

Feeding Water or Filling Buckets?

A Checklist for Calf Care Persons

We all know how to feed water. Right? It's the least complicated task in calf care. Even the person with the least amount of experience can do it.

You just refill the pails. How was it done yesterday on your farm? Drag a hose from a hydrant. If you are like me I don't even have a nozzle – we just bend the hose in half a couple of feet back from the end to shut it off between hutches. Bend, walk, let go and fill the pail, bend, walk, and repeat.

Well, folks the good news is that the calves have water. The bad news is that you are filling buckets but not feeding water.

“Feeding” Water

Let's look behind the activity when a person feeds water. This discussion is not meant as a way to make life more complicated. Rather, I'd like all of us to recognize the management opportunities that are already part of our daily routines.

It is time to dump out the remaining water. Let us assume that your arrangement of individually housed calves allows you to have a reasonable idea how much water calves in different areas probably will consume daily. How much water is left before dumping? Did the calf drink more or less than expected?

I know it is very tempting to keep an eight-year-old out of our hair for a few minutes by sending them off to “dump water pails.” On certain days it's equally tempting to let one's mind go off to solve other problems while dumping water.

But, in those cases, we literally are throwing away information along with the water. The same is true if we have an unknown amount of water going into the pails as well.

In my experience on any given day less than ten percent of the calves will deviate from “normal” consumption to warrant attention. But, that ten percent need attention.

An Example of how to use water consumption information

For example, calf #114 is seven days old. She has been drinking all of two quarts of milk replacer fed twice a day. The water pails are dumped prior to milk replacer feeding twice a day in the same pail. Fresh water is fed after the calves have drunk their milk replacer. She has free choice water – the pail is refilled with about two quarts.

Since day two, she has drunk very little water daily. Last night she drank all two quarts of milk replacer. This morning before feeding milk her water pail was dumped. It was nearly empty – very unusual – I clipped a tag to her hutch to remind me of this.

She only drank one-half of her two-quart milk replacer feeding this AM. She seems alert, no snot, and breathing okay. Miss #114 has consumed five quarts of fluid (2MR + 2 water + 1MR) including last night.

I'll leave her alone now but leave the “flag tag” on the hutch so her fluid consumption can be monitored this PM. Now, put yourself in my place. Would you have reached the same conclusion without the water consumption information?

Another example

Calf #104 is twelve days old. For several days she's been drinking all of two and one-half quarts of milk replacer fed twice a day. She has free choice water – the pail usually has four quarts in it. Her normal water consumption this past week has been about two to three pints daily – varies some from day to day.

Two days ago her stool was observed to be unusually loose and lighter color yellow than normal. That was a signal that her fluid needs were going to be high for the next few days – put a flag tag on her hutch to monitor fluid intake.

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We were especially careful to observe how much water she was drinking. Four quarts in – how much dumped before next feeding? Is she drinking at least eight quarts of fluids daily?

She continues to drink all five quarts of milk replacer daily along with more than double her normal two and three pints of water. No problems, take the tag back off three days later.

A contrasting example

Her neighbor, #103, same age and history she did not keep drinking. On day thirteen she only drank half of her AM milk replacer and no water between AM and PM feeding.

After she drank less than half of her milk replacer in the afternoon, we followed up with a physical exam. She had a temperature of 104 and some thick nasal discharge accompanied by inability to breathe easily through her nose. No abnormal lung sounds. A skin pinch test on her neck skin was a bit slow in responding and her eyes did not look just right. No evidence of severe loose scours.

Following the protocol worked out the with the vet for these cases, #103 received via esophageal tube feeder two quarts of an electrolyte solution, two liters of body-temperature lactated ringers under the skin and the prescribed antibiotic treatment. Her water was replaced with eight quarts of fresh warm water.

Next AM prior to milk replacer feeding her water pail was half empty – good, that's four more quarts of fluids. As we re-bed the hutch she is squirting scours and evidence of diarrhea is everywhere.

By monitoring both milk replacer **and water intake** we were able to manage her fluid intake for the four days needed to get past her crises with both a bacterial respiratory infection and scours.

In each of these examples, water consumption information was routinely collected and retained when the left over water was discarded. This

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enterprise had a system in place to pass this information around among calf care persons. When these three sick or abnormal calves needed to be diagnosed, the water consumption information was used routinely to improve management.

Are you feeding water rather than just filling pails?

YES NO

1. All the calves start over with fresh water at least once a day. _____
2. We know how much water is fed each calf each feeding (for example, calves less than one week receive two quarts AM/PM, the next older group receives one gallon AM/PM). _____
3. The person dumping buckets watches each feeding for unusual behavior (#114 drank a lot of water overnight, #104 doubled her water consumption due to scours, #103 felt awful and just quit drinking). _____
4. When diagnosing sick or abnormal calves we include water consumption along with milk replacer consumption and other indicators of calf health. _____

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Website: <http://www.calfnotes.com>

1. Go to “Calving Ease” link, select June 2000 for notes on increased water needs in hot weather.
2. go to “CalfNotes in Order” link at the left and then select:
 - Calf Note 4 Water, Water Everywhere – basic relationship between water consumption, size and starter intake
 - Calf Note 77 Methods of Feeding Water – provides data comparing bucket and nipple feeding methods.

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