



Background

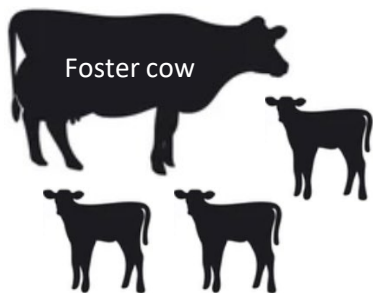
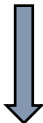
Cow-calf contact (CCC) systems, where calves are housed together with dairy cows, are being developed and evaluated to enable animals to express more natural maternal and suckling behaviour. Calves in CCC systems generally have greater growth rates, especially before weaning, than conventionally reared calves. Different management strategies are based on the amount of maternal contact and suckling allowed. Here a 'Foster' CCC system is described.

How does the strategy work?



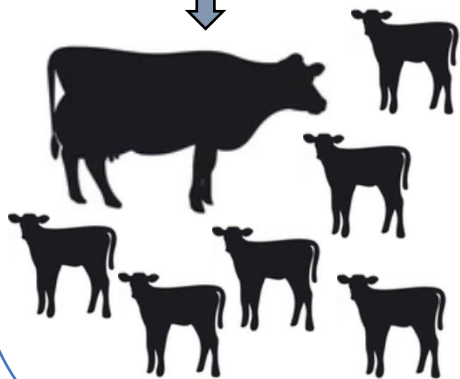
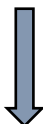
Whole day dam-calf contact

- Dam-calf pair together 1 week
- Unrestricted suckling
- Cow access to milking robot



Foster CCC system

- Foster cow (↑ somatic cell)
- 2 – 3 foster calves
- Housed in groups of 5 foster cows
- Unrestricted suckling access
- Gradual weaning when youngest calf 2 to 2.5 months



Weaning process foster groups

- One foster cow removed per week
- At 3 months, 1 foster cow with all (up to 12) calves
- Moved to smaller pen with fence-line contact
- Complete separation at 4 months
- Group housing calves

Positive features

- More natural maternal and suckling behavior
- Improved animal welfare, specifically calf welfare
- Greater growth rates, especially before weaning
- Potential increased first lactation milk production caused by the greater pre-weaning weight gain

Be careful, especially on these points

- Decrease in saleable milk yield (Calf may drink +15 L milk/day)
- Additional operation cost for labour and management
- There can be a challenge for calf health (e.g. cryptosporidiosis, pneumonia, and mortality)

Specific advice

- Implement systematic calf monitoring; Check if newborn calves get enough milk
- Consider restricting the physical contact

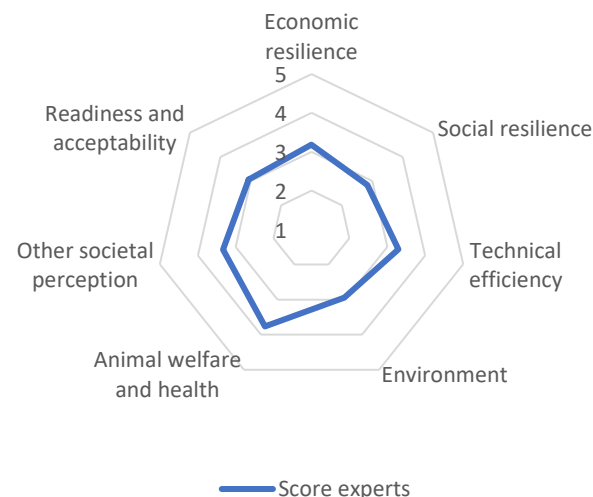
Equipment involved?

Initial investment for

- space allowance per calf
- separation facilities for cows and calves
- in case of AMS system: a dam-calf pen with access to the AMS during the first weeks after parturition
- a calf creep



Assessment of method



Quote of the farmer:

“This way, cow-calf contact systems, of farming is the future”

