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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

4-H Bucket Calf Housing

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The 4-H Bucket Calf Project is designed to introduce youth 7 to 12 years old to beef and dairy 4-H projects. By allowing younger children the experience of working with a smaller, less intimidating size of animal, they become comfortable with beef and dairy cattle as they grow. This is designed to be a short-term project with calves purchased in May and finalized with showing at the local county fair.

A bucket calf is an orphan or newborn calf purchased when they are 1 to 10 days old. The calves may be male or female, beef or dairy. The calves are started on a bottle (or bucket) and nipple.

Calves should be purchased between May 1 and May 30 of the current year. Counties can tag the calves at the end of May or the first of June to verify ownership. This may be done at a central location or tags may be given to club project leaders who tag the calves for participants.

Housing for your calf is a critical consideration because it affects the environment. Good housing provides (1) a dry bed, (2) shade, (3) has good ventilation, and at the same time is (4) draft free. If these conditions are provided, your calf should not be under any environmental stress. Several housing types are available, which will provide good environmental conditions.

Calves should be housed individually to help prevent the spread of diseases (prevent nose to nose contact); to be able to determine how much dry feed they are eating; and to prevent calves from sucking each other. Individual pens may be used in an existing building (horse stalls work great), in elevated floor crates (like a swine feeding floor), or in calf hutches.

Calf hutches are the most common housing system used by dairy farmers in Oklahoma. Calf hutches (fiberglass or PVC) may be purchased through commercial dealers. Building a hutch of your own is very easy and requires little expense or expertise. Hutches provide the environmental conditions necessary for raising healthy calves. And, it is the least expensive housing system. Although a calf hutch might appear to be cold and drafty, the three solid sides of the hutch prevent wind from blowing through it. Calf hutches should be bedded with straw or shavings to provide a dry bed for the calf.

An outside pen that measures approximately 4 by 8 feet will allow the calf to have some exercise, and it will have enough surface area so that it will stay reasonably dry. Your pen should be made of good quality woven wire fence or wire cattle panels to protect your calf from predators (dogs, coyotes). A gate that is easy to open and lock is very important.

Hutches should be open to the south in the winter to avoid north winds and to let sunlight in during the day. Stacking straw or hay bales on the north side of the hutch will provide an excellent windbreak. During the summer, the hutch should face the north to provide more shade. A commercial hutch could also be set on 4-inch blocks to allow more air movement. Oklahoma summers can be brutally hot. If possible try to place your calf hutch under a shade tree or use a nylon tarp to provide extra shade.

Water should be placed on the outside of the hutch and the water needs to be changed daily. Calves will drink more water if it is cool and fresh. Once you start to feed dry feed, place the feeder on the inside of the hutch. This keeps the feed drier and prevents the calf from slopping water into its feed.

Hutches should be moved to a clean spot between calves. If an empty hutch is not needed immediately, turn the hutch upside down and the sunlight will help sanitize it.

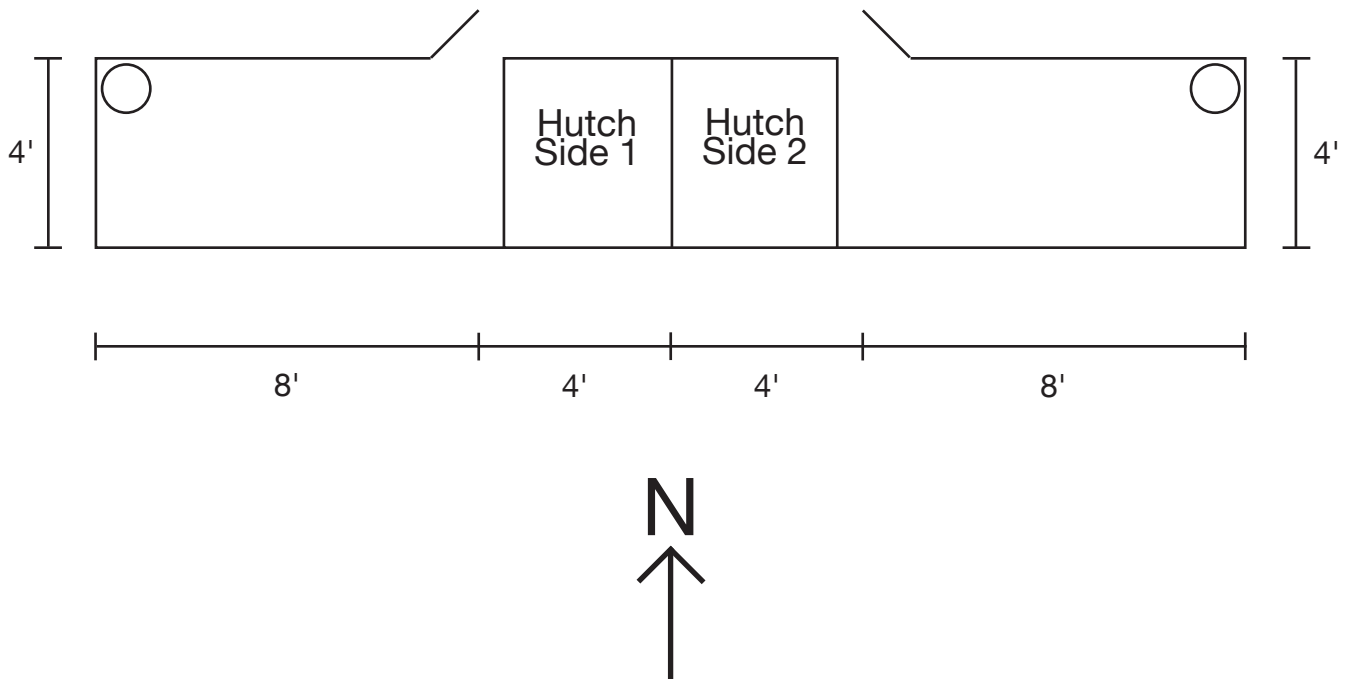
Floor pens in buildings can provide a good environment for calves if the building is well ventilated. Floor pens should be approximately 4 feet by 6 feet in size (about one-half of a horse stall). The pens should have three solid sides with a gate for the front. This will prevent drafts and nose-to-nose contact with other calves. Floor pens are not as easy to clean. Therefore, diseases may be a problem if this system of housing is used.

Figure 1 is an example pen and hutch design that works very well for two calves. The feed trough (for dry feed) should be just inside the calf hutch. The water is in a corner of the pen away from the hutch. The gate allows easy access to the pen and feed trough. The center partition in the calf hutch is a solid wall to prevent nose-to-nose contact.

Reference

Adapted from the Kansas Dairy Leaders Notebook.

Figure 1. Pen and hutch design for two calves.



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