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Core Dairy Herd Principles

Sticking to Protocols Give Long-Term Advantages

by Bob Nichols, DVM

In today's tough economic times with lower milk prices and what seems like a never-ending increase in costs associated with our operations, it's very easy for someone to say that we need to find ways to save money and reduce costs. Before we start cutting corners, we need to **ensure all management protocols are appropriate, are working and being followed**. Protocol drift in many areas is very common and if we are not careful, can and will cost each-and-every one of us more money than we realize.

Dry cow management, calving and colostrum management, reproductive programs, and feeding management are a few areas of utmost importance.

Dry cows need to have plenty of space, be comfortable, clean, well fed, up-to-date on vaccine protocols, and be in adequate body condition. If any one of these areas are insufficient, we will experience

increased metabolic problems in our fresh cows which will cost our herds dearly. Fresh cow colostrum is an excellent indicator of what's going on with our dry cow management. If you have good quality colostrum and plenty of it, chances are you are doing the majority of your dry cow management procedures correctly.

It's not enough to just look at the colostrum and assume that it is good. Measure the quality with a digital Brix refractometer, make sure the newborn calf gets enough at the first feeding, dip navels etc. Talk to your Agri-Basics, Inc. nutritionist, your herd veterinarian, and employees about your dry cow procedures.

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Don't Neglect Reproduction Programs

Reproductive programs can often be neglected in times of tight economic margins. It's easy to say let's only do herd check once a month instead of every two weeks. If we don't have pregnant cows, we will not have a profitable milking herd.

We need to ensure that our cows and heifers are getting pregnant in a timely fashion in order to have a herd with average days in milk as close to 150-160 days as possible. We need to have a continual supply of fresh cows on a monthly basis in order to ensure that our herds do not become stale. Even today, in these tough times, the best managed herds are having weekly reproductive checks. Each week there are new cows enrolled into reproductive programs. Animals are checked weekly that are to be bred via ultrasound to make sure that she is being bred at the most optimal time. If anything happens (and it does each and every week) and an animal is found to not be ready to be bred, the program gets altered based on what the cow tells us.

The goal of a weekly vet check is not to identify pregnant cows but to identify the open problem cows and adjust the breeding program as needed in order to accomplish the end goal of pregnant animals. For example, a herd milking 120-150 cows, having a weekly vet check with the goal of examining the open cows enrolled in the breeding program, will usually have at the most 20-25 cows called up for

ultrasound examination. This includes the pregnant ones as well. (Most of the time, check will consist of 15 cows or less). What the farm will find is that over time weekly breeding protocols are much easier than trying to perform those tasks once every 2-3 weeks.

The big pay-off is herds that engage this type of management will often achieve pregnancy rates in excess of 30%. Talk with your herd veterinarian about how you can use ultrasound as a tool to evaluate your open cows at reproductive checks. If you're

only using reproductive exams to evaluate the pregnant animals, then you are really missing a golden opportunity to improve your herd's profitability.

Core Management Areas

Be sure to talk to your Dairy management team to ensure that all protocols are appropriate and being followed. Areas to consider are Dry Cows, Calving and colostrum management, Reproductive programs, Feeding management, Milking procedures, cleanliness of the stalls/bed-packs, vaccination protocols for young and older livestock. These are just a few "Core" management areas that need to be addressed on all of our farms.



Nutritionists

Herbert Bonnice Jr. Tunkhannock, PA
570.836.2421
hbonnice@mymail.emcyber.com

Sam Brown Millmont, PA
814.720.4273
cattleconcepts@gmail.com

Michael M. Campbell State College, PA
814.574.7259
mcampbell550@gmail.com

Robert Davis Christiana, PA
610.593.2961
davisrobert@zoominternet.net

Homer Eberly Stevens, PA
717.336.3047
heeberly@dejazzd.com

Wilson Eberly Ephrata, PA
717.656.4942
wilson@emypeople.net

Tom Good Lititz, PA
717.626.8689
tcgood@dejazzd.com

Dan Hillyer Dover, PA
717.308.1615
hillyerdan@comcast.net

Jim Longenecker Christiana, PA
610.593.2575
abjnklong@epix.net

Bob Nichols, DVM Waynesboro, PA
717.262.5013
bndvm300@gmail.com

Tim Rutledge Reinholds, PA
717.371.7667
abt看@dejazzd.com

Adam Zurin Manheim, PA
717.682.5103
azurin5001@gmail.com

