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It Just Makes “Dairy \$ense”

Don't Skimp on Health Costs

by Virginia Ishler - Extension Dairy Team

Production Perspective

Regardless of high or low profit margins the investment in health care for calves, heifers and cows should not waver. Calves and heifers are the future of a dairy operation and the current cows are the ones generating the income.

When operations get strapped for cash flow the first thing owners do is look to cut corners. Reducing costs related to vet and medicine is not very prudent. Based on the summary of several hundred cash flow plans, the average cost per cow for vet and medicine is \$108 with a range from \$88 to \$126/cow. There is no association with the herds having the lowest or highest breakeven cost of production. Health costs are not typically the key to a herd's poor financial performance.

With the volume of cash flow plans that have been done by the Dairy Business Management Team, there are common questions that get asked. The first is usually how the vet and medicine expense compares to other herds. Many times the costs are well within the ranges that are typical. The question should be: is the focus on preventative or reactive health care? In the long run preventative care is going to result in healthier animals. When evaluating standard operating procedures for vaccination protocols sometimes it appears that our animals are walking pin cushions. However, protecting a young animal's immune system against respiratory and digestive problems enables the animals to grow and perform to their genetic potential.

A critical time period for cows is the few weeks pre- and post-calving. Precision feeding and good

management practices can go a long way to minimize transition cow problems. However, there can be outside forces that can affect how well a cow starts off her lactation. Implementing protocols to minimize ketosis, milk fever, displaced abomasum and others can more than pay for themselves in optimizing overall animal performance. If there is a high incidence of metabolic problems requiring many visits from the vet or prolonged treatment protocols, then it is time to evaluate potential causes and develop a preventative health plan.

Proper nutrition is critical for all stages of growth and performance. There is a lot of time and research devoted to the pre-weaned calf and getting her off to a healthy start. After calves are weaned the plain of nutrition can change dramatically and not for the better. Heifers should not have hay bellies and scruffy hair coats. They require good quality forage, ample protein intake and the proper level of energy. The goal is to have animals large enough to breed at 13 to 14 months of age. After a heifer is pregnant she also needs the stature and weight to meet her genetic potential for milk production when calving at 22–24 months of age.

Preventative health care and good nutrition are the staples to successful dairy operations. This means that animals are positioned to achieve their genetic potential. The dairy producer must maintain the necessary balance of income and expenses to achieve a cash surplus.

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Virginia Ishler

Action plan for evaluating health costs for calves, heifers and cows

Goal – Maintain standard operating procedures on vaccination protocols and record all treatments.

Step 1: Develop standard operating procedures on vaccinations and boosters for all animal groups on the farm.

Step 2: Utilize a record keeping program (i.e. Dairy Comp 305, PCDART, Excel spreadsheet) to track when animals get vaccinated.

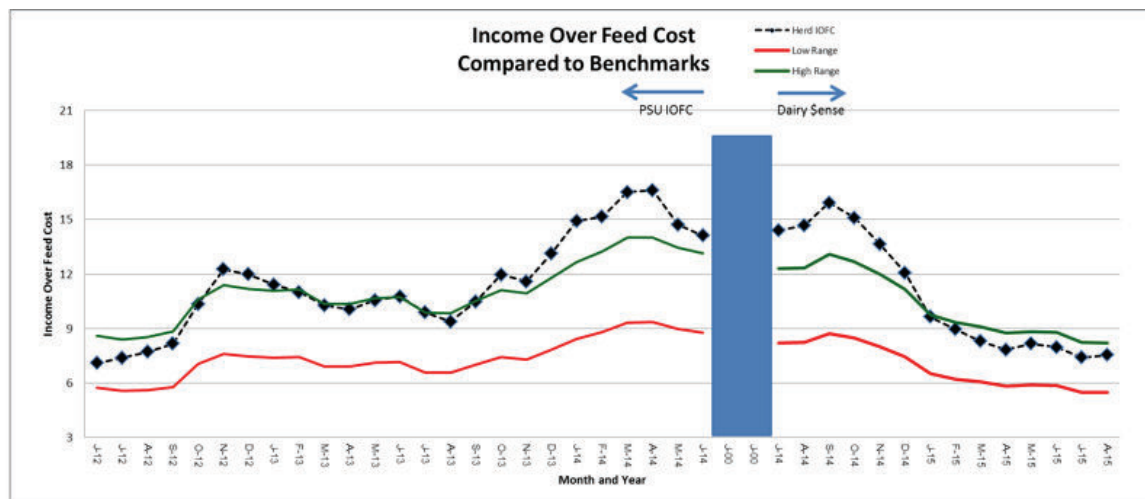
Step 3: Develop a record keeping system for tracking all treatments on animals, including mastitis. Record the product used, duration of use, and if the animal has improved. Make note of any meat or milk withholding.

Step 4: Summarize treatment results monthly and discuss potential problems with the herd veterinarian.

Economic perspective

Monitoring must include an economic component to determine if a management strategy is working or not. For the lactating cows income over feed costs is a good way to check that feed costs are in line for the level of milk production. Starting with July's milk price, income over feed costs was calculated using average intake and production for the last six years from the Penn State dairy herd. The ration contained 63% forage consisting of corn silage, haylage and hay. The concentrate portion included corn grain, candy meal, sugar, canola meal, roasted soybeans, Optigen and a mineral vitamin mix. All market prices were used.

Income over feed cost using standardized rations and production data from the Penn State dairy herd.



Note: PSU milk price: \$/cwt; feed cost/cow: \$; average milk production: lbs.



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<http://extension.psu.edu/animals/dairy/business-management/financial-tools/dairy-sense>

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