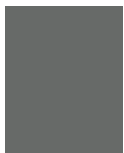


# Calf rearing



By FIONA MAKIN

**H**ave you ever been to a dairy farm or spent time with a dairy farmer? Most likely the answer is no for 2 reasons. Firstly, the number of dairy farms in Australia is continually dwindling with the reality of sons and daughters choosing not to work the hard life of a dairy farmer like their parents. Secondly, the amount of work required on a dairy farm can be overwhelming: milking twice daily, irrigating, calving, managing animal health, the business and the rest of the property – it doesn't provide a lot of opportunity for free time to socialise.

Given the demands placed on dairy farmers, the availability of quality calf rearing services is not only significant in time savings but also in the ensured care of one of their most important assets.

Jannine Brennan and Fiona Skene founded their calf rearing business, B&S Calf Rearers, in Geelong servicing Victoria's Western District 4 years ago and haven't looked back. Each have had a long history in farming, especially dairy, and saw an opportunity in the area. "We are very passionate about our industry. We can see a real need for more calf rearers. Our dairy farmers have such a huge job running their farms seven days a week, 365 days of the year. They are up against it with the massive running costs of today. Then when the calving season starts, there is another job to contend with, on top of their already huge working day. We are hoping to help our fellow farmer by introducing an alternative."

This year, the pair are expecting up to 1000 calves that will be either contract reared for dairy farmers or directly purchased by Jannine and Fiona. The figure is a testament to the need for this type of business supporting dairy farmers across Australia.

Calf rearing is an important service that supports the Australian dairy industry and promotes best practice in dairy calf management.

## How it works

- n Calves are picked up at a minimum of seven days of age using a small truck which is tarped and ventilated with a hydraulic hoist on the back for easy transfer. The calves are guided onto the platform, raised to tray level and then walked into their pens lined with fresh straw. The calves are penned into their own dairy groups to help reduce the spread of disease.
- n Once the calves reach the farm, they are housed in large eco shelters. The calves are weighed and given an ADE shot, a dose of probiotic paste and 2 litres of electrolytes. The calves are individually penned for the first 2 weeks and fed once daily with a milk replacer and have access to adlib water, straw and calf meal.
- n Week 3: The calves are grouped into pens of 6 to help the calves learn to socialise.
- n Week 4: The calves are introduced to pens of approx 15, where they have access to outdoor paddocks and they are fed milk until 7 weeks of age.
- n Calves are then weaned from milk and progress to outdoor paddocks with a shelter, pasture, as well as their adlib straw, calf meal and water. Once the calves reach 120kg, they are put into larger pasture paddocks with a daily ration of calf meal, and adlib straw and water.
- n Once the calves reach weights of 120kg - 180kg, the contracted calves are moved onto larger grass growing properties.
- n Their stock of F1 heifers are grown out and eventually sold onto larger farms for breeding.
- n Their stock of F1 steers are grown up to a minimum of 150kg and purchased by local farmers throughout the area.

The calf rearing property is on 160 acres. Approximately 20 acres has been set up to cater for the intensive part of the operation. There are 2 eco shelters, 30m x 10m, with 2 more under construction. The roofs are made from a canvacon material which is very commonly used in animal housing. The shelter frames are a saw tooth design which helps with ventilation, and the wall can be opened and closed to cater for any changes in the weather. There are many small paddocks, each with their own shelter, water and pasture. Most of the infrastructure has been bought from clearing sales and through the classifieds to help to keep set up costs down.



## Costs for dairy farmers

The costs vary, depending on the farmers needs. Many aspects are taken into consideration when rearing a calf, e.g. is the calf going to be a future milking cow, or is the calf going to be grown out for beef?

## Support

Jannine and Fiona work closely with the Department of Primary Industries and specialist vets and nutritionists in the day to day operation of their farm.

The Department of Primary Industries vets have been particularly useful in advice relating to maintaining disease free calves and guidance to create a comfortable environment for the calves.

Specialist vets and nutritionists have been vital to the business success. Jannine said "We owe so much of our calf rearing success to the advice and planning given by these professionals. It is vital in this field that you establish a trusting relationship within these areas. Our vets are only a phone call away for advice, and our nutritionists make up our specialised calf meal to suit our calves diet."

