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Waste Milk for Calves-To Feed or Not to Feed

With the high price of heifers, many producers have started raising their own heifers. In an effort to reduce the cost of feeding baby calves, some producers are looking at using waste milk instead of milk replacer. But in the long run this practice might cost money instead of saving money.

California researchers have shown that waste milk contains a number of bacteria, including streptococcus, enterobacteria, staphylococcus and E. coli. Thus using waste milk can pose a health risk to calves. In addition, a lot of waste milk contains antibiotics. British studies have shown that antibiotic-containing milk is unpalatable resulting in poor growth rates.

Waste milk can be nutritious, but if you are going to use it there are some precautions you should take.

- Know the health status of the cows. Check to see if they have BVD or Johne's.
- Keep waste milk chilled till used, as the bacteria count will increase dramatically if stored at room temperature.
- Discard milk from the first milking after antibiotic treatment. This milk can cause antibiotic residue problems and result in poor palatability.
- Avoid using milk that is excessively bloody or unusual in appearance. This milk may have more pathogens and could upset the digestive system.
- Use waste milk for animals housed individually. Do not use it if calves are group housed.
- Discard milk from cows infected with E. coli or pasteurella.
- Pasteurize waste milk prior to feeding it to reduce the potential for disease transmission.

Although pasteurizing the milk will reduce the potential for disease transmission, it does not eliminate that potential. If you are raising both bull and heifer calves, keep the heifer calves on milk replacer and use the waste milk only for the bull calves. Use appropriate antibiotic withdrawal times for bull calves destined for slaughter.

Using waste milk can reduce out-of-pocket costs of raising calves; however, if disease increases, the savings disappear. Practice sound waste milk management if you decide to incorporate it into a calf feeding program.

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