

Focus on Farm Management: Stepping up Calf Protocols Case Study

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Do you ever feel like your calf health is “pretty good” but you feel like you’re treating more calves than you should? Or always fighting a virus or scours bug at a certain age in your calf group? A step back to look at calf protocols might be a worthwhile exercise.

The case study I’ll share in this article was from a participating farm in our NY Farm Viability Institute grant project “Focus on Farm Management: Areas of Excellence and Opportunity with Calves, Transition Cows, and Cow Comfort”. Participating farms received assessments in these three areas, worked with their Cooperative Extension Dairy Specialist to come up with an action plan, implemented the plan, and then had their farms reassessed about a year later. A benchmark of all fifteen participating farms was created for each farm to compare to, as well as against their original assessment.

Calf Measurements

This case study farm knew that calf health was an area on their farm that they wanted to focus on. Calf health here was not terrible, but they felt that they were treating more calves than they should. Their first assessment of calf health included using the University of Wisconsin’s Calf Health Scoring Chart. This method utilizes scoring criteria of evidence of cough, nasal discharge, eye discharge, ear droop, and fecal scoring; each area receiving a score from 0-3. Indication of respiratory disease occurs when 2 of 4 categories score greater than 1, or a total score of 5. A copy of the chart can be found at: <https://www.vetmed.wisc.edu/fapm/clinical-info/> (both in English & Spanish).

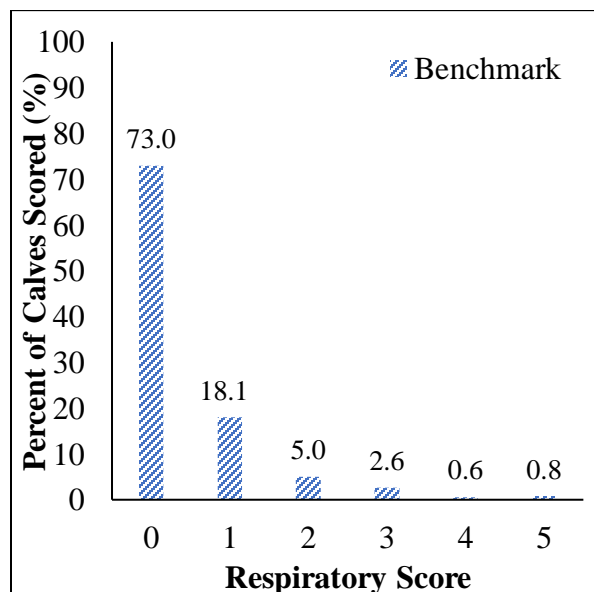


Figure 1. Pre-weaned calf respiratory scores for the 15-herd benchmark. NYFVI 2021.

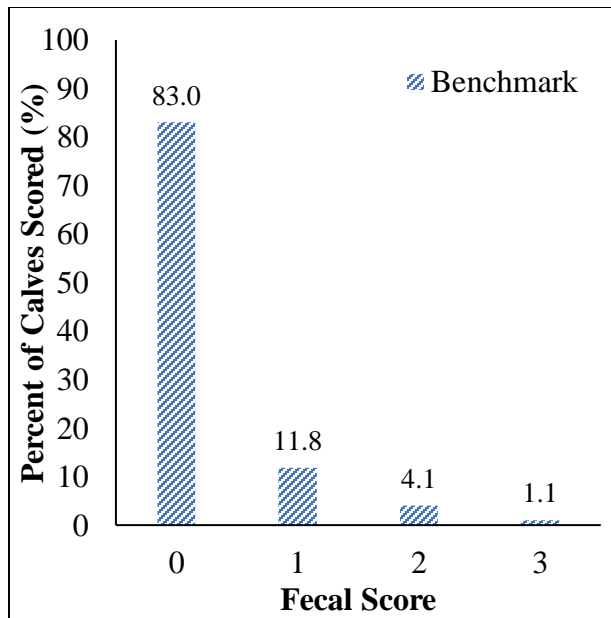


Figure 2. Pre-weaned calf fecal scores for the 15-herd benchmark. NYFVI 2021.

Upon comparison to the benchmark of participating farms, the manager’s suspicions were confirmed that calf health was an area they needed to focus on. While their respiratory scores were better than benchmark (81% vs 73% score 0), we found that calf fecal scores were much worse than benchmark (70% vs 83% score 0). Other data collected were nesting scores and bedding cleanliness, which the farm scored very well on, as they prided themselves on bedding hutches daily at a minimum, and ensuring calves had a clean and dry environment.

Forming the Action Plan

After viewing the assessment results, the farm wanted to make it a goal to improve calf health, even though respiratory scores were better than benchmark numbers. The assessment helped reveal where calves started to struggle with scours – about two weeks old. The farm to this point had only been feeding twice a day, as three feedings per day was too much for the current labor. As treatments and monitoring sick calves takes quite a bit of time, the farm decided to implement a third feeding, and add to their calf staff.

Taking a Step Back

The farm also wanted to review colostrum protocols as well as feeding and cleaning protocols, as there were new staff as well as feeding changes happening at the same time. The owner evaluated current protocols with their veterinarian and nutritionist. The decided changes were written down and dated, so that the farm knew when changes were made in order to make comparisons afterwards. Calf staff were called together to go over the updated colostrum feeding protocols and trained on cleaning protocols for feeding equipment.

The Results

About nine months after making changes, the farm received their second assessment. The farm manager was eager to see the results, as the calf staff felt that calf health had improved greatly and had far fewer calves to treat. The results? Calf fecal scores improved dramatically, from 70% score 0 to almost 99% score 0. Concurrently, calf respiratory scores also improved, from 81% score 0 to over 87% score 0. The farm saw calves achieving higher gains in addition to reducing treatment costs. The farm owner attributes their success to the calf crew's ongoing care, and stated, "I was surprised on how a low investment could make such a big improvement". Making time to review protocols with key farm individuals, decide on changes, and train staff was key in this case study.

If you'd like to go over calf health on your dairy, feel free to reach out! I'd be happy to do an assessment and walk through protocols with you!