Raising healthy calves is key to maintaining your milking herd. About one million dairy calves are born in Canada every year. However, many of them die. You can increase your farm’s milk production and overall performance by successfully raising replacement cows. Researchers have developed a new on-farm advisory tool that lets you review your rearing strategies to improve calf welfare and management.

University of Guelph researcher, Elsa Vasseur, teamed up with researchers from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Université Laval, McGill University, Université de Montréal and Valacta Inc. to develop the advisory tool. Entitled Evaluate your rearing strategies, it uses a scoring system to evaluate calf management strategies and identify risky practices on the farm.

“High mortality rates can be a management issue,” says Vasseur. “By identifying risky practices used with newborn calves and using proper management practices, cattle welfare can be improved.”

After surveying 115 dairy farms in Quebec, the researchers identified risky calf management practices. Technical advisers well-known to the dairy producers conducted the interviews. Producers were asked about their operation’s overall environment, cow health and farm management. The researchers created the on-farm advisory tool based on the survey results. During a three-hour visit, they collected data and scored each farm based on predetermined targets. Some of the practices the tool focused on were colostrum management, pain control during dehorning, milk feeding and weaning, and housing. The researchers discussed the scores with the producers and provided recommendations.

Colostrum management, for example, is one of the most important strategies for ensuring healthy calves, says Vasseur. Producers should provide their calves at least three to four litres of colostrum as soon as possible after birth, she adds. She also recommends freezing and storing good colostrum for future use.

Your farm adviser or veterinarian can access the tool online.

To download the evaluation, visit www.fao.org/ag/againfo/themes/animal-welfare/newsdetail/jp/?dynafeuclid=44370.

A follow-up research project was funded by Dairy Farmers of Canada as part of the Dairy Research Cluster 1 Initiative to develop an on-farm assessment tool to improve adult dairy cattle welfare.

An advisory tool has been developed to help you improve calf welfare and management on your farm.

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