

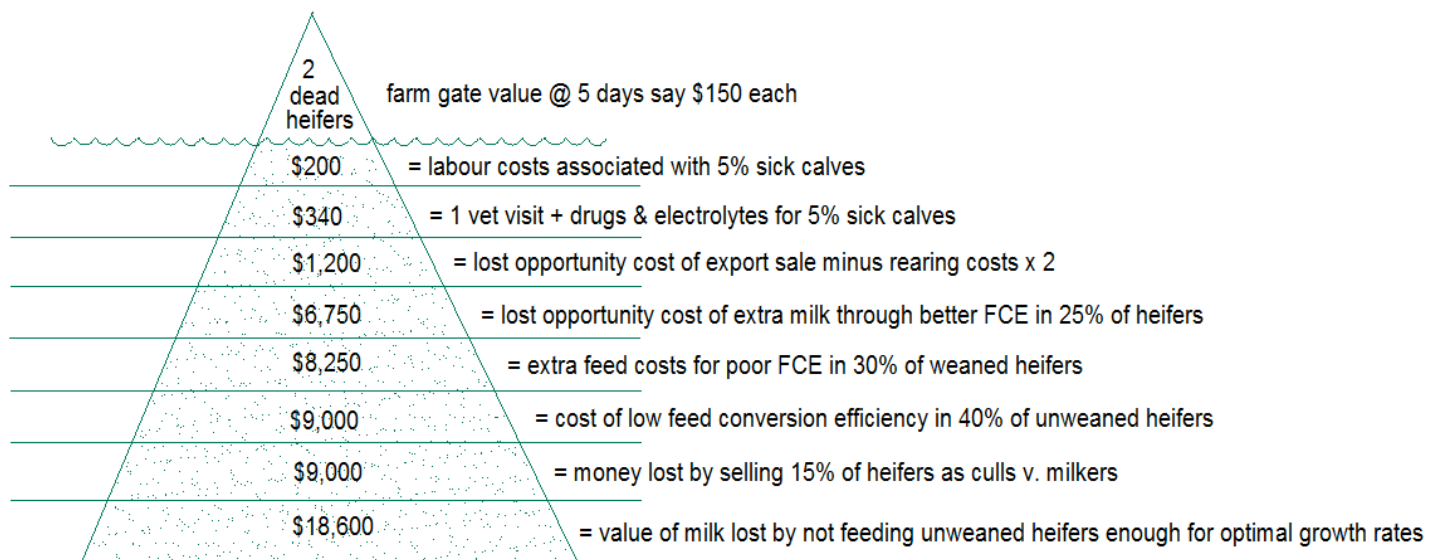
The dead calf “iceberg”.

Farmers often think that losing a few calves a year is not a big problem. In fact, dead calves are actually the tip of the iceberg. Related illness and poor feed conversion efficiencies & growth rates in surviving calves cost far more money than the value of the dead calves.

Heifers are going to cost money to rear; particularly when money is short, it needs to be spent where it will give the greatest return. Low milk prices often result in farmers attempting to save money by reducing the costs of calf feeds. Calves which are not adequately fed are more likely to become ill & die. Experience of large scale calf rearers would say that, in general, for every dead calf there are about 5 sick ones.

The death of only 2% of heifers reared is often viewed as a good result. The following illustration estimates the unseen costs and lost productivity associated with 2 deaths from a group of 100 calves. Using “middle of the road” figures based on a Holstein herd, the “iceberg” shows the hidden costs of economising on feed and other rearing inputs.

Whether the figures are exactly accurate for every herd is not important; the point is that by cutting costs to save cents now, the enterprise will be losing dollars both now and in the longer term. Long term productivity will certainly be compromised, possibly at a time when milk prices have risen and dairies are looking for maximum productivity to make up ground lost to poor prices.



The above illustration calculates the costs associated with sick calves and associated lost productivity to be a startling **\$53,340**.

A range of factors can cause an exponential increase in these costs on dairies rearing more calves. Higher percentages of deaths also result in much greater costs and productivity losses; this money can be saved by re-assessing heifer management practices.

When milk prices are low it is natural to economise in every facet of the business. The best way to economise in the area of heifers is to do a really good job. Sick calves mean that somewhere, something is not being done well; this is adding to the costs of rearing heifers. Raising healthy calves is not any more expensive up front than doing a bad job – it just means that you are spending money in different areas. It may actually mean spending less money for a better result.

To do the most economical job with young calves means:-

- attention to colostrum management,
- care with sanitation and
- feeding appropriate amounts of milk and grain.
- monitoring to evaluate the success of calf management

Older heifers need:

- to be fed supplements until they are at least 6 months old
- on-going supplementary feeding after 6 months if pasture availability and quality does not maintain target growth rates
- regular weighings to monitor progress

Even really high quality pasture alone is not adequate feed for young heifers. Calves have certainly evolved to eat grass but in nature a calf would still be receiving milk as well as nibbling grass until it is 10 - 12 months old. It is false economy to think that young calves can be weaned and put out into a paddock with no supplementary feed. A feeding regime that relies on pasture alone for freshly weaned heifers is likely to result in them growing at far less than the recommended daily gain. This is particularly so if the weather is cold and wet, as much of the energy they consume will be used to maintain body heat rather than to sustain growth. Rotational grazing of heifers will ensure that the quality of pasture available remains high and the additional heifer growth rate will more than justify the extra work involved in shifting fences.

Milk prices will lift again; when they do, farmers will need to have productive cows to recoup current losses.