



THE ADVANTAGES OF A CALF JACKET IN WINTER

As winter approaches, dairy farmers face the challenge of keeping their young livestock warm and healthy. For young calves, this is particularly crucial, as they are more vulnerable to cold stress, which can negatively impact their growth, immunity, and overall well-being. One effective tool for managing this challenge is the use of calf jackets. These specially designed jackets offer a range of benefits that can significantly improve calf health during the colder months.

1. Enhanced Warmth and Comfort

Calf jackets provide additional warmth, which is essential for young calves in winter. Newborn and young calves have limited ability to regulate their body temperature, especially during the first few weeks of life. A calf jacket acts as an insulating layer, helping to maintain a stable body temperature by trapping body heat close to the calf's skin. This reduces the energy the calf needs to expend to stay warm, allowing it to use more energy for growth and development.

2. Improved Growth Rates

Cold stress can lead to poor growth rates in calves, as they expend more energy maintaining their body temperature rather than using it for growth. By keeping calves warm, calf jackets minimize this energy expenditure, enabling calves to convert more of their feed into body mass. Studies have shown that calves wearing jackets tend to gain more weight compared to those without, particularly in colder climates.

The thermoneutral temperature for calves (1–4 weeks old) is around 20 °C. In-house research has shown that every 10 °C drop below this temperature corresponds to the loss of 1 liter of milk per day (equivalent to 150 grams of CMR). Without calf jackets, farmers may need to provide an additional kilogram of CMR per week to achieve the same growth rate. If no adjustments are made to feed or clothing, growth rates could drop by 100–150 grams ADG for every 10 °C decrease in temperature. Of course, housing also plays a significant role in mitigating cold stress.

3. Boosted Immune Function and Increased Survival Rates

Cold temperatures can suppress the immune system of young calves, making them more susceptible to illnesses such as respiratory infections and scours (diarrhea). By maintaining a stable core temperature, calf jackets support a stronger immune response. Warm, healthy calves are less likely to fall ill, reducing the need for medical interventions and ensuring long-term health. This also results in higher survival rates for young calves.

4. Cost Efficiency

While there is an initial cost for purchasing calf jackets, they can lead to significant long-term savings for farmers. The reduction in illnesses and improved growth rates result in lower veterinary expenses and more efficient feed conversion. Additionally, healthier calves grow faster, reach weaning and maturity sooner, and contribute to better overall farm productivity.

Even with the savings in CMR alone, the cost of jackets can be recouped quickly. For example, using a jacket for four weeks can save approximately 4 kilograms of CMR per calf (see point 2), which equates to 8–12 euros per calf. This means the jacket's cost is offset after use on 3–6 calves.

CONCLUSION

Calf jackets offer numerous advantages during winter, from enhancing calf comfort and growth rates to boosting immunity and reducing mortality. They are a cost-effective and practical solution for farmers aiming to improve the welfare and productivity of their young livestock. As part of a comprehensive winter management strategy, calf jackets help ensure that calves thrive even in the coldest conditions, setting them up for a healthy and productive future.