Observations of Custom Heifer Raising by WI Dairy Producers

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Survey conducted by
UW-Extension Dairy Team & UW-Center for Integrated Agriculture Systems

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Rock Garden, Depere, WI & Fond du Lac County UW-Extension, Fond Du Lac, WI
2006 Custom Heifer Raising Survey

- Conducted jointly by UW-Extension Dairy Team and the Center for Integrated Agriculture Systems
- USDA “Dairy Industry Revitalization” Grant
- Nearly 800 respondents completed the survey
- Only WI dairy producers were surveyed
The Farms who Responded...

- 76% of the respondents were from traditional dairy systems with 50 to 150 cows.
- 9% of the respondents were from large modern facilities with a parlor.
- 12% of the respondents utilized an intensive grazing operation system.

These are the perceptions of the average WI dairy producer!
Their heifer raising operations...

- 134 raise all bull calves on farm
- 669 raise all female calves on farm
- 558 raise all heifers are on farm
- 165 raise all dairy bull/steers on farm
- 56 of the farms utilize a custom wet calf grower
- 32 of the farms utilize custom heifer growers
Calves raised per year...

![Bar chart showing the number of farms raising calves per year.

- **None**: 0 farms
- **1-50 Calves**: The highest category, with a significant number of farms.
- **51-100 Calves**: A smaller number of farms.
- **101-200 Calves** and **Over 200 Calves**: Even smaller numbers of farms in these categories.

The chart indicates that the majority of farms raise calves in the 1-50 range.
Heifers raised per year...

![Bar chart showing the number of farms raising different numbers of heifers per year.]

- Orange: None
- Blue: 1-50 Heifers
- Red: 51-100 Heifers
- Gray: 101-200 Heifers
- Black: Over 200 Heifers
What is their biggest concern with custom raising heifers?

- Cost
- Disease
- Loss of management control
- Quality of heifers
- Other
17% have considered using a wet calf grower.
13% have considered using a heifer grower.
Questions asked...

- Section 1: Your Farm
- Section 2: Custom Heifer Raising
  - Housing
  - Managing Heifers on Pasture
  - Payment of heifer raiser
  - Concern with custom raising of heifers
  - Reproduction
- Section 3: You and your operation
Defining the calf environment

- Resting surface
- Feed space
- Water
- Temperature
- Hair Coat
- Insulation
- Relative Humidity
- Solar radiation
- Ventilation
- Draft control
Custom Wet Calf Raising Preferences

- Of those who have considered or are using a custom wet calf grower, which was their preference of having wet calves raised:
  - Individually, warm calf barn
  - Individually, cold calf barn
  - In calf hutches
  - In groups using group feeding system
Which way do you prefer?
How do you think they responded?
Calf Environment & Housing

- No single "best" design
- Every design involves a trade-off
- Choosing the right design depends on:
  - Environment
  - Capital
  - Labor
  - Management resources available

The goal is to provide a healthy environment for the calf & optimize calf growth.
Custom Heifer Raising Preferences

- Of those who have considered or are using a custom heifer grower, which was their preference of having heifers raised:
  - In a free stall barn
  - On pasture
  - In outside lots or mounds
  - In bedded pack open barns
Which way do you prefer to have heifers raised?
Which way do they prefer to have heifers raised?
Aspects of heifer housing...

- Air temperature
- Solar radiation
- Humidity
- Precipitation
- Ventilation
- Resting surface
- Feed space
- Water access
- Space allocation
- Walking surface
Reproduction...

- Reproductive efficiency
- Sets stage for heifers to enter milking herd

When asked where they preferred heifers bred:
  - 65% preferred heifers bred at the growers
    - 89% preferred AI breeding
    - 11% preferred bull breeding
  - 35% prefer to retain the control and breed them at home
Do you think feeding and managing heifers on pasture has positive or negative implications for the health and productivity of replacement animals?

60% Very or somewhat positive
26% Neutral
8% very or somewhat negative
So the questions...

If you are currently raising your own heifers, would you consider having a custom heifer grower graze your heifers on pasture just for the summer if it saved you labor and feed costs?
If you have, or have had in the past, your heifers custom raised, would you consider transferring your heifers to a custom grazier if the cost of raising the heifers was significantly less than your current contract? 52% would consider transferring their heifers.
If you have or have had in the past, your heifers custom raised, would you object to heifers being transferred between two custom heifer growers? 55% would object to having heifers transferred to another grower in the summer.
If a custom heifer raiser business were available that could raise heifers in confinement during the winter months, for around $1.60/heifer/day, and then transfer them to another operator that utilized pasture for around $1.00/heifer/day during the summer months, would you consider allowing such a business to raise your heifers? Total cost to raise a heifer this way would be around $950 per heifer.

59% would not consider such a business
34% would consider such a business
What is their biggest concern with custom raising heifers?

- Cost
- Disease
- Loss of management control
- Quality of heifers
- Other
What defines a successful calf-raising program?

Calves are alive
Calves are healthy
Calves are growing well
Goals of raising heifers

To raise a healthy productive heifer ready to enter the milking herd at 22-24 months of age
The best way to predict the future in the dairy industry is to help create it.

-Greg Henderson
Monsanto Dairy Business
To help get us there...

- UW-Extension Dairy Team’s “Dairy Workers’ Training” Calf Management Skills Modules
- PDGHA “Raising Quality Replacement Heifers” BMP self-audit
- MWPS “Raising Dairy Replacements” Publication
- Numerous other resources
Thank You...

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UW-Extension