

Health Issues to Consider When Selecting a Calf Ranch

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The focus of this article is on the health issues associated with sending your calves off to be raised on a calf ranch and not on the economic issues of how much does it cost per day or per pound of body weight gained. This also assumes that any dairyman will talk to the neighbors about the ranch where they send their calves. The health issues revolve around what potential pathogens, antibiotic residues and immune status your calves might bring home when they come back to the dairy.

Pickup vehicle

Calf pickup trailers or trucks should be routinely cleaned and disinfected to prevent buildup of manure and harmful bacteria. A quick look into the vehicle can give a good idea if and how often this is being done. Otherwise, ask about it. Beyond sanitation, it is also important that the baby calve be carried in vehicles used only for calves. Vehicles used for adult cows could be contaminated with manure containing Johne's Disease or salmonella that could infect the calves for life. Keep in mind that calves are usually pickup on the day they are born and on that day they are most susceptible to infections compared to any other day in their life.

Pre-weaning Feeds

It would be important to know what steps are taken to insure that these future replacements get essential amounts of high quality colostrum to assure adequate colostrum protection against disease. In addition, it would be wise to find out what if any colostrum supplements are being given to aid in disease prevention. Many calf ranches collect and feed waste or hospital milk. If that is the case, this milk should be pasteurized. The often-suggested temperature and time for batch pasteurization is 145 F for 30 minutes. Other studies have suggested that 155 to 160 F is necessary to reduce transmission of Johne's Disease bacteria. When flash pasteurization is used the necessary temperature is 162 F for 15 seconds.

Many calf ranches also pickup surplus colostrum. This pooled colostrum has a high likelihood of being contaminated with Johne's bacteria. To prevent Johne's Disease in your herd, avoid ranches that feed pooled colostrum.

It would be equally prudent to know about use of waste milk from the standpoint of bacterial antibiotic resistance. Waste or hospital milk will contain antibiotics in amounts much less than that needed for treatment. These small amounts of antibiotics may induce bacteria to develop resistance making future treatments much more difficult.

Housing and Bedding

Ideally, the housing units should not permit calves to touch each other as some bacteria can be transmitted by saliva and calves like to suckle on each other. Bedding should be other than recycled manure from adult cows to prevent Johne's infections. Enough hutches should be available to allow them to be cleaned, disinfected and remain vacant between calves.

Vaccinations

It will be important to know what vaccines are given to the calves, whether they are modified-live virus or killed as well as when and how often are they given. This information will allow follow-up booster to be given at the appropriate times once the calves return to the home dairy. Request a written record of the vaccinations from the ranch you choose and match up your vaccination program to insure maximum protection.

Treatments and Mortality

Some antibiotics used to treat sick calves such as gentamycin will result in very long-term antibiotic residues in the calves. It will be very important to know what antibiotics have been given to your calves in order to avoid a meat residue if calves are shipped off your dairy. Ask to see written treatment protocols for antibiotic treatment use or get a treatment report with each load of returning calves. Also check for the mortality history of the calf ranch.

Pest and Parasite Control

Control of pests like flies is important. Large fly buildups may result in eye scars on calves due to pinkeye. Flies may also transmit mastitis pathogens to the calves and cause teat-end damage due to their bites. External and internal parasites should also be routinely treated. Often the milk or milk replacer may contain compounds to control coccidian and related parasites.

The goal should be to get back all the heifer calves you sent to the calf ranch without any additional pathogens like Johne's or salmonella, free from any antibiotic residues and in good immune status ready for booster to complete their vaccinations. Knowing as much as possible about your calf ranch can make this goal a reality.

After you have thought through all these items, it would be worthwhile thinking about what might be done your dairy to improve the calf-raising program so that the calves could stay at home under your complete control. If a dairyman were really serious about the answer to this question, a thorough review of the calf-raising program by the herd veterinarian would be in order.