

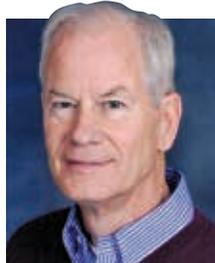


Custom rearing is an emerging business

Less than 10 percent of custom raisers have been in business over 20 years. Differences between the operations abound.

by A.F. Kertz

THE National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) conducted national dairy surveys in 1996, 2002 and 2007. The primary objective of its most recent undertaking, the Dairy Heifer Raiser, 2011, was to provide the first comprehensive information on animal health and management practices for heifer-raising operations.



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Data came from 21 states designated as East and West. Noticeably absent on the map were the nine states in the southeastern U.S.

Most are newer operations

Heifer raising is a more recent business venture. Less than 10 percent of operations in this study had been in business for 21-plus years. Meanwhile, 24 percent had been in business for one to five years, 33 percent for six to 10 years and 35 percent for 11 to 20 years.

One-third of the growers raised heifers for only one client, while 7 percent raised heifers for 10 or more clients. Operations in the West averaged five or more clients reflecting differences in herd size between the two regions. Small (20 to 99), medium (100 to 999) and large (1,000 or more) operations accounted for 2,666, 42,462 and 432,055 heifers raised during 2010. Of this, 328,686 were raised in the West and 148,497 in the East.

There were three types of heifer ownership: the source dairy retained ownership (78 percent), the heifer raiser bought heifers from the source dairy and sold the same heifers back to the dairy (13 percent) or the heifer raiser bought the heifers from various sources with-

out selling them back to the sources (19 percent). Throughout this column, some percentages may exceed 100 because of rounding or overlapping categories.

The majority (54 percent) of operations obtained weaned heifers and shipped out pregnant heifers. But 22 percent of East region operations obtained preweaned heifers and shipped out pregnant heifers compared to only 7 percent in the West. Primary challenges for most operations were heifer health, client relations, payments from producers, and feed cost and availability.

Housing varied with region

The average operation raised 2,217 heifers, with a range from 61 for small operations to almost 7,000 for large operations. Over 90 percent of operations in the West housed calves in outside hutches or pens. In the East, 31 percent raised calves in either outside hutches or inside unheated barns, 20 percent used multiple inside areas/barns/sheds and only 13 percent used inside heated pens.

After calves were weaned and grouped, 75 percent of Western operations used dry lots or outdoor areas. In the East, 15 percent used pasture, 20 percent freestalls, 21 percent open shed bedded pack, 19 percent multiple inside area/barn/shed and about 14 percent used some other housing.

Obviously, many heifer operations received heifers from several sources. About 31 percent of heifers traveled 100 miles or more, with a higher percentage traveling long distances as herd size rose. Twelve percent of operations sent heifers to other countries with Turkey, Mexico and Russia being the top destinations.

Colostrum prior to arrival

All operations reported that the dairy of origin administered colostrum with about 21 percent of heifer operations administering additional colostrum after arrival. Most of this (64 percent) was from the dairy of origin while 54

WHILE THERE WERE OVERARCHING THEMES in the Dairy Heifer Raiser study, most operations exhibited regional variation.

percent of operations also fed a commercial colostrum replacer. Calf serum protein levels were measured on 40 percent of operations. Of large operations, 72 percent monitored these levels. The majority of Western operations (79 percent) monitored serum levels versus 32 percent for Eastern operations.

Most operations (86 percent) fed some milk replacer, and over 60 percent of heifer raisers fed a medicated milk replacer. The latter is somewhat surprising given the more recent restrictions on feeding medicated milk replacers. There was some evidence of feeding higher protein milk replacers with 14 percent of operations using over 24 percent protein and 85 percent using between 20 to 24 percent protein.

The fat content of milk replacers fed continues to be marketing driven with 83 percent at 20 to 24 percent fat. The amount of milk or milk replacer fed daily varied with 70 percent feeding 4 to 5 quarts, 21 percent at 6 to 7 quarts and a mere 9 percent at 8 or more quarts. Larger operations fed more times daily than smaller operations.

Overall, bucket feeding was the most popular method at 62 percent followed by bottles (27 percent). This was skewed by larger operations where 45 percent used bottles and 52 percent buckets. This was largely due to the 93 percent of Western growers using bottles. Less than half of the operations cleaned and disinfected milk feeding equipment between each feeding, while one-third rinsed only with water between feedings. Fifty-five percent of large operations cleaned and disinfected. All Western operations did so, but only 34 percent of Eastern operations followed suit.

Heifer raisers did a better job of feeding water and starter earlier and forage later than dairy operations in the 2007 NAHMS report. Large heifer operations fared best, waiting until 70 days of age to provide forage and commencing water and starter feeding at four days. On the other hand, Western operations did not wean calves until 9 weeks, while the East and smaller operations weaned around 6.7 weeks of age.

Weaned heifers were fed medicated feed 90 percent of the time, and 77 percent of this was ionophores. From a biosecurity standpoint, commingling of heifers from other operations was done on 60 percent of operations. While 38 percent of large operations housed heifers separately, these operations still allowed nose-to-nose contact.

Biosecurity measures prevalent

On a weekly or monthly basis, 76 percent used a veterinarian, 64 percent a nutritionist and 47 percent an A.I. technician. All of these percentages were higher in large operations and in the West. The A.I. technician was most frequently allowed in heifer housing areas. Clean coveralls or boots were the most prevalent biosecurity practices (82 to 94 percent) followed by footbaths (27 to 33 percent).

Nearly 60 percent of operations either had no visitors or never allowed visitors in heifer housing areas. On only 26 percent of operations were vehicles washed or rinsed out after each shipment. This was more common for large operations.

The 2011 NAHMS Dairy Heifer Raiser report contains a wealth of pertinent data which can be used for an assessment of overall operations in the U.S. and as a reference point for individual operations. Larger operations typically fare better in how they manage and the results they get most likely because they have and commit more resources to their operations. 🐄