

NEWS COLUMN

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Successfully Grafting Calves

Each year many cow/calf producers face the challenge of grafting an orphan calf on to a cow that has lost a calf. Some producers simply will not take time or do not have the time to graft calves. This however leads to non-productive cows or the premature culling of young to middle age females. These are the most valuable age group of females (3-7 years) with the most upward genetic potential. This also becomes quite expensive as the development of a 1st calf heifer can range from \$325 upwards of over \$400 per head. In addition cow production cost per year range from \$350-\$450 annually. True business analysis would say cows that do not have a calf at side are gone no excuses or exceptions. But she is so good, so productive....etc. No calf means she is gone.

The only alternative to this is grafting an orphan or twin within herd calf. By in herd, it means in herd. Calves purchased at the sale barn or off other farms are very high risk as they often carry strains of scours that can spread rapidly within your herd. This of course can lead to sickness, higher labor costs, more animal and human stress and increased calf death loss. If there is no in herd orphan the choice of keeping vs. culling must be based on a combination of age and genetic potential weighed against economic cash flow analysis.

When grafting calves several things must be considered in order to attain success. It is very important that you have adequate time and patience when grafting. Adequate and stable facilities are also a must. They do not have to be new or fancy but they do have to include a head gate, opening which allows a calf to nurse and be strong and durable. As you can guess the initial relationship between cow and grafted calf is usually less than ideal. Cows are often very resistant and calves are eager to nurse. Cows will often kick at calves and thus tying a cow's back leg is often necessary. In addition separating cow and calf within close proximity may be required as cows often times try and hit or bunt calves. If grafting a calf fails it is almost always the lack of cooperation from the cow side of the equation. Much of this can depend on the age of the cow's lost calf and also the age of the grafted calf. There are some scented aids on the commercial market that can be applied to the top and sides of the calf and face and nose of the cow to help create a successful graft. These are available through your local vet or animal health supply outlet. Scented aids can help the graft occur more quickly and smoother however sometimes this process takes a week or longer. This is why I referred the word patience earlier in this column. In addition to this, if timing allows, the skinning of the cow's dead calf and tying of hide onto the grafted calf can be utilized and successful. If this is done it should work within the first 48-72 hours, after that point it will likely not aid the success of the graft. Some grafts are successful only because of repetition. As an example, twice a day restrained nursing until calf is full and satisfied. Repeat this until the cow claims the calf willingly. Some cows have super maternal instincts and easily take on a graft. Others never work but if you can get the marginal ones to take a calf within 4-10 days it will more than pay for the time invested.

On a related subject to this, calving time usually means milk replacer, thawing and mixing of colostrum, etc. Keep this process as well as related equipment, vaccines, syringes, etc. out of the kitchen and food preparation areas of the house. Calves can have diseases such as E:coli and Cryptosporidia that should not be accidentally introduced to the human side. Small children are especially at higher risk. Keep it out of the kitchen. It's a human health risk issue.