Animal health advice for producers in the *Hunter*

FACTSHEET

BUYING HEALTHY BOBBY CALVES

A Bobby calf is aged 5-30 days old and not accompanied by its mother. They are commonly a dairy or dairy cross animal. Bobby calves are often sold through property to property sales and occasionally through livestock markets.

There are rules and welfare guidelines surrounding the transport and slaughter of bobby calves that all involved in the transaction must be aware of and comply with. These rules and guidelines help protect the welfare of the calves, but also may help the bobby calf vendor and purchaser to sell and source calves that have had the best start in life. Calves that are stressed from too long off milk, lengthy transport and harsh environments often succumb to diseases like pneumonia and bacterial or viral scours. Cryptosporidia and coccidia can also be involved.

The following may help you to source and manage calves with the best welfare and production outcomes. Paying a bit more for calves that have had the best start in life and when you have had a chance to speak and get advice from the farmer is a better investment. Introducing calves to a new life takes care and attention to detail and this starts with good calf selection.

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Before buying a bobby calf

Rearing a bobby calf is not easy. It can be time consuming and require a meticulous level of nutrition and hygiene to ensure they do not become ill. However, getting it right can be a rewarding experience.

Before purchasing bobby calves, you should ensure you have:

- Knowledge, equipment, infrastructure, time and budget to provide suitable feed, water and husbandry care. Initially they will require milk several times a day and access to grass/hay and calf meal.
- Appropriate transport.
- Appropriate shelter and bedding.
- A clear plan as to why you are buying bobby calves, what market you are aiming for, what age and weight you want to get them to etc.

Calves don't stay small forever! You should ensure you have suitable facilities on your property for all stages of the animals' life: This includes water sources., cattle yards with working cattle crush, adequate fencing and appropriate sized paddocks with adequate and suitable pasture for the number of adult animals you will have on the property. A budget for husbandry and veterinary attention is also required and to cover feed costs over winter when pasture growth is minimal or during periods of drought.

Transport Checklist:

To be transported for sale bobby calves must be at least five days old, bright and alert, actively mobile and with no signs of disease such as scours, nasal discharge, cough etc.

- Bobby Calf vendors must have a system in place to accurately age and ensure calves are older than five days before they can leave the farm. The navel must be dry and the hooves firm and worn flat, and not bulbous with soft unworn tissue. These are additional indicators the calf is older than five days and thus able to travel.

- The calf must have been fed milk within the last six hours.
- The calf must has an NLIS tag (it is illegal for cattle to leave a property in Australia without an NLIS tag).
- The Producer must have completed a Bobby Calf National Cattle Vendor (NVD) Declaration.
- If purchasing direct from the calf producer you must transfer the NLIS tag to your property within seven days
- The Producer has completed a National Cattle Health Declaration. This is an optional but very valuable step as it will give you a lot of additional information on the management of the calf to date.
- You have an appropriate livestock trailer that has protection from the heat and cold (eg wind protection on front and shade protection on top) and the trailer has thick bedding (15cm) and room to lie down.
- Transport is less than six hours

Housing/Shelter and Hygiene Checklist:

- Calves must be provided with suitable housing that gives a minimum 2.5m^2 space per calf. Has good drainage, protection from wind, draughts, rain and heat and with good ventilation for air quality. Calves do best in environments that are clean and between 12-23 degree Celsius
- Comfortable dry bedding eg. rice hulls or sawdust is important as is regular bedding replacement or top up, when it becomes soiled or wet. Soiled bedding in sheds can predispose calves to pneumonia and scours.
- Thoroughly clean feeding equipment after each use and clean water containers regularly.
- Calves are still developing a competent immune system. Thus, good biosecurity to prevent diseases entering the calf area is important. Ensure handlers clothes, boots and hands are always clean. Regularly disinfecting rails, partitions, walls and gates in calf pen can also help to reduce diseases that calves might be exposed to.
- If you have previously raised calves, completely disinfecting the calf area and replacing all bedding prior to the new batch entering is a key step to protect the next calf group.
- Hygiene is important for your own health as well as the calf. Many of the diseases (*cryptosporidium, salmonella* and *E.coli*) that can make your calf ill can also affect humans, particularly children. Always wash your hands with soap and water after feeding or touching the calves and do not handle calves if you are ill.

