



Focusing Management on Heifers Returns Big Dividends

By John Gloss, Agricultural Management Resources

Several factors are leading farms to increase their focus on the heifer enterprise. The increased cost of concentrates is driving higher forage diets for milking cows, which means feed or land currently used for heifers may be necessary to use for milking cows. If farms purchase rather than grow their heifer feed, they still need extra land to handle the waste produced by those heifers. So, the cost of raising heifers and the limitations of land for feeding and nutrient management are fundamental heifer raising issues. In most cases, however, using a few measuring tools can significantly improve the way the heifer enterprise is managed. Well-managed heifers will likely result in reduced cost, additional income, and healthier, more productive animals.

Heifer Numbers to Match Your Needs

Managing young stock numbers to closely match your inventory needs is a big project. You must start by setting goals for your farm. Are you planning to grow the herd, shrink it, or stay fairly constant over the next 3-5 years? Will your culling levels remain constant? How many extra heifers do you want to carry? For the most part, inventory and culling questions can be answered by using the Herd Summary (DHI - 202) report, or ask your Dairy One farm service technician to run the ECON\VE report to get reliable culling numbers.

Once you have an inventory plan for your heifer enterprise (and you have created pregnancies), you will want to monitor how you are doing at converting pregnancies into live calves. The Calf Report from Dairy Comp 305 can help.

The Calf Report (Figure 1) tells us how many calves are started each month and how many were lost at birth (DOA). In the report below, there are columns for the number of calvings by month, the count of twins, the distribution by sex, mortality overall and by sex, and the number of calves that we recorded as marketed. The percent dead (%D) column shows the percentage of calvings where the calf was DOA. A good rule of thumb is to keep this number below 5%.

The calf report is available in Dairy Comp 305, Dairy Comp Analyzer, and from any Dairy One Technician on test day using the EVENTS\3 command.

With increased availability of resources like gender-selected semen and genomics, it is theoretically possible to plan out to the calf how many heifers you will need to meet your future milking cow needs. Your best bet is to consult your herd reproduction specialist and veterinarian to develop a reproduction strategy for making sure calves get produced.

Track Weights and Growth

Tracking heifer weights is relatively low cost and easy way to add relevant information to your heifer management program and potentially add income to your bottom line.

There is consistent and strong evidence that heifers who are fed well and

grow rapidly are more profitable animals over their lifetime. It is generally accepted that heifers that grow well have about a 1700 pound per lactation advantage over herd mates that do not. Using a \$20 milk price and \$7.50 per CWT feed price the additional income from a well raised heifer is approximately \$200 per lactation. Larger calves also carry more reserves to ward off or minimize the severity of illness. The soft income from not treating animals can be a significant savings in time, medication, and lost animals.

Growing heifers faster is not free. They will need to eat more to grow more, and you will probably have to change how animals are managed or what is fed. Tracking body weights gives you information to evaluate this so you know if the changes resulted in a sufficient positive response to justify continuing.

To begin weighing animals and tracking growth you will need scales, somewhere to record the weights, and a way to calculate growth response. Some farms are investing in Tru-test weighing equipment to weigh the animals and are using Dairy Comp 305 to store weights and calculate response.

The process of capturing the weights is very simple. Place the scales where it is convenient to load the animal onto the scale, walk the animal onto the scale, allow a second or two for the scale to stabilize, enter or scan the animal ID, and press a button to store the ID and weight. When you are done weighing animals, simply lift the indicator off the scale and carry it to the Dairy Comp 305 computer. Plug it in and transfer the data to Dairy Comp with a few key strokes. Dairy Comp automatically records the weights and calculates growth response.

Where the scale is placed and the process of getting the animals on the scale will vary widely based on your situation. Fortunately, the scale systems are modular and are easily adapted. The scale indicator is battery powered, very light, and can easily be shared between multiple platforms. There are a wide variety of options for the scale platform ranging from off the shelf units from Tru-test to completely customized homemade solutions. Visit the Dairy One Facebook page to see an example of a custom solution for weighing weaned calves.

You will need three or four weights to get an accurate picture of growth and response in your herd. Common weigh points are birth, weaning, moving into the breeding pen, and at pregnancy confirmation. Birth weights don't vary that widely, so you may want to consider estimating these rather than investing in scales for this. Plan on recording weights for about four months before you have actionable data.

In order to manage heifers better and improve the chances that the heifer enterprise is healthy and profitable, start with monitoring the basics. These include keeping good records of inventory, culling, disease, and feeding. If possible, add heifer weights to your management scheme. With the tools in place to monitor these activities, positive results are likely to follow.

For more information, contact your Dairy One farm service technician, or e-mail amr@dairyone.com.

| Calf Report for 10/09/12 - 10/09/13 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------|-------|----|------|--------|----|-------|------|----|--------|----|--------|----|------|-----|
| Month | Fresh | None | Twins | %T | Male | Female | %F | Alive | Dead | %D | M:Dead | %M | F:Dead | %F | Sold | DCC |
| Oct12 | 56 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 26 | 32 | 55 | 56 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 28 | 2 |
| Nov12 | 69 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 22 | 47 | 68 | 66 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 27 | 3 |
| Dec12 | 75 | 0 | 5 | 7 | 38 | 42 | 52 | 76 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 8 | 1 | 2 | 44 | 4 |
| Jan13 | 52 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 27 | 27 | 50 | 52 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 27 | 1 |
| Feb13 | 63 | 0 | 7 | 11 | 35 | 34 | 49 | 62 | 7 | 10 | 3 | 9 | 4 | 12 | 41 | 0 |
| Mar13 | 63 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 34 | 31 | 48 | 61 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 9 | 1 | 3 | 36 | 2 |
| Apr13 | 62 | 0 | 3 | 5 | 31 | 33 | 52 | 61 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 6 | 35 | 1 |
| May13 | 62 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 43 | 24 | 36 | 65 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 46 | 2 |
| Jun13 | 66 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 40 | 27 | 40 | 67 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 40 | 4 |
| Jul13 | 89 | 0 | 9 | 10 | 47 | 49 | 51 | 91 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 10 | 56 | 5 |
| Aug13 | 78 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 41 | 41 | 50 | 79 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 47 | 2 |
| Sep13 | 56 | 0 | 6 | 11 | 29 | 32 | 52 | 56 | 5 | 8 | 4 | 14 | 1 | 3 | 34 | 2 |
| Oct13 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 10 | 67 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| TOTAL | 806 | 0 | 50 | 6 | 418 | 429 | 51 | 807 | 40 | 5 | 21 | 5 | 19 | 4 | 466 | 28 |

Percent DOA

Figure 1: Calf Report