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Plant Health  
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Dear BCVA secretariat,

### **Legal position on once a day feeding to young calves**

We are writing to alert you to this issue and ask that you distribute this letter to your members to remind them of the legal position on once a day feeding to artificially reared calves.

APHA is aware that concerns have been raised regarding some potential rekindled interest in feeding milk replacers only once a day to very young calves. This is driven in part by an increase in the price of milk replacer powder as well as a reduced availability of labour on some farms. In order to protect calf health and welfare, we feel it necessary to restate the legal requirements across GB encompassing Defra's and devolved governments position on this matter.

The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007, The Welfare of Farmed Animals (Wales) Regulations 2007 Schedule 6, paragraph 12 and The Welfare of Farmed Animals (Scotland) Regulations 2010 Schedule 4, Paragraph 12 all state that all calves must be fed at least twice a day. Defra's, Scottish Government's and Welsh Government's Statutory welfare codes for cattle which offer further guidance for farmers and keepers on the legal requirements, state that 'all calves should receive liquid food every day during the first four weeks of life and, in any case, until they are eating enough solid food'.

In practice, calves do not eat a sufficient amount of solid food in the first four weeks of life to constitute a feed, so calves should be fed twice a day with liquid food to satisfy their nutritional needs. Due to the time required for rumen development after birth, to enable both digestion and absorption of nutrients from solid feed, even if calves did eat sufficient quantity of solid feed, they would be unable to process it until they are a minimum of 3-4 weeks old.

Consequently, calf starter feed cannot be considered a suitable substitute for a liquid feed until calves are four weeks old and both feeds for a calf up to four weeks of age must be liquid food, otherwise the welfare of the calf will be compromised. Therefore it is an offence for calves, under 4 weeks, to only be fed with milk once a day.

Fibrous food must be fed to calves after they are two weeks old, and the quantity of such food should be increased as the calf grows. As the calf gets older, the ratio of liquid to solid food in the diet will shift towards solid food. The requirement for twice-daily feeding remains until 6 months of age. Water should be available at all times.

APHA is an Executive Agency of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and also works on behalf of the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Food Standards Agency to safeguard animal and plant health for the benefit of people, the environment and the economy.

Additionally the Farm Animal Welfare Committee (now the Animal Welfare Committee, AWC), published its Opinion on the welfare implications of nutritional management strategies for artificially-reared calves from birth to weaning in 2015, (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farm-animal-welfare-committee-fawc-opinion-on-calf-nutrition>). The Committee endorses the existing legislative requirements and recommends that “farmers must feed their calves at least twice per day up to six months of age. Farmers should not provide the daily liquid milk ration as a single feed for consumption in one meal, i.e. ‘once-a-day feeding’, during the first four weeks of life”.

It is important to note that no peer reviewed published work has been identified to indicate that there was any benefit to the calf in terms of health, nutrition or welfare from reducing feeding to single liquid feed a day at under four weeks of age. There is a legal requirement to inspect housed calves at least twice a day, which provides an opportunity for feeding at least twice a day while remaining time efficient.

Where calves are over 28 days of age, those responsible for their care must decide if the provision of solid food sufficiently constitutes a calf’s feed to ensure that feeding milk or milk replacer once-a-day meets the requirements set out in the legislation. If not, twice a day liquid feeding should be maintained. This decision must be made on a case-by-case basis, should be based on veterinary advice and recorded in the farm specific health plan.


Following collaboration between Defra and feed companies, industry bodies, veterinary associations and editors of publications the majority of UK manufacturers of calf milk replacers clarified their product-positioning and advice to reflect the guidance from Defra. However, some milk replacer products still have a once a day feeding claim in their promotional material without clarification as to its suitability. Please could your members be alert to this and advise their clients accordingly if they come across calves being fed once a day under the age of four weeks.

APHA carries out farm inspections to determine compliance with animal welfare legislation in Great Britain. Any farmer found to be non-compliant with the rules on feeding calves is at risk of enforcement action and penalties, ranging from single farm payment deductions to potential prosecutions.

In summary – calves must be fed with feed appropriate to their age twice a day till they are six months old. For calves under 4 weeks old both these feeds should be liquid food as their digestive system is unable to process sufficient solid feed, to constitute a meal, until after then.

I hope that this has fully explained the legal position. However, if you have any remaining questions then please do not hesitate to contact APHA welfare advice services ([AHWAwelfareVAs@apha.gov.uk](mailto:AHWAwelfareVAs@apha.gov.uk))

Yours sincerely,



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