Cattle Chat: Caring for first-calf heifers and calves

K-State beef cattle experts discuss the dietary needs of first calf heifers and the importance of water to nursing calves

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Each season of the year brings management considerations for the beef producer. For summer, two groups in the herd – first calf heifers and young calves – need special attention, according to experts at Kansas State University’s Beef Cattle Institute.

“First calf heifers need a lot of extra care because they are still growing while caring for a calf and can easily become too thin going into late summer and fall,” said Phillip Lancaster, BCI nutritionist, on a recent Cattle Chat podcast.

He estimates that these females are only about 80% of their mature weight when they have their first calf. Therefore, he suggests these pairs be grouped together and fed separately from the mature cows and their calves.

“Keeping the first calf heifers in good body condition is important for rebreeding,” Lancaster said.

He added that there are some economic benefits as well.

“Making sure the heifers and those who just had their first calf are properly taken care of nutritionally can be a cost savings versus having them drop out of the herd because they wouldn’t breed on time and having to buy replacements,” Lancaster said.

Along with supplementing the diets of growing animals, providing ample access to fresh water is important for all, said K-State veterinarian Brian Lubbers.

“Water is the most important nutrient in the diet and one that is often given the least consideration,” he said.
Along with providing access to clean water for the heifers, cows and bulls, Lancaster said it is also important for nursing calves.

“When calves nurse, there is a reflex reaction that allows the milk to bypass the rumen and go through the stomach to the small intestine,” he said. “Water is important because once the calf starts adding grass and grain in the diet liquid is needed in the rumen to allow mixing of forage and feed better aiding in digestion.”

Calves typically start eating grass about one month of age. Once the cow passes peak lactation 60-days post calving, grass consumption by the calves increases, according to Lancaster. At that point, some producers offer creep feed to the growing calves as well.

To hear more of the discussion on these two topics tune in to the Cattle Chat podcast online.

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