

The Finely Tuned Calf Program at D&E Jerseys

A good vaccination program for the milking herd. Good colostrum management. Sanitation.

"These are the basics, and it doesn't take much more to be successful at raising Jersey calves," Richard Avila told the audience at the *Improving the Bottom Line* management discussion on May 8, 2003, in Visalia, Calif.

"As a result of our program, we started 2002 milking 1,200 cows" at the two dairies of D&E Jerseys, Hilmar, Calif. "Throughout the year, we ran a 21% cull rate. Apart from that 21% cull rate, we sold 230 head for dairy replacements, and we were able to start 2003 milking 1,200 cows."

It's possible because up to 99% of the calves born at D&E survive and thrive.

The self-described "recovering Holstein breeder" recounted "apprehensions and anxieties" at the thought of raising Jersey calves when he started at D&E Jerseys 11 years ago. He had experienced seven years of good results managing the calf raising program for a 600-cow mostly registered Holstein herd in nearby Turlock.

"I had a lot of the common misconceptions that Holstein breeders share, that Jerseys are prone to scouring and various diseases and that they're not very hardy calves.

"What I learned quickly is that it's a little bit opposite," Avila reported. "Jerseys scour no more and no less than Holsteins do, and I saw that right away after having dealt with Holsteins all that time.

"What Jerseys are is a more vigorous calf. They're a better feed converter. And, if you get them off on the right start, they are just about bullet-proof."

With owner Don Sherman (now Avila's father-in-law), "In 1992, we were milking about 450 cows. Our calf mortality was 12% and that was quite acceptable at that time. The national average was somewhere between 15% and 18%. We set out to see what we could do about bettering the program."

By 1996, the herd had grown to 630 cows without buying a single replacement.

"We lowered our mortality to 5%. We were doing quite a bit better, but we thought we could do better yet. So what I did was apply some of the same practices I used on the Holsteins to the Jerseys, and found that they responded even better.

"Currently our mortality rate is 1%," Avila said. "The amazing thing is that the tools we've used to reach these current figures are very basic. Number one is a good vaccination program for the milking herd. Number two is a

Vaccination Protocol Described As "Very Basic"

Setting up a high-performance calf raising program, in Richard Avila's experience, starts with building immunity in calves long before they are born. "Number one is a good vaccination program for the milking herd," he told the audience gathered at Delta View Farms. "This is paramount for success, and something that you should have in place even if you're not raising your own calves."

Cows

- 10-17 days fresh J-5 (*E. coli bacterin J-5 strain*)
Titanium 4 L5 (*IBR-PI₃, BVD Type I and II, five Lepto. strains*)
- Positive pregnancy exam ... Killed *Lepto.* vaccine
- At dry-off J-5
Clostridium with tetanus
- 7 days post-dry Scourguard 3 (K)/C (*rotavirus, coronavirus, K99 E. coli, Cl. perfringens Type C*)
- 28 days pre-calving Scourguard 3 (K)/C booster
- 21 days pre-calving J-5
Piliguard *E. coli-1 (K99 piliated E. coli)*

Calves

- At birth J-5
TSV-2 (*IBR-PI₃*)
Fortified Vitamin B
1 gallon colostrum, tube-fed
- At 1 week prior to move
to calf barn Titanium
- At 1 week prior to move
to group pens Titanium

good colostrum management program. And number three is sanitation.

"We start out newborn calves with a full gallon of colostrum, tube-fed. We don't even give them a choice. Then all they get is Vitamin B, J-5, Vitamin E because we're in a selenium-deficient area, and TSV-2. They're off and running."

Colostrum is fed for the first 14 days. "All calves seem to go through scours," Avila commented. "They all do. The biggest problem with Jersey calves is that when they do scour and dehydrate, they have such a small amount of body fat, it's crucial to get them bouncing back.

"We keep our fresh cows out of the milking string for the first five days. We feed that high-fat, still immunoglobulin-rich milk to those baby calves so that it gets them through their scouring period. They bounce back within a day or two and they just never look back."

Adding that "everyone runs into bumps in the road," Avila said, "we use the simplest, most effective and yet least expensive approach to treatment. That's penicillin, sulfa pills and oral electrolytes."

After 14 days, calves are fed a Jersey-specific milk replacer formulated with higher protein and higher fat levels, plus a "basic calf grain" *ad lib* and water.

To conclude his presentation, Richard Avila drove home "take-home" messages about the long-term benefits of a finely tuned calf management program.

First is the quicker return on investment. "We start breeding our heifers at 10 to 12 months of age, which gets them into the milk string usually calving at 1-9, what our average is."

Plus, he noted, they are "able to sell and merchandise replacements, which we know is a lot more profitable than simply culling cows for beef. That doesn't get us anything."

And from a herd that is healthier overall? "You get a longer productive life from those cows. That's the bottom line: to get more productivity, and less input, more output. Profitability, that's what the bottom line is, because none of us is in the dairy industry for our health."

But on second thought, a grinning Avila added, "Now, milking Jerseys is a lot less stressful, and that is better for your health. So, why not?"