

# Calving performance benchmarking

Dr. Nate Zwald for *Progressive Dairyman*

*Editor's note: The following benchmarks have been compiled using data reported by dairies enrolled in Alta's AltaAdvantage program, a progeny testing program. More than 182,500 cows in 175 herds participate in the program nationwide.*

The start of a long, profitable life for a cow is an easy, uneventful calving. Think of an easy, uneventful calving as the beginning of what I like to call the four-event cow. These cows have a calving, a breeding, a pregnancy check (where she is confirmed to the first breeding) and a dry off. No metabolic problems, no mastitis, no lameness, no hospital pen moves and only one breeding!

These are the cows we don't notice, and they make the operation run seamlessly. If a cow has an easy calving, then she is more likely to avoid metabolic problems, and if she avoids metabolic problems, she is more likely to get bred back in a timely manner. Of course, if she gets bred back on time, she is likely to live a long, profitable life.

So benchmarking calving performance is a key area that really helps determine the productivity and profitability of a dairy.

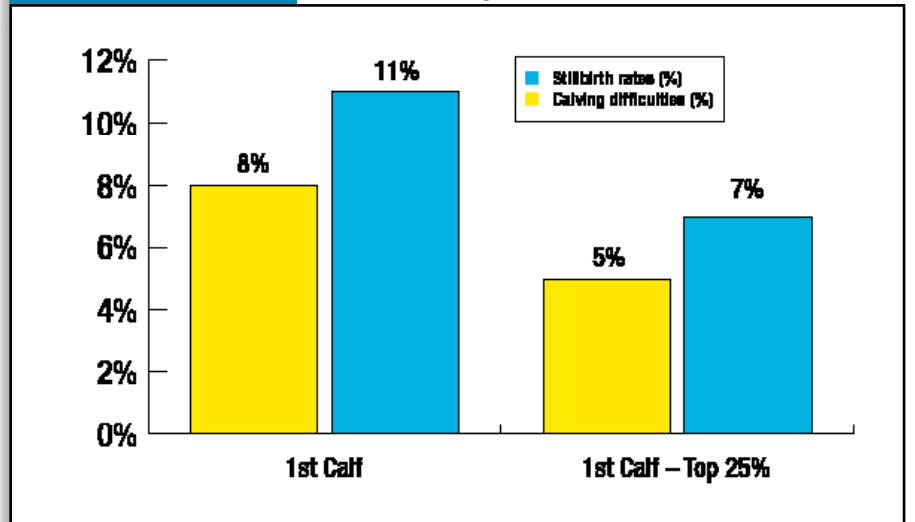
## The value of easy calving

Managing your dairy's calving performance is worth the effort. There are many estimates on the cost of a difficult calving. The main consequences of difficulty calving include potential for dead calves, potential for poor reproduction, lower production and lower performance in the ensuing lactation for the fresh cow and even increased susceptibility to disease for both the cow and the calf. An objective measure of the cost is the cost of a stillborn calf.

Although in certain areas there has been a depression in the value of bull calves recently, as of this writing, the average selling price is nearly \$150 per calf. Meanwhile, the average price of a newborn heifer calf is around \$650. Therefore, the average value for a live calf is about \$400. A 1,000-cow dairy has about 1,000 calvings per year. With a 15 percent stillborn rate, this dairy has 150 dead calves per year for an annual cost of \$60,000. The cost of stillborn calves can total more than 1 percent of your revenue, and may even approach 2 percent. This fact reinforces the obviously critical point that calving pays for the progressive dairy.

**Figure 1**

**Calving performance of 1st calving on AltaAdvantage dairies**



## Calving performance benchmarking

There are three key indicators to follow in the area of calving. They are:

- 1) average age at calving
- 2) stillbirth rates
- 3) percent of calvings scored greater than "4" for calving difficulty

These measures indicate not

only how efficient the heifer-rearing program is operating but also what the cost of calving is. It is best to segment the analysis by looking at these indicators for first-lactation and 2+ lactation groups separately. The results for the average and top 25 percent of herds in our program are shown in **Figures 1 and 2**.

