

Growing up with a friend may improve a dairy cow's lifelong welfare, says a University of Florida scientist

By Brad Buck
bradbuck@ufl.edu
UF/IFAS Communications
University of Florida

GAINESVILLE — If young dairy calves live together, they develop better social skills and may eventually produce more milk as a cow, a University of Florida scientist says.

Just like humans, dairy cows need to adapt to changing environments as they develop. That includes moving among social groups, changing housing arrangements and entering the milking parlor, said Emily Miller-Cushon, an assistant professor of animal sciences at the UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

A cow's ability to cope with these events depends on her ability to learn and interact socially with other cows, said Miller-Cushon. The more adaptable they are, the less they will be stressed and fearful in new situations and the more

milk they should produce, the UF/IFAS scientist said. This means that their welfare — which broadly refers to the animal's health and performance, emotional state and opportunity for normal behaviors like socialization — will improve.

"The most common way to raise dairy calves from birth is in individual pens, but providing early social contact may improve the long-term welfare of these animals. This should benefit sustainability of the dairy industry as a whole, improving consumer perceptions and having economic benefits for producers," Miller-Cushon said.

The cattle industry is big in Florida. In 2017, Florida's combined beef and dairy cattle and allied industries generated revenues totaling \$16.8 billion and supported

118,191 full- and part-time jobs, according to a recent UF/IFAS economic report.

Miller-Cushon will utilize a new, \$490,000 grant from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, an arm of the USDA, to fund research into early dairy cattle development. She plans to start her research later this year at the UF Dairy Unit in Hague, north of Gainesville, Florida. Similar types of data also will come from scientists at the University of Tennessee.

UF/IFAS animal scientists will collect information from calves' early lives until post-calving, evaluating pre-weaning housing methods, including putting calves in pens by themselves, with one other calf or in groups of six.

Normally, a calf is removed from the mom shortly after birth and housed in a barn with same-aged calves, she said. Farmers give it milk or milk substitute until it's about 8 weeks old. During this pre-weaning/milk-feeding stage, the calf is often housed alone. It can see and hear other calves but not touch them.

Dairy farmers commonly house calves individually because it simplifies management and may protect calves from disease, Miller-Cushon said. Yet evidence suggests that social contact during this period may benefit calf behavioral development without greatly increasing disease risk. Furthermore, no work has determined the broad effects that early calf social contact may have on animal welfare over a longer time, she said.

It is becoming more common for calves to be housed on farms in groups with same-aged companions for this early time period, and UF/IFAS researchers are going to explore the longer-term effects of this early social housing.

Previous research in young calves and across other species suggests that early social contact has critical effects on learning and development of social behavior, Miller-Cushon said.

"Cattle are social species, so early social interaction may be important for development of lifelong normal social behaviors," Miller-Cushon said.

Supervisor of Elections Lori Scott raises more money for Project Hunger program

VIERA — Supervisor of Elections Lori Scott and her staff presented a \$3,022.50 check to United Way of Brevard / Project Hunger for the "Feed & Read" summer program. The check represents donations received from Scott's 10th annual "Vote to End Childhood Hunger Bake Sale and Raffle" held May 21. "As a mother, I am very passionate about helping children in need," said Scott. "We are honored this money will make a difference in the lives of children in our community." Over the past 10 years, Scott's office has donated more than \$29,000.

This year's raffle included eight themed gift baskets and a 50-50 raffle. Additionally, Scott's office has the fifth edition of the "Election Office" cookbook available by donation. This year's cookbook is titled "Generations of Love" and is dedicated to Scott's mother who recently passed away.

Project Hunger provides access to proper nutrition over the summer months for children that receive free or reduced priced lunches during the school year. This program also provides one-on-one reading mentors and distributes new books to children throughout Brevard County.

"My staff and I wish to thank all of this year's participants for their incredible generosity," said Scott.