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INTERVIEW: Hokovit Champions Intensive Calf Feeding As Solution to Dairy Cattle Obesity and Inconsistent Heifer Performance

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09 May 2018- The feeding of rearing calves and heifers becomes more and more an important preoccupation for those whose livelihood depends on dairy. However, according to Swiss nutrition expert Jürg Hofmann, the key to ensuring consistent and successful outcomes for dairy cows takes place before the first calving. For him, attention and resources are to be focused on the calf. "Too extensive calf feeding (with little concentrated feed) and too intensive heifer feeding are capital mistakes that farmers often make," he asserts.

To help overturn this paradigm and set more dairy cattle on the right path for lifelong productivity, his company Hofmann Nutrition AG, HOKOVIT, has created what he refers to as "a perfect and reliable system" for dairy calf and heifer production; the HOKOVIT Super Heifer method. According to him, the development of the Super Heifer method began 15 years ago, as an attempt to confront the immense challenges in calf and heifer rearing. From health, mortality, morbidity, and growth, to size, feed conversion, fitness, and organ development, he saw simply "opportunities for optimization and improvement."

Alexander Hofmann, CEO and **Jürg Hofmann**, Owner of Hofmann Nutrition AG

Nowhere is the need for high productivity levels more acutely felt than in the dairy industry. Faced with a global glut of production, ensuring success among a farm's herd restocking is "simply a question of efficiency". Dairy producers are under great pressure and need well-developed, early-calving heifers. With the optimal first calving age of 23 months, they should be ready to meet the requirements of high performance without any problems, which they then have to deliver." The fact that the demands on the animal are far more complex than simply weight gain gives this an even greater importance; for dairy heifers, what matters is not only size and weight, but also fitness, fertility and overall health status, he notes. "It is also very important that the heifers be highly fit and not obese.".

The HOKOVIT Super Heifer method breaks down into three steps.

In the first, a newborn calf receives colostrum which has been enriched with the company's proprietary CAVICOL (a step Mr. Hofmann declares is necessary because the high milk yield of today's dairy cow breeds has "diluted" the most important protective substances of the colostrum). This is also supplemented with HOKOSTAR, a preparation which contains iron, highly digestible trace elements, and emulsions of vitamins designed to have the "ultra-fast" effect of an injection, but administered orally. "This way we insure the calf's immunity and vitality from day one" confirms Mr. Hofmann.

Step two runs from the first week of life until the age of six months, with a focus on support for the immune system and metabolism with Hokovit's micronutrition product CALVISTART. Mr. Hofmann counsels that this be accompanied by hay and straw at will, but by relatively little milk, explaining this will

not result in lost growth. "The early and unlimited use of calf-rearing feed with CALVISTART promotes not only the health status and growth, but the optimal development of the rumen and villi of the rumen, too. Heifers thus reared produce more milk from forage than calves reared conventionally." By the age of six months, Holstein animals reach 230 kg LW on average with the Super Heifer method. "And they are in top shape."

After their sixth month, animals are ready for step three. According to Mr. Hofmann, the accelerated development of the rumen means that "costly feeding from the age of seven months is not required," meaning that heifers may be fed on protein-based roughage along with micronutrient supplement SUPER HEIFER GUARD will be appropriate until the first calving. "The cattle eat more roughage, are healthier thanks to a strengthened immune system, have a much better feed conversion, achieve the desired growth, and exhibit excellent development [and improved] fertility," he claims. The heifers achieve 420 kg LW by the age of 14 months for a first insemination, and experience a first calving at the age of 23 months at a live weight of 650 kg. "We survey for these numbers again and again on different farms," Mr. Hofmann maintains. "We see the heifers reared on the Super Heifer method, which produce much more milk in the first lactation already and bring a better live performance, too. And they are perfectly healthy, fit and fertile – at even lower total rearing costs than conventionally reared dairy calves and heifers."

Three basic micronutrient-preparations, included in the products CALVISTART and SUPER HEIFER GUARD, developed and manufactured by Hofmann Nutrition are the key for full success: HOMEXAN modulates and strengthens the immune system and regulates digestion. HOKOLYSAT improves the metabolism and thus growth, feed conversion and muscle formation in young animals. G II improves the metabolism of older animals, and ensures top performance in this area. Depending on the animal's needs and age, these unique immunity and performance enhancing HOKOVIT micronutrients are combined with natural colostrum, herbal and plant extracts as well as highly bioavailable trace elements. "This is the secret" maintains Mr. Hofmann.

All told, Hofmann Nutrition's founder sees this system as a way to take the uncertainty out of the process, using a carefully calibrated diet to deliver optimal results. "We simplify calf and heifer rearing with the HOKOVIT system feeding. There are fewer mistakes and feeding-related problems as a result," he asserts. He reports that customers have validated this approach, "As a top German Holstein breeder recently told me: 'Since I started to feed the calves using the Super Heifer method, I no longer have any feeding problems, and can even have the work done by less qualified staff – there's just nothing that can go wrong anymore.'"

This has surely contributed to the program's worldwide appeal. Beyond Hofmann Nutrition's home market of Switzerland, it is in place in Germany, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Meanwhile, the company interested in rolling it out further afield; Hofmann's portfolio of products for beef, pigs, poultry, aquaculture, and pets have given the company a footprint spanning over 20 countries from the Americas to Asia, ripe territory for growth of a proven dairy concept. "HOKOVIT Super Heifer method can be used anywhere in the world, generating success stories for feed manufacturers, animal health and specialty feed suppliers, as well as, of course, dairy farms."

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