



Don't put your herd's future in jeopardy

Using non-saleable milk as a thrifty feed option for your young replacement heifers can have dire consequences by spreading Johne's disease from infected cows in your herd

By Ann Godkin

Feeding non-saleable milk to calves may save money now but pose a huge risk to your herd's future. Since this milk can contain a variety of disease-causing bacteria, viruses and protozoa—including the organism that causes Johne's disease—it could sabotage other efforts to raise healthy calves.

As part of the Ontario Johne's program, participating dairy farmers complete a Risk Assessment and Management Plan (RAMP) with their vet. This helps you and your vet examine herd management practices and their effect on spreading disease—paying special attention to MAP. The RAMP highlights management gaps that allow MAP to spread. According to RAMP results so far, feeding non-saleable milk on many farms encourages the spread of *Mycobacterium avium paratuberculosis* (MAP), the cause of Johne's disease.

Prevent early infection

The Johne's program focuses on improving young calf management. This has the biggest impact on preventing future cases. Calves raised in a way that prevents early MAP infection have a good chance to grow up MAP-free.

MAP bacteria spreads from cows to calves in manure, milk or colostrum. If MAP ends up in calves' mouths, it can begin the slow, progressive intestinal infection that leads to Johne's disease in cows.

Infected manure appears to be the most common way MAP spreads to calves. However, milk and colostrum



One-third of dairy farmers won't feed non-saleable milk to their calves.

can become as great a threat as manure when a herd has multiple MAP-infected cows or cows with late-stage Johne's disease.

The RAMP closely investigates calf feeding. One question asks whether the farm feeds non-saleable, raw milk to calves and how often this is done. Non-saleable milk that you have to keep out of your bulk tank includes milk from fresh cows, cows with clinical mastitis and treated cows.

Sick or recovering cows

This milk frequently varies in composition, has abnormal consistency or colour and contains antibiotic residues. Sometimes it may appear normal but still contain a variety of disease-causing organisms. Apart from fresh cow milk, non-saleable milk most often comes from sick or recovering cows.

Among the first 1,000 produc-

ers to complete their RAMPs, about one-third said they felt strongly they would never feed non-saleable milk to calves. The rest were evenly divided among "rarely", "sometimes" and "routinely."

The wide distribution of answers suggests producers have different concerns when they decide whether to feed non-saleable milk to their calves. On-farm discussions suggest many forget it poses a disease risk to future cows.

Saving money is the main reason producers feed non-saleable milk to calves. Many have difficulty discarding what they consider good calf food. Whole milk is the perfect calf food—it was made that way. However, feeding calves cheaply with non-saleable milk can lead to a high proportion of them developing Johne's disease before their productive years as cows are completed.



For many years, when smaller herds predominated, Johne's occurred rarely. Over the last few decades, as herds have become larger, the disease has become much more common.

It spreads through herd management practices that let one MAP-infected cow pass infection on to many calves at a time. Feeding non-saleable milk can spread MAP from sick or treated cows to multiple calves.

Disease more likely

Research shows MAP-infected cows are more likely to have diseases such as mastitis, so their milk ends up in the non-saleable milk pool more often. That greatly raises the odds of milk from MAP-infected cows being fed to calves.


The Ontario Johne's program goal in calf feeding is to reduce the risk of an infected cow spreading MAP to multiple calves. Small herds often feed milk from only one cow to her own calf because they have only a few milk-fed calves at one time. In larger herds, where non-saleable milk

is frequently or routinely fed to larger numbers of calves, chances of a MAP-infected cow infecting a group of replacement heifers is greatly increased.

By examining dairy farm management practices, the RAMP looks for gaps that have let Johne's become a common disease instead of a rare, sporadic condition. It can then identify practices that block specific pathways for spreading MAP and can be used by a producer to prevent a Johne's epidemic in their herd.

Feeding non-saleable milk to calves is one of those gaps. Completion of a

full RAMP and discussion with your herd vet can highlight the threat of this practice on your farm.

Many producers have already stopped the practice. They can now preserve hard-won advantages from other calf management changes that protect their future cows from growing up infected with MAP. 

Ann Godkin, a veterinary scientist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, chairs the Ontario Johne's Industry Working Group.

Bulk tank graders updating TTR clocks

Ontario producers may have noticed bulk tank milk graders (BTMG) using their handheld computers to update the date and time on milkhouse time-temperature recorders (TTR).

A TTR's clock can become inaccurate if the unit is subject to low power supply, such as a brown-out, says Alex Hamilton, Dairy Farmers of Ontario field services manager.

The BTMG handheld device automatically updates the date and time on your TTR when your milk is picked up, he says.

Maintaining proper date and time on your TTR is important for accurate recording of CQM records, Hamilton says.

The transporter assigned to pick-up your milk will not have access to any TTR information when updating your TTR clock, he adds

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