



Transition Pens....Time for a Change?

What's the weakest part of your calf program? Chances are it's the transition pen, where calves usually first experience group housing.

A calf raiser's priorities typically begin with making sure that calves get enough colostrum. That's followed by keeping them healthy during those first three weeks. Finally, it's getting them weaned. After weaning, we usually house calves individually for another few days or weeks. Then a calf goes to the transition pen, typically at eight to twelve weeks old. A lot of calf raisers then feel the initial phase of the job is complete and it's time to get back to feeding calves. In essence, they've passed the baton to the next grower stage in a 24-month long relay race.

Now, consider the runner handling the next leg of the race – the calf raiser who takes over once the calf gets group housed. As they receive calves in their group pens, they tend to see their part of the race as not really starting until after the calf is acclimated to its new pen. But for calves, life in the transition pen is not always as smooth as it could be. The key to successfully managing the transition pen lies in minimizing stress to the calf. This requires a full understanding of the calf and its environment.

Individually housed calves are typically used to the following:

1. A Private Room –

There is no competition with other animals for a place to lay own, or for a spot to eat or drink.

2. Breakfast in Bed –

Milk, starter and water are all provided so the animal does not have to search for nutrition. We even teach newborn calves how to drink.

3. Room Service –

When the calf is hungry or thirsty, it bawls out and soon enough, the on-duty servant (calf feeder) shows up with food and drink.

4. Climate Control –

Although ambient temperatures are the rule, we do all we can to control drafts and moisture so the calf is as comfortable as possible. We're even known to put a coat on a young calf if it's cold.

5. All You Can Eat Buffet –

Every attempt is made to make sure the calf receives only fresh starter and that the calf eats as much as possible. Many calves can eat up to 10 lb. (4.5 kg) or more of grain at ten weeks of age before moving to the group pen. So it's a positive, caring and fulfilled environment calves experience in the nursery phase.

Now let's examine what calves encounter as they move to the group transition pen.

1. Socialization:

This is a major stress. Calves must now compete with other animals (sometimes too many) for a place to lie down, to drink and eat.



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2. Behavior Changes:

Calves will typically walk the fence line for a couple of days. They are no longer in a “comfort zone” and must get used to their new surroundings.

3. Nutrition Programs:

Several things can occur here.

Grain Mix

- The grain mix will usually be limit-fed starting on day one. This is often 5-6 lb. (2.3 - 2.7 kg) of grain per head per day.
- The starter grain mix can be changed to grower mix on day one of grouping which can lead to reduced intakes.
- Medications can be changed at the time of grouping. But a possibility of reduced grain intake can lead to calves becoming more susceptible to diseases such as Coccidiosis.

Hay

It can take up to three weeks for the rumen bacteria to fully adjust to a different type of feedstuff. By offering hay free-choice and limiting grain on day one of grouping, we substantially reduce calves' nutrient intake since it will take a few weeks for hay to be fully used.

Water

It is almost always available, but do calves always drink it? They've been accustomed to open water containers near their feed area. Water is critical to maintaining health and growth.

4. Pen Design

Important considerations include:

• Size –

An oversized pen makes it harder for calves to find their feed. Many calves may walk the perimeter of the pen for hours or days leading to stress and loss of calories to exertion.

• Feed Bunk space and design –

Calves need a properly sized, readily accessible bunk. Don't use headlocks or narrow slants to guard the feed. It is important that calves have uninhibited access to feed the first week after grouping.

• Feeder location –

Bunks may be placed in the middle of the pen to increase feeding space. Unfortunately, fence line feeders are preferred since calves spend their first couple of days walking the perimeter of the pen.

Calf raisers commonly expect weight loss during the first week in the transition pen. The second week is supposed to bring calves back to the same weight where they started. But that's two weeks of lost growth opportunity. In addition, calves often develop respiratory problems anywhere from five to twenty days after being moved to group housing. The stresses noted above can lead to a reduced immune response, sick calves and poor growth performance in the transition pen.

How can we do better?

Here are a few ideas to help calves do better when they enter the transition pen.



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- 1. Keep the grain mix type** and amount the same as the day before the calf was moved. During the first week in the transition pen, calves should get the mix at the same level as in the week before they moved. This is typically at a free-choice level. Do not reduce nutrition during this stressful time.
- 2. Do not feed any hay for the** first week in the transition pen. Gradually introduce hay starting the second week. Hay initially provides few nutrients and it also can reduce starter intake.
- 3. Location of feed and water** is important. Place open water containers and feed bunks so calves will have easy, ready access so they will essentially run into them as they walk the perimeter of the pen.
- 4. Do not subject calves to** any unnecessary stresses for the week before or after moving. That includes vaccinations and dehorning.
- 5. Have the pen properly bedded.** Minimize any drafts or environmental extremes. Calves are not used to it and need time to acclimate.
- 6. Watch your calves.**
 - Is each one eating?
 - Where are they located in the pen?
 - Are they getting wet and dirty when laying down?
 - Are they coming to the feed bunk like they are hungry?

If they look confused, they probably are.

These measures can minimize stress associated with the transition pen. Often it's the little things that make a big difference. So be careful to avoid dropping the baton. Proper transition pen management can help keep things moving along in the 24 month race to get a quality replacement heifer into your milking herd.