



Group Calf Housing Systems – What are my feeding options???

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Many dairy farmers are looking into group housing for calves and need to evaluate how they will provide milk or milk replacer to these calves. There are three common options available for group feeding: mob feeders, self-feeders and automatic feeders. All three options have pro's and con's and one option may work better for you and a different one for your neighbor.

Mob feeders – This type of feeding system allows for a whole group of calves to be fed at one time. A single reservoir with multiple nipples attached is filled with milk or milk replacer and placed in the pen or hung from a gate. Similar to conventional systems calves are often only fed 2 to 3 times per day. Once the milk is consumed calves must wait for their next meal. Feeding times per day can be increased if you are willing to spend the extra time to add an additional feeding. This unit must be cleaned and sanitized between all feedings. These systems have often been used in conjunction with a pasture based herd and can be very cost efficient as the initial investment cost is fairly low.



Self feeders – This system allows for groups of calves to have free access to milk or milk replacer throughout the day. The set up for this system is varied and can be as simple as barrels stored outside the pen with tubes attached to nipples mounted in a pen to around the barn pipeline attached to nipples mounted in the pens. The flexibility of this type of system allows for it to be an option for both small and large farms. Group size tends to be 6 -10 calves. This type of system works best with the use of acidified milk or milk replacer to reduce the risk of bacterial growth in the milk or milk replacer.



Automatic feeders (robots) – This system has the greatest initial investment cost. Most automatic feeders have 2 nipples and can be positioned to feed two pens. It is recommended to have no more than 25 calves per nipple. The calf manager can program the amount of milk individual calves can consume at each feeding and the total amount allowed to be consumed within 1 day. The computer also tracks the number of visits/day for each calf, thus allowing farmers to identify calves that do not drink.



Free access to milk or milk replacer provides many benefits to calves. Calves will visit the feeder 6 to 8 times per day allowing them to consume more milk and increase average daily gain as compared to conventionally fed calves. These systems have been reported to reduce scours, hunger, weight loss, stress as well as promote additional growth, ease of feeding and social behavior.

However, switching from conventional feeding programs where you can easily identify sick calves – “hutch #3 didn’t drink her bucket this morning” to a group feeding where you can’t easily tell how much an individual calf is drinking can be challenging. You must be willing to watch calves throughout the day and be observant to behavioral changes.

If you are interested in switching to group housed/group fed calves talk with other farmers who have been working with a system for their input—what are the challenges, what would they do different, what are the greatest benefits? Resources are available through Pro-Dairy and your local extension office.

If you would like additional resources on any of the information discussed in this article please do not hesitate to contact me. kmm434@cornell.edu