

Getting it Right: Feeding Calves in a Group Housing Facility

In the sixth free webinar of the [DeLaval Calf College](#) series, Dr. Robert James, PhD., reviewed the options for feeding calves in group housing facilities. He noted that a successful group calf feeding operation provides the opportunity to:

- utilize a higher plane of nutrition – equating to smaller, more frequent meals;
- capture genetic potential through better feeding of calves during first weeks of life;
- employ better labor management; and
- improve animal welfare.

The concept of feeding calves in groups, as opposed to individually in hutches or pens, originated in New Zealand where mob feeders were first used. While these systems are simple and low-cost, they are not very efficient at tracking milk intake or weaning calves. Keeping the feeder clean can also be an issue.

Another type of group feeding system is the free-choice acidified milk system made popular in Canada and Northern Europe. It is done by adding acid to milk to reduce its pH levels to between 4.2 and 4.5. This practice may limit bacteria growth, but it isn't very palatable to young calves, and weaning calves can be a challenge.

"I think we're creating a false sense of security," said Dr. James of acidified milk. "We often think that if we add the acid, it will take care of all of our bacterial growth – and that's not necessarily true."

Dr. James concluded that automated calf feeders are a proven method to feed calves in group housing systems.

Choosing an automated calf feeder

These machines vary in functionality and, of course, price. But accuracy and precision are key when operating an automated calf feeder, and according to Dr. James, you get what you pay for.

It's important to consider the feeding requirements for this type of system. "We know that feeding two meals a day is not desirable for the young calf, and we know that that's one of the big advantages of the auto feeder system – we can have smaller, more frequent meals," said Dr. James. This means providing enough milk or milk replacer and having a feeding plan in place to support the desired rate of gain or weaning strategy. This sort of flexibility, offered in a high-tech system like the [DeLaval calf feeder CF1000S](#), is another key advantage.

Other key questions when choosing an auto feeder: is the unit self-cleaning; does it mix and deliver milk or milk replacer accurately; how does it calibrate; what sort of data is recorded and how can this information be viewed or accessed; and is there service and technical support available in my area?

These questions can all be answered differently depending on the brand and model of equipment you choose.

Optimizing the system

There are two types of automatic liquid feeders: those which feed milk replacer only and combi feeders, which can use either liquid milk or milk replacer powder. A combi feeder obviously offers greater flexibility. However, he warned: "Using waste milk may increase the complexity of the management."

This is due, in part, to the varying supply of milk and the need to pasteurize it – regardless of whether it is saleable or waste milk.

Most manufacturers recommend up to 25 calves per feeder, but Dr. James said he prefers to see that number at 20 calves per feeder. It ultimately depends on the facility layout, herd size and age differences within the group. He noted that a higher stocking rate requires a more sophisticated machine, an excellent environment for the calf, and excellent management.

Implementing a feeding plan with an automated calf feeder can effectively help achieve desired rates of gain and assist with the weaning process. Dr. James touted the benefits of an ad lib feeding plan where the calf can eat as much as she likes for the first 28 days of life to encourage a healthy appetite. To wean the calf, the diet is automatically restricted in a gradual, stair-step fashion. “This is a really very successful and proven system for feeding calves,” said Dr. James. “I’m really excited about it. Not all of the auto feeders offer this flexibly.”

Managing these machines is easier for some than for others. An auto feeder which can be controlled remotely is an obvious advantage. Some systems offer text alerts and can be accessed via the internet, making it easy to manage feeding plans from anywhere. The level of data recorded by each system also varies. “Drinking speed is good indicator of impending health problems when calves begin to drink their milk more slowly,” remarked Dr. James.

Being successful

There are many factors at play in a successful automated calf feeding operation. Dr. James stressed these requirements for success:

- High level of herd health
- Excellent maternity and colostrum program
- Commitment to a high plane of nutrition
- Accuracy of the system
- A good team in place
- Good understanding of finances (installation, operating and labor costs)

Be sure to consult your local equipment supplier to determine which options suit your needs. Dr. James advised visiting other farmers with automated calf feeders to learn from their experiences. “Evaluate your pros and cons,” he said. “Choose a system that reflects your goals and resources.”

The entire Sept. 7 webinar ([Choosing the Calf Feeder System](#)) is available for playback on the DeLaval [website](#). Register now for the next free webinar on Nov. 2: [Managing the calf feeder system](#).