Tethering Method Keeps Calves Healthier

Low cost calf-tethering is "definitely the only way to go," when it comes to managing baby calves, according to Melvin and Nancy Abel of Greenwood, Wis.

Tethering is safe and humane when done properly, they say.

Over the past four years, the couple has used this system to raise 120 baby calves with zero mortality. Even with no buildings for the young animals, which are tethered for four to six weeks between April and June, the calves thrive. According to the Abels, this method has been more successful than any other method they've ever tried.

Part of their secret is the simple, trouble-free tether stake that Melvin designed and now makes to sell.

The 4-ft. stake is made from 1/2-in. pipe (old waterline), with a 16-in. section of angle iron welded horizontally about 18 in. from the bottom. When the stake is pounded into the ground, the crossbar prevents it from spinning.

The calf wears a leather dog collar with an 8-ft. length of plastic-coated 5/32-in. steel cable attached. It's similar to a dog leash, with a snap on each end.

The couple warns that the cable should not be any thinner than this or it will likely wrap around the stake and "knot up."

The other end of the cable snaps onto a 3-in. ring that's threaded over the stake and turns freely. The bigger this ring is, the better, according to Abel, because it ensures that the calf can travel freely in any direction around the stake without the tether cable becoming twisted around the stake.

Abel adds that an area of grass under the stake should be mowed because long grass may interfere with the ring's ability to turn.

Part-way up the stake, he bolts two 8-in. dia. by 4-in. deep hard rubber pans for water and grain. Above that, Able mounts a removable wooden block (a short piece of 2 by 8), by drilling a hole in it and sliding it over the top of the stake.

The block provides a place to hang a plastic 2-quart nursing bottle for milk feedings (50/50 milk replacer and colostrum purchased from dairy farmers), using its wire harness. A covered screw in the stake keeps the block in place, preventing it from spinning while the calf nurses.

Abel charges $55 each (plus S&H) for his self-styled tethering stakes.

"Tethering calves is the smartest way to go because there's no cost for buildings, no bedding and no need to haul manure since they spread it themselves. It's extremely cost effective," he says. "We buy baby dairy-cross calves from seasonal dairymen whenever possible, and have tethered up to 40 at a time."

Abels says, if desired, his system can be used until October, when harsher weather becomes an issue.

"After a month to six weeks of tethering, we move them into milk-fed community pens with four to six calves per group for another couple of weeks before gradually starting to rotationally graze them. When they're a year and a half old, we sell them as 700 to 800-lb. feeders," Melvin says. "It was a learning process along the way, but now we have a system that works really well. You have to be patient for the first couple of days teaching the calves to drink from the bottles."

Photo by Jane Fyksen, Agri-View

Calf wears a leather dog collar with an 8-ft. length of plastic-coated steel cable attached. It's similar to a dog leash, with a snap on each end.

Abel says "phenomenal calf health" is achieved by isolating the animals from each other (preventing physical contact).

"Sickness can be detected and treated quickly without contaminating the other calves," he explains. "The calves weather even nasty rain storms with no problem and being outside like that keeps them clean and shiny."

During his three-month tethering period, Abel can usually run two to three calves consecutively on the same stake without moving it. The only time he needs to relocate a tether is if the area becomes too muddy.

"I got the idea for tethering calves from my son, Adam, who's a grazing specialist. He heard about it from another Wisconsin farmer who's been trying it. Apparently, it's also quite popular in Argentina."

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Composters Built From Old Fuel Tanks

Ben King turns old fuel and water tanks into "continuous fill" compost tumblers that turn out fully composted material in just 7 to 10 days.

At about 5 ft. in diameter and 12 ft. long, King's average tumbler isn't as big as some commercial compost makers. But once it's up and running it puts out a continuous half yard of finished compost a day from roughly twice as much raw material.

"You fill it from one end, and as you rotate it, the material works to the other end," says King.

He usually rotates his tumbler twice a day. Compost time depends on the materials, how much is added, and how often it's turned.

King's tumblers are mostly recycled 2,000-gal. tanks. He cuts holes in both ends, installs flighting and discharge paddles inside, and mounts them level on a steel frame with wheels that follow tracks on the tank's sides. He uses either electric or hydraulic motors to turn the tumblers.

Buyers of the tumblers install augers or elevators for filling the unit. At the discharge end, setups vary depending on end use and storage options.

"Some drop it into a conveyer, and it goes into a forage wagon or other vehicle," says King. "Others drop it into a container on a pallet and haul it away when it's full."

King has custom built larger tumblers, including an 8 by 26-ft. unit at a New York vineyard and winery. The largest was 10 by 30-ft. He says his smaller units are ideal for stables or homesteads with a few cows. They are sized right to handle about three wheel barrels per day and sell for $2,000.

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Large fuel and water tanks are turned into "continuous fill" compost tumblers, driven by electric or hydraulic motors.

Low-Cost Cab

"I used 1-in. steel tubing, sheet metal and plexiglass to build a cab for my Kubota B5200 4-WD, 13 hp tractor. It keeps me warm during the winter, and I can easily remove all the doors and windows to stay cool during summer," says Glenn Dawson, McConnelsville, Ohio.

The cab sides and roof are made from sheet metal. There are doors on both sides and large plexiglass windows on all four sides. The doors are removed by pulling a pair of hinge pins, while the windows are removed by loosening some bolts and clamps.

The back side of the cab bolts to the tractor's rollover bar, while the front side of the cab bolts to the floorboard. A piece of canvas hangs down from the back side to keep cold air out.

"I really like it," says Dawson. "I use the tractor for mowing and for clearing snow off my 400-ft. long driveway. The fan on the tractor's water-cooled engine provides heat. It stays warm enough inside the cab to melt the snow off my boots. During winter I cover both sides of the tractor with canvas housing, and I also cover the grille on both sides with duct tape to direct heat toward the cab."

Using 1-in. steel tubing, sheet metal and plexiglass, Glenn Dawson built this cab for his Kubota B5200 4-WD, 13 hp tractor.

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