



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

Veterinary
Services

Contract Heifer Raising

National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project

There is a growing demand for information on contract heifer raising in the United States. On farms where facilities or other components of an operation are limited, contracting with someone else to raise the heifers for all or part of the replacement growing period may be a viable option.

The National Animal Health Monitoring System (USDA:APHIS:VS) has compiled information on contracting heifer raising as part of a 1991-92 study of heifer health and management, the National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project (NDHEP).

Contracts offer a number of advantages and disadvantages for both the dairy farmer and replacement grower. Relocating the heifers can give an operation room to grow with additional space to expand the herd size 25 percent or more within existing facilities. Another plus is the opportunity to specialize in milking cows or raising crops. Perhaps space isn't a problem, but if the calf and heifer part of the operation is costly or inefficient, contract heifer raising may be more practical or profitable. Raising calves off the farm may reduce risks of transmission of diseases for which older cows are the main source of infection.

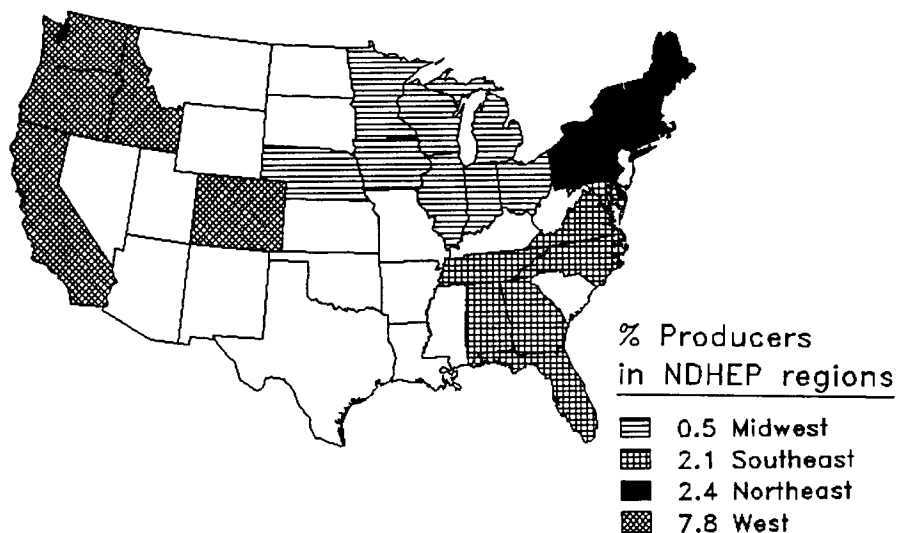
Possible disadvantages for the dairy farmer are increased risks of introducing disease into the herd

and a shortage of replacement heifers if the calf grower's results are less than adequate. Also, replacements could cost more if labor, feed, and other resources are not allocated profitably.

During the NDHEP, the National Animal Health Monitoring System looked at contract raising in the U.S. The study included 1,811 farms in 28 states¹ which were selected to represent herds of 30 or more cows in those states. These herds also represent 78 percent of the National dairy cow population.

The study results showed that 1.7 percent of the farmers have someone else raise their heifers on a contract basis. Producers that contract out are found in all areas of the country, with greater proportions in the western region (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of Dairy Producers Who Contract Heifers Out to Be Raised



¹States participating in the National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project (NDHEP): Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Note that the percentage of farmers who use this management option is small.

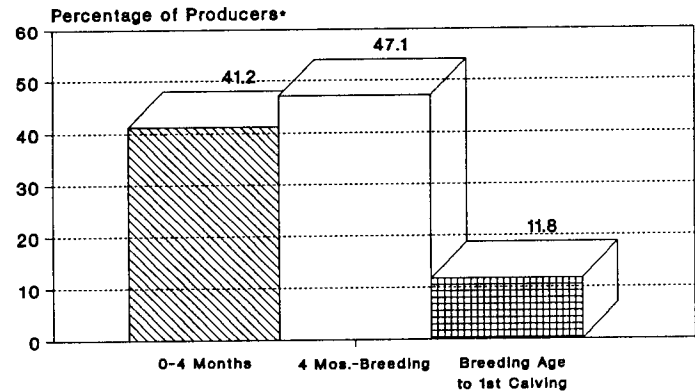
Farms that contract out are larger than the average dairy farm, with a herd size average of 233.6 cows compared to an overall average of 85.7 cows.

Those producers who contract out generally send heifers away before breeding (Figure 2). A few, 11.8 percent of the producers who contract out, send out heifers of breeding age to calving.

On the NDHEP farms, the median age newborn to 4-month-old heifers are sent out is one week of age (Figure 3). They remain on contract for a median period of 12 months.

Heifers from 4 months of age to breeding are contracted out at a median age of 6 months and remain out 15 months. They are sent out for a large part of their growth period. In most cases, the contract raisers keep the heifers until about calving time.

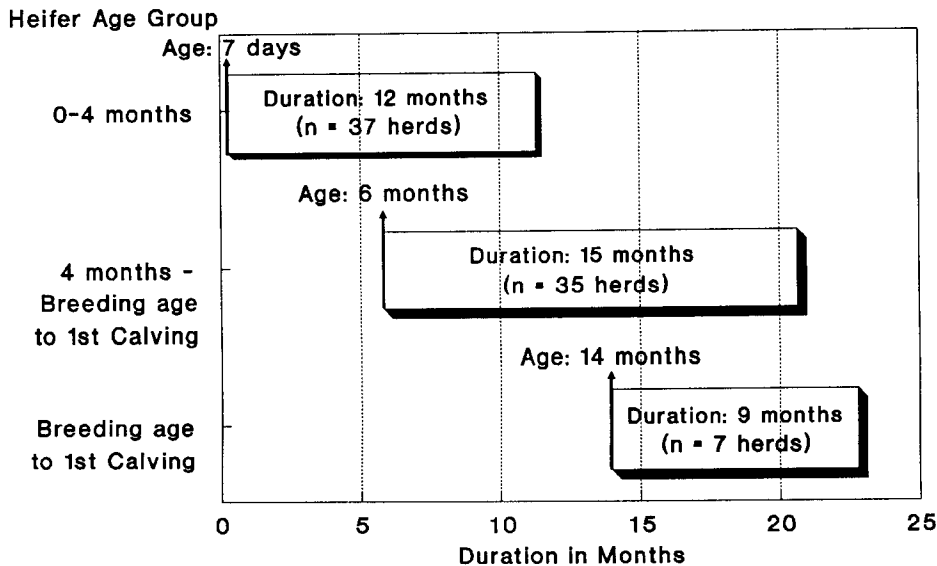
Figure 2. Percentage of Producers Who Contract Out: Age at Which Heifers Exit Herd



*Only 1.7 percent of producers contract heifers out. Does not equal 100% due to rounding.

As final NDHEP results are compiled, the information on contract raising will be combined with other health and management factors and analyzed to provide associations between calf health and management practices. 🐄

Figure 3. Heifer Contracting Practices in National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project Herds: Median Age Contracted Out and Duration of Contract



Participants in NDHEP data collection also included the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service and State and Federal Veterinary Medical Officers. The Cooperative Extension Service provided editorial assistance. For more information on the National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project and other NAHMS programs, please contact:

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