Nutrition

Calf feeding is important to allow adequate rumen development and to ensure optimum growth and health. Calves fed a suitable quantity and quality diet have less disease. Some of the things you will require include:

- Quality milk replacer. Multiple brands are available from local produce stores in the region.
- Sufficient means to provide milk or replacers to the calves - eg. bottles, 'calfeteria', troughs with a minimum 35cm head space per calf at troughs. Troughs should be raised off the ground to prevent contamination.
- 24hr access to fresh clean water.

A guide on how to feed:

- A quality milk replacer is essential
- Calculate the daily intake per calf from the nutritional information for the particular product you are using. As a guide, the calf should get approximately 10% of its bodyweight in milk – ie a 35kg calf should get approximately 3.5L per day, split between feedings. As the calf grows, adjust accordingly.
- Feed the warm milk replacer twice a day (morning and night) until four weeks of age.
- Introduce small qualities of concentrates (a handful per calf per day of a high-quality grain or calf starter) from one week old. This is crucial for rumen papillae development. Commercial calf concentrates can be sourced from your local produce store. Build up to a kilo per day per calf for weaning at three months.
- Introduce quality fibre (hay, chaff) from about three weeks old.
- Allow paddock access from four weeks old.
- Between 4 weeks and 12 weeks of age, continue feeding the warm milk replacer once a day
- Aim to wean the calves from milk when they are consuming the hard feed consistently at a minimum of 12 weeks old or 100 kilo live weight.

Everyone who handles calves must treat them with care and patience at all times and protect them from the elements and disease.

Care of bobby calves is an important part of the social licence all Dairy and Beef farmers have with the community. This means that the community trusts and expects Bobby calf welfare to be maintained while they are being sold or transited.

This information is adapted from Dairy Australia.com.au Rearing Healthy Calves Manual. Thanks to Liam Mowbray, Veterinary Graduate, Charles Sturt University.

Questions to ask the Dairy Producers before buying bobby calves

Dairy producers are adept at raising dairy calves and are a great source of information to help you manage the transition that these calves must undergo when leaving the dairy farm. Ensure you are familiar with the steps the bobby calf producer has undertaken to produce a viable, healthy and robust calf.

QUESTION	WHY IT'S IMPORTANT
Has the calf had 2L of high quality colostrum twice before 12 hours old?	Colostrum provides maternal antibodies for prevention of some diseases and will assist calf health and growth rate. Scours maybe associated with calves that did not receive colostrum quickly after birth
Did the colostrum come from cow(s) who received a clostridial disease booster vaccine 10 weeks prior to calving?	Cows start producing colostrum five weeks before calving. They take an additional five weeks after vaccination booster to reach maximum antibody levels. Therefore, cows should receive vaccination booster 10 weeks before calving so that calves get the maximum antibody protection against disease. This ensures your calf has initial protection from clostridial disease for the first 8-12 weeks of life until you vaccinate the calf.
What other vaccines are used on the farm to protect against common diseases such as Pestivirus or some causes of scours such as Salmonella or Rotavirus?	Every Farm has a different level of exposure to a range of endemic diseases. Pestivirus for example is a common disease and you should know the pestivirus status of cattle coming to your farm. A completed National Cattle Health Declaration is a simple way to ascertain this type of information.
Has the calf been housed in a clean, dry shelter?	Calves exposed to mud and manure are at greater risk of developing common calf illnesses.
Has the calf or its pen mates shown any signs of sickness or disease?	Calves that are lethargic, not suckling, dehydrated, scouring or coughing, are ill. These calves should be left in the care of the birth farm. Talk to the farmer and your veterinarian how to manage these issues should they appear.
Has the calf been fed any milk from cows which may contain treatment residues?	Feeding calves milk containing residues means the calf will have a withholding period before it can go to a processing facility. A completed Bobby Calf NVD is legally required to capture this information.
What is the Johnes Disease Dairy Score of the Dairy Farm and is that compatible with the Johnes Disease Score of your farm?	Johnes Disease is a chronic, incurable disease of adult cattle caused by the bacteria Mycobacterium paratuberculosis. Symptoms include diarrhoea, reduced milk production, weight loss and eventually death. The disease is frequently passed from cow to calf unless specific calf rearing controls are in place on that farm.

HERE'S HOW TO CONTACT YOUR DISTRICT VET:

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