

Health challenges of beef-on-dairy calves

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Abstract

The use of beef sires in dairy herds has almost doubled from 2015 to 2019. Geiger (2020) reported a 128% increase in domestic semen sales of beef breeds in just 2 years, which has been accompanied by an improvement in beef genetics and provided the potential for better consistency across the population. However, creating a beef animal originating from a dedicated dairy operation has provided some significant challenges to managing animal health. The first 24-hour management of the calf at the dairy is critically important, as is management throughout the stages of calf development. Management of colostrum intake, hygiene, calf comfort, bedding, air quality, hydration, nutrition, appropriate vaccination, forage quantity and quality, optimal rumen development, transportation, and socialization all play a role in optimizing future feedlot health outcomes and ultimately, feedlot performance. The industry has learned a great deal from costly mistakes made early in this shift to beef-on-dairy calves. Some producers have made huge strides in calf management and have benefited from the improved health of their calves; other producers still have a ways to go in order to fully capitalize on the opportunities this new population can provide.