hey still exist, but nurse cows aren’t as common as they once were. There was a time when many stock farms and ranches kept at least one gentle, good-milking cow that was none too particular about whose calf she suckled. Often of dairy breed extraction, a really good nurse cow might feed an assortment of milk-pen calves — orphans or calves split from sets of twins.

The decline in the use of nurse cows, of course, is owed to the convenience and affordability of commercial milk replacers. Most cattle folk find it much easier and cheaper to buy a bag of powdered product, which can be mixed with water and fed to calves by bottle or bucket. Mixed and fed properly, milk replacers can be an excellent source of nutrition for suckling calves. Many different brands are available. Like nurse cows, however, milk replacer products are not all alike.

To illustrate that point, let’s consider a story shared by a producer unaware that milk replacer ingredients could make a big difference in product quality. The setting is a fairly large commercial operation, where calving season often produced a handful of calves that were bottle-fed with milk replacer. Then, for two consecutive years, all bottle calves became sick. Symptoms, including bloating and diarrhea, suggested infectious scours. Treatments were ineffective and most of the calves died.

Neither fecal sample testing nor necropsies of dead calves pointed to any particular disease agents. However, after looking more closely at the milk replacer, an investigating veterinarian suggested the problem was nutritional. While its label indicated adequate levels of essential nutrients, the milk replacer fed to the calves, during both years, had been formulated with plant-based protein sources. Sickness in calves, in this case, was resolved when the producer switched to a milk replacer formulated with animal-based protein sources.

Type of protein matters

The events related above probably provoke knowing nods among people having ample experience in the growing of dairy calves. Our story comes as no surprise to Ellen Jordan. The Texas A&M professor and Extension

Choose Milk Replacer Carefully

Check the label for protein sources and fat content.

by Troy Smith, field editor

35 Keys to Success

Herd Nutrition

PHOTO BY SAMANTHA SCHERMER FROM NJAA/ANGUS JOURNAL PHOTO CONTEST

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Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a cattleman and freelance writer from Sargent, Neb.