The Future of Your Farm Depends Upon Keeping Your Calves Healthy

Source: Emily McDonald, Industry Development Coordinator

Every dairy farm has a supply of milk that is not saleable and is typically referred to as "waste milk." Waste milk may consist of excess colostrum, mastitic milk or milk from treated cows. Historically, raw waste milk has been fed to calves as a means of economic efficiency and alleviating disposal challenges. However, one major concern with this practice is that waste milk is often contaminated with potential pathogens and has a variable level of nutrition. Young calves flourish on a consistent product day after day; therefore the fluctuating nutrition of waste milk is detrimental to the development of these young calves.

Bacterial counts in raw milk are variable and can be extremely high. The increased risk of transmission of infectious bacteria shed directly from the mammary gland can pose serious health issues for the animal. These concerns of bacterial contamination with salmonella, e-coli, MAP (the bacteria responsible for Johne's disease) etc. have led to a general recommendation not to feed waste milk to calves. Many dams infected with MAP, for example, will excrete the bacteria in their milk. MAP excretion in milk happens most often in animals with clinical signs of Johne's Disease, but can occur in infected animals that appear healthy too. Because no diagnostic test can detect all MAP infected animals it is best to avoid feeding raw, non-pasteurized milk to control Johne's Disease. Milk replacers are pasteurized and are considered free of MAP.

Pasteurization of milk for calves is one option to reduce the transmission of diseases to your calves. While pasteurization destroys major pathogens it does not sterilize milk and some spoilage bacteria may survive. Temperature and time should be carefully monitored during the pasteurization process.

Feeding pasteurized milk has been demonstrated to improve calf health as compared to feeding raw waste milk. Research trials have shown that feeding calves pasteurized milk lessens the severity and duration of scours and pneumonia when compared to calves consuming raw milk. Also, research shows that average daily gains are significantly greater with pasteurized milk when compared to raw milk. Other related advantages include fewer sick days, lower mortality rates, lower health associated costs and higher weaning weights.

Success in a pasteurized milk feeding program is directly related to the ability to control the milk before and after pasteurization. Time must be taken to clean the equipment thoroughly and maintain the equipment for optimum operation efficiency.

Pasteurization provides no protection against antibiotic residues in waste milk and calves fed pasteurized waste milk may be contaminated with antibiotic residue, therefore producers need to consider appropriate meat withholding times.

Special acknowledgement for this article to Glenn Smith, Mill Nutritionist, Viterra Feed Products, Chilliwack, BC, with permission of the Dairy Leader, 2011.

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