

## **Should You Raise Your Replacement Animals?**

By Charles E. Gardner, DVM

Have you ever stood looking at a group of young calves and observed their living conditions? Over the years, I have visited farms where the calves were very thin with rough haircoats. Manure was caked over much of their bodies. There was no clean or dry place for them to lay down. Some poor-looking hay was the only feed available. Older calves and heifers were in similar conditions.

In a lot of these cases, the dairy farmers who own these calves have good intentions about the environment they are creating for their animals, but they are totally overwhelmed with trying to care for their herd. Many years ago, I worked with a dairy owner who had an 80-cow free stall barn with 50 cows in it. Cash flow was very tight. I had urged him several times to sell the youngstock and to fill the barn with milking cows. His workload could have been reduced, and his cash flow could have possibly improved by adding the milking cows.

Fortunately, with National FARM providing standards for animal care protocols, we are seeing fewer of these situations in the industry. However, you still need to ask yourself how it is on your farm. Would you do better if you had someone else raise your replacement animals? In general, if you do not have all the resources you need to adequately serve both adult cows and replacements while providing positive living conditions for both groups of animals, you should consider giving up the youngstock.

When labor, feed and housing are not adequate for all animals, youngstock can be compromised which can lead to lower milk production over the lifespan of these animals than what would be their genetic potential. Farm workers can also feel overwhelmed and discouraged as well when there are more animals than resources to take care of them.

Selling the youngstock can often raise a little cash that you can invest to improve matters for your adult cows. Of course, money now needs to be budgeted to purchase replacements. You should also identify a source that you can count on to provide high quality replacements for your herd. Contagious disease must be managed. Your veterinarian needs to be involved with this aspect. All these financial implications should be considered when determining whether you're going to raise your own replacements.

One added benefit of not raising replacements is that you can breed cows to sexed angus male semen, meaning you will have calves born that are quite valuable. This could further improve your cash flow.

I encourage you to take a hard look at your own operation and decide if you should be raising replacements. Ask your nutritionist, your veterinarian, and other trusted advisors and consultants for their thoughts. The Center for Dairy Excellence has several consultants available who can help you make these types of decisions, evaluate cash flow, and determine what makes

the most sense operationally. You may find that focusing all your resources on adult cows will improve both cash flow and your quality of life.