



IS BIGGER BETTER?

Nocton's plans for an 8100-cow unit may have caused a stir in the UK, but herds of 10,000 plus cows are common in the USA. **Aly Balsom** discovers what UK herds of all sizes can learn from large herds in Idaho



Good quality colostrum is the key

Having a contract heifer rearer that rears just their calves is a requirement for many UK producers, but what about one rearer for 37,000 calves from 42 different units?

Managing calves on such a large scale may sound like a challenge but, for Millenkamp Cattle, Jerome, USA, ensuring calves are provided with top-quality, pasteurised colostrum and milk goes a long way towards achieving impressive results.

Making sure calves receive enough colostrum before entering the unit is key, says Mark Harrison, unit manager.

"To help heifers get off to a good start, and guarantee we are provided with a fit and healthy calf, we supply pasteurised colostrum to all the dairies sending us calves."

Colostrum is collected and pooled from different farms, pasteurised at Millenkamp and then sent back to the dairies. "Farms are not necessarily receiving the same colostrum, but they are all receiving the same quality colostrum," he says.

Why fix a problem here when it can be fixed at the dairies? asks Bill Millenkamp, unit owner.

"There is no point not giving the dairies any responsibility or they have no incentive to do well – we don't want to see sick calves." And with 220 heifers entering the unit every day, it is essential any risks are reduced.

"Cost varies, but we charge about \$2 (£1.38) a head a day – we may

be some of the highest-priced guys, but we are achieving good production with mortality rates of 2-4% and cull rates of 1.5%." The owners stand all losses.

The 13,000 calves on milk are receiving 75% pasteurised waste milk topped up with milk replacer in two feeds, totalling 3.8 litres a day.

"When calves are picked up we

also collect waste milk, which is returned to Millenkamp to be pasteurised," says Mr Harrison.

"Pasteurising and ensuring milk is fed to calves at body temperature, about 38C, is one of the most important things to prevent scours."

All milk pasteurisation and mixing is automated, so milk can be mixed according to age group, with

USA DAIRY FARMING FACTS

- * 9.2 million dairy cows
- * Oversupply of milk influencing low milk price
- * Average yields of 9318 litres a cow a year
- * 60,000 dairy farms
- * Smaller-sized herds have dropped significantly, with herds of 200-500 cows reducing by 25-46% in the past nine years
- * The number of herds with 2000+ cows has increased by 160% in the past nine years
- * At the moment, cull cows are worth £786 and in-calf heifers £642, meaning dairy farmers are culling hard



smaller calves receiving different ratios of vitamins and the system flagging up how much water, fat and replacer needs to be added.

Heifers are reared from 24 hours to 6-7 months of age, with calves housed individually in wooden hutches for the first 81 days. Stock are then moved into open lots where they progress from groups of 25 to 75 to 150.

Calves are weaned late at 13.5 weeks old to get the most from milk. "We like to keep calves on milk for as long as possible to produce a strong calf that will compete well when they are moved into group housing."



Pasteurising milk and feeding at body temperature are key to getting the 13,000 calves on milk off to a good start, says Mark Harrison (left).



Separation for less anxiety

Economies of scale dictate that large units have the resources to be hugely specialised in specific areas of cow management, and this is no more apparent than at Double A Dairy, Jerome.

With 13,000 cows on one unit, having a separate calving facility and managing fresh cows and heifers as a separate group are key to maximising health and welfare.

Double A calving unit

Double A's calving unit manages dry cows from Double A Dairy and other dairy farms, totalling more than 16,000 cows.

And with 50-90 cows giving birth a day it pays to have staff dedicated purely to calving 24 hours a day, explains Sam Mosley, calving and fresh cow manager.

"We have a vet on site and three staff whose job is purely looking after calving cows."

CALVING PROTOCOLS

The calving barn has facilities for calving and milking fresh cows for colostrum. Colostrum is pasteurised at a separate calf unit and