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BEDFORD COUNTY DAIRY FARMERS SHARE CALF MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES, TIPS FOR COLDER WEATHER

Greta Halahan and Virginia Deffibaugh Were Interviewed in New Podcast Episode

Harrisburg, Pa. – In the Center for Dairy Excellence’s latest episode of the [“Cow-Side Conversations” podcast](#), herd manager Greta Halahan and calf manager Virginia Deffibaugh of Singing Brook Farms in Bedford County, Pennsylvania shared their calf management strategies and how they have worked together to define their protocols to ensure excellence from the start of a calf’s life. With cold weather making respiratory issues more common in calves, they also explained how they combat the cold and commit to weight gain through colostrum management and proactive feeding strategies.

Singing Brook Farms has a Registered Holstein herd and milks approximately 300 cows. They raise all their replacements and own and farm about 2,500 acres. Greta opened the podcast by describing her role as herd manager and how she works remotely using CowManager software to monitor herd data and help make decisions. She works four days at the dairy operation every other week to help manage the herd, while Virginia is responsible for being on-farm every day to manage the calf program.

They went on to describe how they have revamped the calf program over the past few years and their goals in three key areas:

- **Mortality rates.** “I have a zero percent goal as our mortality rate. My goal is that we prevent and catch things so early that mortality just doesn’t happen,” Greta said.
- **Morbidity rates.** “For morbidity rates, we want to see around 10 percent. There are certain times of year where the limitations of our facility and the respiratory issues are hard to control, but we like to average about 10 percent for the year,” Greta added.
- **Growth rates.** “My goal is to average two pounds rate of gain throughout the year. The interesting thing to me about rate of gain is, the CowManager tag can ultimately tell me how healthy the rumen is in the cow. Our goal is to build perfect rumens, and our rate of gain tells us how successful we were at doing that.”

As part of their calf management strategy, they discussed their approach to the transition cow pen. Clean bedding is a top priority along with proper vaccination protocols. Cows in their transition pen receive the Scour Guard vaccine at dry-off along with other vaccines.

“Udder health is also incredibly important. Heifer calves out of mothers who have high somatic cell counts do not perform as well and are more likely on our farm to get respiratory issues,” Greta shared. “That’s not a scientific study, but it’s what I’ve noticed on our farm, which is why I prefer not to have heifers out of high somatic cell cows.”

They also described a unique solution they have found to improve the feed intake for close-up cows in the transition pen, which ultimately helps set their calves up for success before they are even born.

“In pre-fresh, we have a topical pellet electrolyte that we use to feed the close-up cows twice a day to help with feed intakes. We’ve seen an improvement in feed intake in the pre-fresh pen because of that,” Greta explained. “We’re only talking about the last two weeks. It would be very expensive to do for our whole dry-cow program, but the cost is actually fairly low for us to do that with just the close-up cows during those final two weeks.”

During the delivery stage, Greta described how important navel care is to ensuring their calves get off to a healthy start. They dip the navels in iodine right after birth, when the calf is put in the pen, when it is first fed, and a final time in the calf barn.

“Navels are a really sneaky thing. You don’t know you did a bad job until it’s way too late,” Greta shared. “You might not know until the calf is 60 days old and weaned and having a respiratory issue.”

They also stressed the importance of colostrum management and the major changes they have made within their program. Their goal is for every heifer and bull calf to have a minimum of 300 IgGs (immunoglobulins) of colostrum within the first four hours of birth. To meet that goal, they implemented an incentive program with farm employees to help deliver the colostrum.

“Especially for a herd our size, one of our challenges was we don’t have someone in charge of the maternity pen. So, we have an incentive program for staff to participate in helping with [calf care and colostrum],” Greta explained. “We set up a system of managing the colostrum to make it easy for them to select and deliver that colostrum.”

To do this, Virginia works carefully to manage the entire colostrum process, so it is simple, straightforward, and quick for all employees to administer.

“We try to get cows to the parlor within a very short period of calving. The closer you get, the less the milk has diluted the colostrum down and you get better quality. As soon as she’s milked, the colostrum is moved directly to a refrigerator. When I come in for my shift, I test it. I try to keep ones that test higher than 24 on a Brix Refractometer for the heifers and lower than that for bulls,” Virginia said in the podcast. “I label it, so if I’m not here when a calf is born, whoever is here can easily thaw a bag and administer it in a relatively timely manner.”

This process helps Virginia control the quality decisions and ensures all calves receive four quarts of colostrum at the very first feeding.

“When we were going through our colostrum protocols, it became very clear that for it to happen the exact same way every single time, there needed to be a process that was timely and simple. By Virginia managing it, freezing it, processing it, and sorting it, when a calf arrives, nobody needs to make a decision other than whether they need a bag for a bull or heifer. We want Virginia to be the one making the quality decisions for the calves,” Greta added. “I feel colostrum is the foundation of all of it. If you’re not doing colostrum well, none of your other strategies will work.”

As soon as the calves in their program come off colostrum, Virginia explained how they begin feeding them an electrolyte every day until they are three weeks old. “We’ve found it increases fluid intake,

which truly starts them eating grain at a younger age. Their grain intake picks up a lot faster, which of course leads to a higher growth rate,” Virginia said.

In cold, winter temperatures, the focus on colostrum intake and electrolytes also helps their calves stay healthy and growing.

“The colostrum definitely helps because they’re healthier to begin with. So the cold doesn’t affect them as greatly,” Virginia explained. “At three weeks old, when they come off the electrolyte, we increase their morning feeding. That does a good bit for combatting the cold and keeping weight gain up over the winter.”

At the conclusion of the podcast interview, Greta shared how she uses apps and technology to communicate protocols with staff and troubleshoot problems, especially when she works remotely. She has found success with an organizational app called SlackBot.

“It has a whole bunch of different to-do lists. We have a calf category in there, and I can choose which employees go into each category,” Greta said. “We ask questions, make comments, and share whatever we need to. That’s how we communicate. It’s really nice because we can all see every communication.”

The app helps her track herd health across the entire dairy operation and communicate protocols. However, she reminded listeners that having employees who are committed to the operation’s goals is just as important as well-defined protocols.

“Your protocols are only as good as the people who are managing them. I’m very proud of the protocols and how far we’ve come in certain areas, but we have wonderful employees who care about the cows every bit as much as I do.” Greta shared. “They are excellent at following the protocols and very resilient and willing to work with our unorthodox way of managing things.”

To listen to the full podcast interview, including their insight on colostrum absorption, vaccination protocols, weaning, and dehorning, visit www.centerfordairyexcellence.org/podcast. The podcast is also available on [Spotify](#), [Apple Podcasts](#), and [Amazon Music](#). With a new episode released each month, Greta and Virginia’s interview is the third episode in the second season. The podcast was designed to share real-time farmer insight, tricks of the trade, and inspiring stories from dairies across Pennsylvania.

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The Center for Dairy Excellence is a non-profit organization initiated by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in 2004. Bringing together people from more than 40 different dairy organizations in Pennsylvania, the Center’s mission is to enhance the profitability of the dairy industry by empowering people, creating partnerships, and increasing the availability and use of resources. Learn more at centerfordairyexcellence.org.

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