

Measurement to Management: Tracking Heifer Weights

Heifer programs are one of the most expensive parts of our dairy and sometimes one of the least monitored areas. They are often not monitored until after an issue or a change is made. The first step to monitoring this area is to record disease incidence, treatments and deaths. The next step can be weighing heifers. Tracking heifer weights is a relatively low cost and easy way to add

To improve the chances that a heifer enterprise is healthy and profitable, start with monitoring the basics.

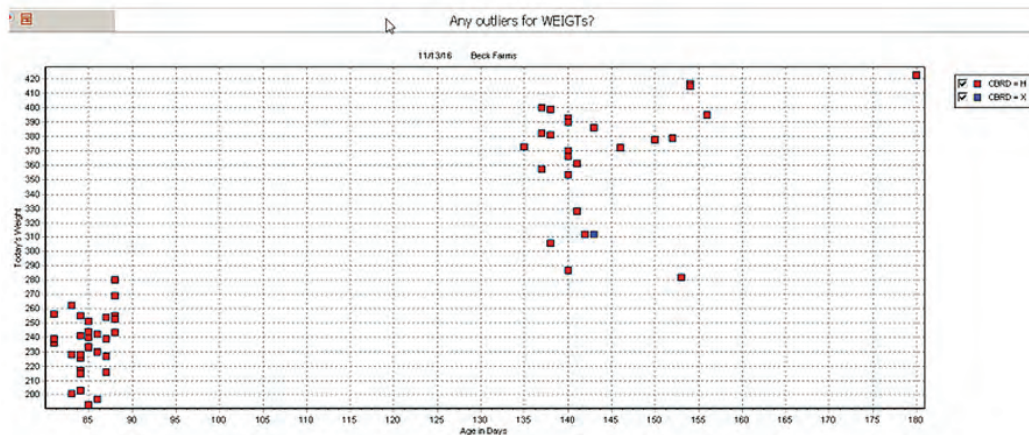
relevant information to a heifer management program and potentially add income to the bottom line. Weighing heifers and tracking their growth allows us to see how the current program is performing and how to make changes accordingly.

Why weigh heifers?

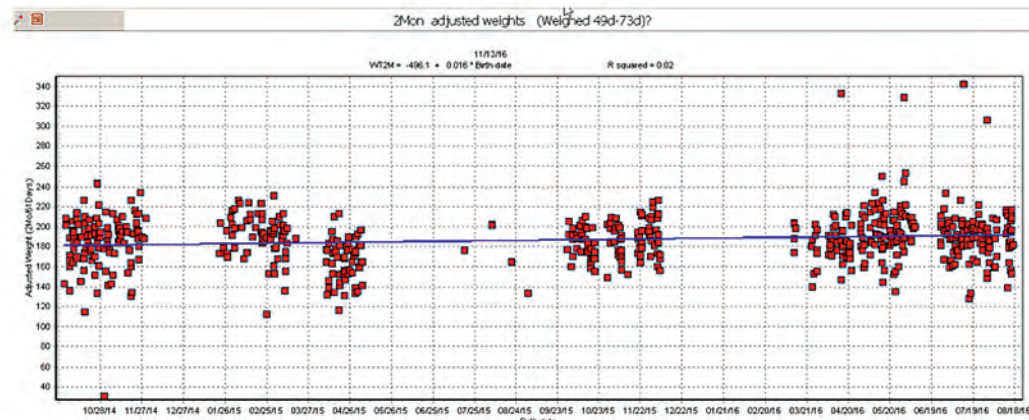
It is commonly accepted that heifers who weigh more at calving, and those who have grown quickly, will produce more milk, not only during their first lactation, but throughout their lifetime. Larger calves also carry more reserves to ward off or minimize the severity of calving illnesses. Often, changes are made to rations and programs with the hopes of achieving these goals. There is an actual cost to raising larger heifers. They will need to eat more to grow more, and farms may need to change how animals are managed or what is fed. Real-time data is necessary to monitor changes. Tracking body weight will help provide the necessary information to evaluate whether there was a significant savings in growth time or if there was a positive response.

How do we weigh?

The first step is to decide



Dairy Comp report reviewing weights after weigh day. This allows us to check for outliers that might not be performing to our expectations. They are possible cull candidates.



Dairy Comp report looking at weights for heifers that were weighed between 49 and 73 days of age. This allows us to review the impact of our management changes.



Custom weighing solution for calves.

how many times heifers will be weighed. Generally, three to four weights are needed for an accurate picture of growth and response in a herd. Common times to weigh heifers are at birth, weaning, moving to the breeding pen, and at pregnancy confirmation. Once at what age is decided, the next decision is what hardware to purchase.

It is important to purchase the correct type of hardware. Where scales are located and the process of weighing will vary depending on a farm's situation. Scale systems are modular and easily adapted. The scale indicator, which captures the weights, can be moved and shared at several locations and weighing stations. The scale indicator is lightweight and can be charged in an office or plugged in at the platform.

This allows the flexibility of having several permanent stations or having a movable weight crate. If desired, height markings can be made at the weigh stations. Height can also be measured and recorded at time of weighing.

Farms that have (Radio-frequency identification) RFID tags on their heifers can incorporate them into the weighing process. An RFID wand can be paired with the scale indicator. This will increase the speed and accuracy of weighing sessions. If farms do not have RFID tags, they can key in the animal IDs.

Once weighing is finished, the scale indicator needs to be taken back to the Dairy Comp office. The scale indicator is connected to the computer, and with a few key strokes, the weights and heights

can be loaded into Dairy Comp.

What do we do with the data?

Weigh day isn't finished when the weights are loaded into Dairy Comp. The data needs to be reviewed and used. Without this final step there is no gain from the weighing process. New modules have been created in Dairy Comp for easy data review. The graphs show results, positive or negative, of changes. Farmers can also use the graphs to create a work list of animals that aren't meeting weight goals. These animals need to be evaluated. Is there an issue of data accuracy or are there heifers that aren't meeting growth goals?

Farms need about four months of data before data is actionable. Once animals are identified as "poor doers," action needs to be taken, including culling. These animals will never produce as much milk as their peers without waiting for them to calve and start their first lactation. Another year of raising the heifer and the costs associated with it do not need to be invested.

To manage heifers better and improve the chances that the heifer enterprise is healthy and profitable, start with monitoring the basics, including keeping good records of inventory, culling, disease, treatments, and feeding. Heifer weights can then be added to a management scheme to provide even more valuable data. With the tools in place to monitor these activities, positive results are likely to follow.

For more information, contact your Dairy One Farm Service technician or email support@dairyone.com. □

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