



## SHOW SOLUTIONS

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### Starting your new calves on feed

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Getting your new calves home is an exciting time, and the possibilities for the coming show season are truly endless. However, nothing can erase those feelings faster than having to worry about a calf that won't start on feed. Preparation and observation are the keys to eliminating your worries this fall.

#### **Pen preparation**

If you have had the pens empty for a couple of months, your first priority should be to make sure that they are in good order. Prior to getting your calves, repair anything in the pen that might create a hazard, such as a damaged fence, broken concrete, protruding nails or jagged edges.

In addition to repairing damage, this is also a good time to haul out manure and make sure the pen surface is in good shape. Wet, poorly drained pens can lead to issues with foot health and can also make it difficult to keep your calf clean and to keep their hair dialed in. If conditions aren't ideal, you may want to consider bedding part of the pen, as this will give the calf a clean place to lie down. The pen's surface is often an overlooked feature, but it can make a big difference in the performance of your calf. An even more critical feature to get right is making sure the calves have access to plenty of clean water. If you left the tank full, drain it and scrub it out with a steel brush; using bleach while cleaning can help kill any bacteria that may be growing on the tank. If the tank has been cleaned and shut off, make sure it's turned back on. Nothing is more critical for a good start than ensuring that there are no barriers keeping your calf from getting plenty to drink.

#### **Consider personalities**

Your calves' pen-mates will impact how well they do on feed. On one hand, having other cattle to interact with can help create a calmer environment, as the new individual(s) won't be threatened or stressed out by being alone. However, as you get calves started, their personalities will affect how well and how often they and their pen-mates access the feed. If a calf is timid and its pen-mates are cleaning up the feed before the calf even gets a taste, you may want to consider placing that calf in a neighboring pen by itself. It helps, however, if other cattle are in sight, so the calf doesn't feel alone but can avoid the competition for feed.

#### **Oh yeah, and feed, too!**

When the calves first arrive at their new pen, I suggest giving them immediate access to two things. First, offer a highly palatable grass hay free-choice. This will likely be a very familiar ingredient to them, so they will consume it quickly and easily. The other is a [Relaxlyx tub](#). Calves are easily attracted to this molasses-based product, which is fortified with vitamins, trace minerals and other additives to enhance an animal's appetite, health and performance.

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Last but certainly not least, let's talk about the ration. When you're starting calves for the first week or so, you can be less concerned about having the precise feeds necessary to compliment your calves' strengths and weaknesses in terms of their phenotype. You should, however, be focused on how they are eating and making sure that they are getting the nutrients they need to succeed.

Textured feeds are a great option to appeal to newly received calves. One common mistake is using a bag of feed that was left from when you turned last year's calves out after the fair. I can't emphasize this enough: Start with fresh feed! It's also important to focus on what calves need nutritionally. Since they may not be eating as much as they are capable of in the beginning, providing them with feeds that are nutrient-dense is recommended. My personal preference is to use a 13% protein feed as calves get started on feed to help optimize their performance and assist their immune system in meeting any challenges it might face. Offer this feed at 1% of their bodyweight in grain per head per day to start with, and increase the amount from there. If they are cleaning that up easily, you can increase the amount of grain at a rate of 0.25% of their bodyweight each day until they reach 2% bodyweight in grain, which is when I consider them to be fully on feed. If the calves are familiar with feed already, this will be no problem — but if they are freshly weaned, it may take some work to get them there.

The last important step? **Be observant.** The most critical tool to starting calves on feed has been available to cattlemen and -women since the start of time: As the saying goes, "It's the eye of the master that fattens cattle!" Letting the cattle tell you what they want and actually listening to what their actions are communicating is the key. Watch how they eat, how they poop and how they grow — this is how they will talk to you. Being observant is a learned skill, so don't be afraid to ask questions of someone who has already been through this.

### Summary

Starting calves is a process that begins before they ever arrive. Providing them with a comfortable place to live that offers easy access to the appropriate nutrition is critical. Most importantly, use your eyes to listen to your calf, and this year's show season will be off to the right start!

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