

Animal Welfare Issues - Understand the Facts!

Getting Involved as a Practitioner - Veal Industry

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Veal production in the United States reached its peak during the 1980's and since then has been slowly declining. The number of "Special-Fed" calves processed in federally inspected plants fell from 1,106,000 in 1980 to 739,000 in 1994. This represents a decline of approximately 33%. The actual amount of meat produced over the same time period fell only by 14% due to the fact that heavier calves were being raised. Overall profitability in the veal industry has also been diminishing. Fewer companies (mostly meat packers) will control more calves as the number of independent growers continues to decline. The number of calves owned by meat packers has risen from about 10% in 1985 to approximately 50% in 1995. United States veal production is centralized in 5 states: Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, and New York account for 85% of total production. The remaining 15% is spread out over the following states: Michigan, Minnesota, Iowa, Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, West Virginia, Vermont, Mississippi and Missouri.

By U.S.D.A. definition, "Special-Fed" calves are those that are fed a milk-based liquid diet throughout the feeding period of 15 to 20 weeks. These calves are fed to a finished weight of 350 to 400 pounds. They are also referred to as Fancy, Formula-Fed, Milk-Fed or Nature Veal calves.

The veal industry is very aware of the animal welfare and food safety issues of the 1990's. The "Guide for the Care and Production of Veal Calves" was originally written in 1980 and has since been updated five times. "The guide is intended to aid the veal farmer in the successful production of special-fed veal calves. The goal of

the veal producer is to profitably raise calves under healthful and humane conditions." In 1995, ground work was completed for a two-level Veal Producer Quality Assurance Certification Program. This program involves a working relationship with a veterinarian, self-evaluation of farms, education seminars and production records.

There have been changes in veal production technology which have made a real impact. One of these changes has been the upgrade to in-depth blood profiles. Approximately 60 - 70% of calves now have blood samples analyzed by a Coulter Counter. This system provides eight parameters for each sample which will help assure the proper meat color which in turn will guarantee the highest market value. These hematology tests are being conducted by both feed companies and veterinarians.

Another recent change has been the introduction of liquid feed. In Wisconsin, by the end of 1996, nearly 80% of the calves on feed will be using a liquid finisher. This liquid finisher is delivered twice weekly to the farm in a condensed liquid form (16% Protein, 18% Fat based on 35% Solids). Sanitation is crucial and hot water requirements increase. Liquid finisher is more economical due to the fact that the expense of drying milk products to make traditional dry powder feed is removed.

Challenges and concerns which the veal industry faces today include improving record keeping, established withdrawal times, the handling of long-haul calves (those trucked more than 12 hours), and approval of new animal health care products for veal calf application.

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