Shedding light on common calf procedures

Farms shared how they care for calves and keep them healthy in this UW-Extension survey.

by Sarah Mills-Lloyd and Tina Kohlman

Dairy veterinarians, nutritionists, extension agents, and consultants all strive to assist their farm clients in the creation of dairy farm protocols to maximize the success of their calf programs. However, protocol modifications and procedural drift occur regardless of the best intentions as farm circumstances change in relation to employees, seasons, and calves needing care.

The UW-Extension Preweaned Calf Health Management Survey sought to understand actual calf practices on Wisconsin farms. In particular, we wanted to document differences on individual and calf feeding operations compared to automated calf feeding operations.

The very first meal

All surveyed farms used colostrum. It was administered 2-4 hours after birth for individual fed farms (range one to six hours) and 1.9 hours after birth on automated group calf feeding systems (range one to two hours). Two-thirds of all farms tested the quality of their colostrum with either a Brix refractometer or a Colostrometer, with an average result of 24 percent immunoglobulins or IgG (range of 22 to 31 percent).

Calves in either feeding system were given, on average, 3.8 quarts of colostrum at the first feeding. Seven farms used bottles and four farms utilized esophageal tube feeders.

Colostrum replacement products were given on five different farms. Exactly half of the farm respondents (three of seven individual calf feeding systems and three of five automated group feeding systems) pasteurized colostrum to an average temperature of 144°F.

Keeping calves healthy

Every farm had different calf health management practices due to the differences in the disease prevalence on individual farms. Dip-