## Industry practice

Guidelines for calf rearing can be found through your state Department of Primary industries as well as from the Professional Calf Rearers' Association of Australia.

When asked to comment on the RSPCA press release (see next page), Jannine said "I found the article to be quite confronting. As we only collect our calves off farm, we are not exposed to the market situation. I would like to say that it is paramount that all dairy farmers are not judged from this article. I am very proud to say the farmers we deal with are very caring individuals. The calves we pick up are of excellent health, and clearly cared for in a proper manner."

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COLOSTRUM

Colostrum feeding is crucial to ensure the survival and health of young calves. When purchasing calves to rear you should always confirm that it has been administered.

In the instances where it has not been possible to administer colostrum to a new calf, it should be sent to the abattoirs to reduce any prolonged suffering.

Further information:  
B&S Calf Rearers -  
[calfrearers.com.au](http://calfrearers.com.au)

Professional Calf  
Rearers' Association of  
Australia -  
[calfrearers.asn.au](http://calfrearers.asn.au)

Calf Notes -  
[calfnotes.com](http://calfnotes.com)



# Bobby calf welfare

By MELINA TENSEN  
Scientific Officer  
(Farm Animals)  
RSPCA Australia

**Y**ou may have seen young dairy calves lying in their small pens at yards or calf scales. But have you ever wondered where these calves come from and why they're up for sale?

In order to produce milk, cows have to give birth to a calf every year. In the commercial dairy industry, most calves are separated from their mother within 12 hours of birth to reduce the risk of infection and/or spread of disease. Once separated from their mother, calves are transferred to a shed where they are supplemented with colostrum and then fed milk or milk-replacer, usually once a day.

All bull calves (males) and a percentage of heifer calves (females) are considered to be a by-product of dairy farming. Most – the 'bobby calves' – are slaughtered at a few days old. Around 800,000 calves are slaughtered in Australia each year with around three quarters of these being killed in Victoria alone. Once slaughtered, the calf is processed for human consumption (e.g. veal, baby food and processed meat) with the hide used in the high-value leather market.

Because bobby calves are destined for slaughter at a very early age, they are generally not treated with the same consideration as the more valuable replacement heifers or bull calves for rearing. Housing facilities, bedding, cleanliness and general care can vary considerably depending on the calf's purpose.

Young calves destined for slaughter are required to be in their fifth day of life before being transported to the abattoir. A truck will generally collect calves from the dairy farm twice a week during calving season and deliver them to a central collection point (calf scale) or directly to the abattoir. Calves delivered to a calf scale are collected and then transported to the abattoir.

The RSPCA has a number of concerns relating to the

handling, transport, assembly and slaughter of bobby calves. These include the fact that young calves are physiologically incapable of withstanding the stress, strain and rigours of transport. They also do not yet have the following behaviour required for easy loading and unloading which may result in rough handling. Because it is difficult to accurately determine a calf's age, compliance with the minimum age requirement for transport is difficult to enforce. Trucks used for transporting bobby calves from farm to saleyard or abattoir provide little protection from the elements, no bedding and barely room to lie down. Holding yards at calf scales and abattoirs are concrete or dirt-floored with no bedding and no protection from the elements. On top of this, young calves are deprived of milk for extended periods. In theory, a calf could be fed on farm between 6 and 10am, be collected and transported to a saleyard, then be collected and transported to an abattoir, be killed on the following day – sometimes as late as 3pm – and all that time having gone without feed.

To remove the risk of potential suffering experienced by unwanted bobby calves from the day they are born to the moment they are stunned prior to slaughter, the RSPCA advocates the euthanasia of bobby calves on farm. Where transport is considered necessary, the preference is direct consignment to the abattoir at 10 days old (rather than the 5 days currently permitted) and slaughter as soon as possible upon arrival, with a maximum time off feed of 12 hours (rather than the 30 hours proposed by the dairy industry).

The RSPCA believes that, all in all, bobby calf welfare is poor. Few consumers would be aware of the plight of the bobby calf and, until conditions are significantly improved, there is definitely a reason to cry over spilt milk.