it right.

It takes good nutrition to get the calves off to a good start. That all starts with water. The rumen in newly weaned calves may be small, but that doesn't mean there isn't capacity. The primary nutrient entering the rumen is water, and we need that to be the case so we have the volume to add our nutrients to it so it can be mixed and digested by the microbes. A 600 lb calf needs almost 8 gallons of water a day at 70 degrees. With calves, we want at least 1 linear inch of drinking space per calf to ensure all calves get a chance to drink. Sometimes 3" per calf is warranted. If calves don't drink, they don't eat. It is absolutely the most critical nutrient to get these calves going. Make sure you have a clean, ample water supply that the calves can easily reach. It doesn't do us any good to have clean water and adequate flow if they need to wade through a swamp to get to there. They won't do it, or they won't do it as often as they should. That limits our feed intake, which limits gain and health.

Getting the right nutrients in the bunk is the next step. We need a high forage ration to help make sure we don't cause digestive upsets. Some long-stem hay for the first day or two is helpful. However, we would like to avoid putting out bale feeders if you are going to use a feed wagon, because we don't want to start a yo-yo effect of eating hay one day and ration from the bunk the next and so on. Chopped hay in the bunk is a good place to start. Then, top it with ration and get the calves eating only from the bunk. We want to work the calves up on intakes. Day 1, we might start around 1.0-1.5% of their body weight on a dry matter basis and then increase by around 1-2 lbs every 2-3 days until we approach 3% of body weight. It takes some discipline to start calves, so follow your plan and try not to overshoot them on intake. One morning you might find the bunk slicked but don't be tempted to just fill the bunk. Yes, make an increase in delivery but 1-2 lbs of dry matter is plenty for another 2-3 days.

Protein is also a critical nutrient in this stage. For most calves, we want to start between 13-14% protein to allow enough protein for growth. If we short the calves of protein, the calves don't grow the way they should and end up looking pot-bellied and dull. It takes protein to generate any kind of growth, especially muscle, and for the calves to build antibodies for immunity. We can meet their protein needs through high quality forage, distillers' grains, soybean meal, or protein supplements.

Energy should be moderate in the starting ration. If we are early weaning calves, we often increase the energy to help compensate for the milk that the calves are no longer getting. With normal weaning of spring-born calves, we typically want to start those calves on a 46 MCal ration. This allows us enough energy to support the demands of a stressed calf but not too much to cause digestive upset due to excessive starch. Our feed consultants are typically evaluating the roughage level, MCal and

In a Nutshell:

- **Water is the most important nutrient**
- **Starting calves need a high roughage ration**
- **Target 13-14% protein for spring-born calves at weaning**
- **Around 46 NEg is a good target for energy for weaning**
- **Watch calcium & phosphorus to avoid water belly**
- **Trace minerals are vital for immune function**
- **Talk to your feed consultant about feed additives**
- **Get your VFD in place before weaning for Aureomycin**

starch to make sure the rations are meeting what we are looking for.

Having the minerals in appropriate amounts is important. Calcium needs to be higher than phosphorus, especially in young calves, to prevent water belly or urinary calculi. It is a very basic thing to look at and easy to correct, as long as you know what to look for. The trace minerals are critical during the first several weeks because they are important to proper immune function. When you use specialized starter products, they have Zinpro®'s complexed zinc, copper, manganese, and cobalt to ensure the best bioavailability for the animal. This replenishes their trace mineral stores faster than any other source. This results in a nearly 0.3 lb increase in ADG over the first 28 days and a 20% decrease in morbidity during the starting period.

The right feed additives for your program should be discussed with your feed consultant. Rumensin, Bovatec, and Deccox all work and have their place in different programs. Coccidiosis can cause havoc in newly weaned calves, so having an additive to prevent coccidiosis is definitely worth it. Aureomycin might be something you want to do as well to help treat respiratory disease, and it can be helpful to have your VFD in place before you want to pick up the product.

Calves are worth a lot of money. It will be worth your time to shut down the combine and look at your calves in the daylight so you can spot sickness or issues before it turns into a mortality. We all know what a dead calf is worth. But at this point, if we can save a calf, it is anyone's guess what it might be worth!

Roxanne Knock, PhD

What do you need to be thinking about this time of year?

- **Order your Stress Care® for weaning**—planning ahead will help ensure you have it when you need it!
- Talk to your vet about getting a VFD if you want to use Aureomycin at weaning time.
- Get **30-13 tubs or 38-20 Hi E tubs** for grazing corn stalk residue.
- Implant calves during backgrounding to get the best gain and efficiency.
- Get your forages tested for quality and have your Feed Consultant set up starting/growing rations.
- Set up a herd health plan for vaccinations, a de-worming program, and treatment protocols with your veterinarian.
- Inventory your projected feed resources and project your winter feed needs so you can plan accordingly.
- Pregnancy check cows and decide on a strategy to sell or feed them—implant them if you decide to fatten them.

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