Thousands of baby dairy calves are starving and dehydrating to death in South Africa

Special report by Compassion in World Farming (South Africa) January 2009

Considered a waste product because they will never produce milk, newborn bull calves are often slaughtered at birth or are sold to other farmers or small holders to rear for meat.

Tens of thousands of them are off-loaded at auctions (see our video Saving Baby Ubuntu) where they are sold for next to nothing, or are given away to poor people who do not know how to feed them. Deprived of the nourishment of mother’s milk, they are expected to eat grass, pellets or watery mielimeal porridge, all of which they are too young to digest. Some die of starvation. Others develop diarrhea and die of dehydration or become stunted.

Wine farmer appeals for standards for bull calves

The plight of dairy calves came under the spotlight again recently when a wine farmer in Paarl started a new project, apart from winemaking, raising bull calves that face slaughter or neglect. Saddened that he was unable to save the lives of some of his rescued calves, he told Compassion’s SA Representative, Louise van der Merwe, that he would welcome the introduction of standards for the dairy industry’s bull calves.

“Like all living creatures, calves are extremely vulnerable after birth,” the farmer said. “It is imperative, for at least the first day that the dairy farmers allow the calves the colostrum of the mothers. After that, they must be fed either milk or an appropriate substitute until they are able to start grazing. Unfortunately, all too often, this does not happen and the calves die after a few days or weeks, even if decent grazing is available.”

The farmer added that transporting baby calves was an additional cause of many deaths. “Moving calves from the Eastern Cape to the Western Cape or even worse, to the Karoo in the first 6-8 weeks is extremely stressful to the calves and apart from the change in climate and grazing the travelling takes its toll. I believe calves should not be moved from their environment in the first 6-8 weeks. A dairy farmer should only then be allowed to sell the calves if not interested in farming with them,” he said.

Karoo Animal Protection Society

Collette Teale, Chairman of the Karoo Animal Protection Society (KAPS), commented: “In the Swellendam/Barrydale/Suurbraak area, we continue to fight a losing battle. The farmers continue to dish these baby calves out. You see them tied up and starving behind the labourers cottages everywhere you go.” (See video clip: www.animal-voice.org and click on news).

Independent Animal Welfare Inspector, Jenny Copley, who has a sanctuary for farmed animals near Grahamstown, said: “I would estimate that there are tens of thousands, and possibly hundreds of thousands of little bull calves in desperate circumstances at any given time.

Marina Evans (right), who runs an adventure and language school on a farm near Greyton, recently rescued a three-day-old bull calf that was due to be slaughtered. As a result of the experience, she hopes to set up a sanctuary for farmed animals together with a Cape Town businessman. “Despite the best round-the-clock care, we nearly lost the little calf on several occasions,” she said.
Please speak out for the baby calves

Compassion in World Farming (SA) has submitted a direct appeal to SAMPRO, MPO and Milk SA. Please add your voice by emailing them (see above) and appealing for their urgent attention to the plight of bull calves.

Dr Nico Schutte who represents the South African Milk Producers Organisation on Animal Welfare issues, said it was imperative that:

- every calf drinks his mother’s colostrum (bies) milk within the first 6 to 12 hours after birth. Without the colostrum, a calf’s immune system is severely compromised.
- every calf drinks cow’s milk or a specially formulated and recognized milk substitute until gradual weaning onto pellets at about four to six weeks old.

Dr Schutte said he believed the majority of milk producers were very responsible and practiced a high standard of calf rearing. However, he said he would use the dairy industry’s mouthpiece, The Dairy Mail, to call upon dairy farmers once again to remember that their responsibility to their bull calves does not end when the calf is sold or leaves the premises.

Dr Schutte said he would support the efforts of Compassion in World Farming (SA) for labelling on milk bottles to include information regarding standards for the bull calves born into the industry.

Deprived of their mothers’ care, the least we can do is ensure that bull calves are treated humanely.

The following companies are the main buyers of milk in South Africa and supply milk and other dairy products to retailers:

Clover, Parmalat, Dairybelle, Fair Cape, Sonnedal, Darling, Caledon, Woodlands, Lancewood, Montic, Douglasdale, Supermarket brands and others.

They are all members of SAMPRO (SA Milk Processors Organisation)

Compassion in World Farming (SA) appeals to:

- Mr Alwyn Kraamwinkel, Chief Executive Officer of the South African Milk Processors Organisation (SAMPRO): email yvonne@sampro.co.za
- The Milk Producers Organisation (MPO): email nico.schutte@mpo.co.za
- Mr Nico Fouche, CEO of Milk SA: email nico@milksa.co.za

to work with:

⇒ The Livestock Animal Welfare Coordinating Committee;
⇒ Compassion in World Farming (SA) and
⇒ the NSPCA

to develop good practice standards for the handling of bull calves.