There are significant differences in calving performance detected when comparing the data as we have

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done. For their first-calf heifers, the top 25 percent of dairies in our program are outperforming peers by a margin of 3 percent and 4 percent for calving difficulty and stillbirth rates, respectively. On the same metrics, the same dairies are also posting better calving performance for their older cows as well. In addition, the top 25 percent of dairies in our program are also calving heifers about 1.5 months sooner than their average peer dairy. The average age at first calving is 24.3 months compared to 22.8 months for the top 25 percent.

### Calving performance best practices

Managers that consistently post superior performance in the area of calving have adopted a number of best practices. These include:

1) *Commit an employee to the calving pen during the night hours.*

Herds that rely on the milking or barn crew to take care of the calving area overnight suffer in their ability to deliver the maximum number of live calves. In addition to not being available at all times, the milking and barn staff often lack the expertise and training to successfully deliver live calves. A committed person at all times focuses on the cows and the protocol.

2) *Freshen heifers in at the right age and weight.*

Extremely well-managed herds can have heifers calve in at 21 or 22 months. This requires extremely good growth rates for these heifers, if the risk of additional calving problems is to be minimized. It's a balance, however, as animals calving overconditioned is linked with multiple problems at calving and after calving.

3) *Assist in the calving process at the right time.*

Pulling calves before the animal is fully dilated causes unnecessary stress to both the cow and the calf. Waiting too long can limit oxygen to the calf. A good rule of thumb is to wait until the nose is out before offering assistance, but work with your vet to determine what is right for your dairy.



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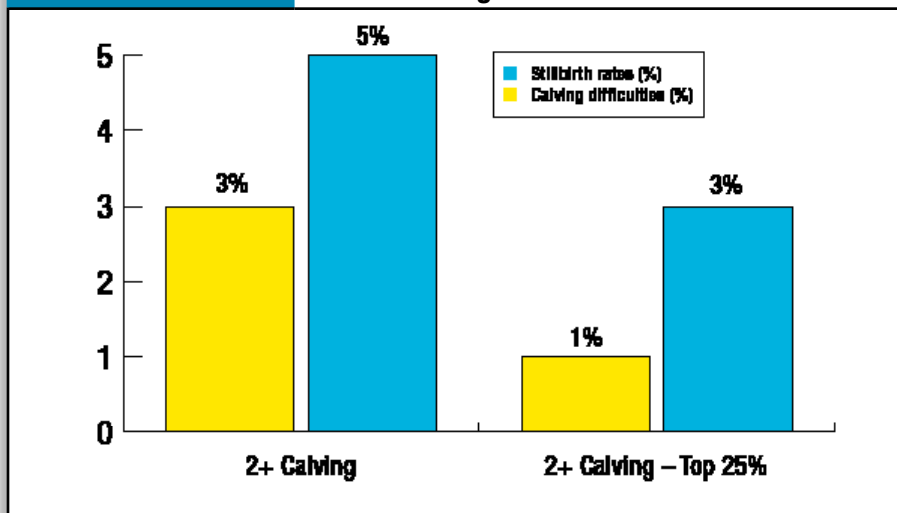
4) *Clean calving area and provide proper movement of cows prior to calving.*

Calves born in a dirty area laden with feces (like a freestall or improperly bedded manure pack environments) are not only more likely to be stillborn, but they are also exposed to large loads of bacteria at an extremely susceptible time of their life. Clean calving environments are a must. Also, waiting too long to move close-up cows results in calves born in potentially "dirty" environments, while moving too early and leaving too long in a calving pen can reduce the competitive impulse of the cow.

An easy, uneventful calving is something all dairymen should strive for. It's the first event in a "four-event cow." After all, about 75 percent of diseases can be traced back to the transition cow stage, and stress of the calving event is a critical point in the transition cow program. Large numbers of stillborn calves cost your dairy a potentially significant profit, and calving difficulty increases labor and treatment costs, too. Easy calving and implementing the strategies to produce it are worth the effort. **PD**

Figure 2

Calving performance 2+ calvings on AltaAdvantage dairies



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