



CATTLE CORNER

Strategies for Managing Dairy Bull Calves

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As recently as 2020 dairy farms have come under fire for their management of bull calves. There have been news stories of farmers euthanizing bull calves directly after birth. A May 2019 article in the Journal of Dairy Science entitled *Management of preweaned bull calves on dairy operations in the United States*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022030219302115> focuses on three main areas of welfare for dairy bulls as compared to heifers: colostrum management, dehorning and castration procedures, and pain mitigation practices. The conclusions drawn by the study is that bull calves are, quite often, not afforded the same level of humane handling that their sisters receive.

MOFGA Certification Services (MCS) encourages necessary physical alterations to be performed at the youngest age possible, and with the use of analgesics and anesthetics. All procedures need to be outlined in producers' Organic System Plans (OSP), and fully documented in their herd health records. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) advises the use of anesthetics (lidocaine) and NSAIDs (aspirin) when performing castrations and disbuddings, both of which are encouraged in organic production, with appropriate withholding times. Every farm has a different strategy for managing bull calves, and it can largely depend on demand in the market, and the ratio of bulls to heifers a farm has in any given year. What we are trying to avoid is neglect or mistreatment of any living creature, and there are some strategies that have worked well for Maine's organic dairy farms.

Artificial Insemination

Some farms rely on artificial insemination (AI) to maintain replacement

numbers. This allows a wide variety of choices to individual producers. Strategies such as using sexed semen when breeding highly valued cows increases the chances of carrying forward desired family traits from dam to daughter. For less desirable genetic profiles, it can be advantageous to use beef semen. These calves, regardless of sex, have been commanding good market value, even as young stock. However, depending on the size of the dairy herd, and the amount of calves being produced each year, a number of these animals could potentially remain on the farm until maturity, and enter the local beef market, rather than being transported out of the state as calves. It is worth noting that AI doesn't work well on every farm, in which case a different management practice should be followed.

Keeping Different Bulls

Another strategy would be to keep one bull of the farm's desired breed and genetic quality, and a second "clean up" bull, usually a beef breed of some kind. The black angus and hereford breeds have been selected over the last 40-50 years for low birth weights, but fast weight gain, since ranchers often raise herds out on the range, and calving and vitality issues can be bad news out in the wild. These bulls are ideal for use in first calf heifers, and any production age cows whose performance hasn't proven adequate for a farm's particular production goals. Again, choosing this "clean up bull" option allows for desirable genetics to remain on the farm, while still managing a higher market value for stock leaving the farm. For any purebred breedings that end with a bull calf, farms might consider entering into contracts with area farms to supply breeding bulls and a diversity of genetics for farms not partaking in AI. It is strongly recommended to maintain polled genetics.

Direct Marketing

There are farmers who excel at making deals, and are able to find local homesteaders to take well-started bull calves. This often requires care with administering colostrum, disbudding, castration, and some extra time in the herd until the homesteader is ready, but can often pay off in the form of mutually advantageous barter negotiations. This also seems to work for those farms managing lower herd numbers.

Whichever method is working on your farm, it is always worth considering the animal welfare aspect. Organic certification standards dictate that livestock be allowed to move and act in natural ways. This is leading to a redirection of how dairy farms have traditionally managed calf housing and feeding. While there are health reasons to separate calves from dams at birth, there's copious amounts of evidence that group housing and frequent feedings only benefit a farm's production in the long run. There's even a school of thought that when calves are group housed, it reduces the likelihood of rogue cows and bulls that injure and kill humans, since they can learn normal cattle behavior and social structure from each other, rather than targeting their human caregivers as tiers in the pecking order.

If dairy wants to remain relevant in a market filled with plant-based options, we have to stop and consider what our traditional management practices look like to a population two generations removed from animal agriculture. Additionally, if we want to maintain a quality product, it comes from well managed livestock. Pain and stress always reduce the gains that keep livestock production profitable.

