

## **Observations from the Field**

### **Staff Communication**

In a dairy operation, where most jobs are delegated, communication becomes paramount. Many times a specific worker does not realize how their job ties into the farm function as a whole.

A perfect illustration would be communicating about the feeding system, one of the highest of all the dairyman's costs. A simple thing such as running out of a feed needs to be communicated promptly to the manager, who can then reorder, before the supply is completely gone. Also, with the sensitivity of the cow's production on whether her feed requirements are met, it is important the employee feed only what is needed. If not, that extra feed will not go to milk production, but will become just an extra cost.

In my opinion, an employee's relationship with their boss is the most important factor in determining how engaged that employee will be when performing their job. The great thing is that, unlike the weather, this is a factor almost completely under the farmer's control. Keeping the staff engaged may help them excel in their position, and they will be more likely to stick around. Employee retention is very important because labor is another large cost to the farmer, by the time each employee is trained, and running in sync with the farm and herd.

However, if the unfortunate day comes when there is a dispute between worker and employer, it pays for the employer to know how to handle it. About a week ago I observed a wise employee "intervention". In this situation, each side of the story was told, and each employee was asked to repeat the other's side. Ben says that when an employee (or anybody for that manner) is very upset, they will only hear 50% of the other side's story, usually only the parts they want to hear. That is why the key to successful communication is to make sure they hear one another. At the time, I thought it was a little too much like treating them like children, but looking back, I see that when they are both that angry it is just like an elementary school dispute, and they need help communicating.

### **Feeding notes**

I have discovered some interesting things about feeding a TMR ration on a grazing dairy. It has been my hope to integrate a computer formulation program into the grazing system, making decisions about changes in the supplemental diet easier, as the grass changes from month to month.

In developing the program, I learned that the National Resource Council (NRC) values are typically the ones to go by, because they are averages decided upon by a group of researchers to best represent each feed. When I tried instead to change the values to reflect test results from New Zealand labs, the ration went haywire and the amounts of each ingredient necessary was much too high. However, when I switched back to NRC values we got a nice consistent

ration that the cows love. In fact we are having trouble with them eating too much at once, but their appetite for grass has improved greatly and their milk production is going up, all at a lower cost per cow. Revamping the feed test program has also helped return our milk fat to normal levels and with that, increased profits.

Another issue we have noticed is that all of our vegetable and bread waste products come dumped in together in the truck. Then they are dumped in the bins and it is hard to get a consistent feed out of the bin. A new technique that we are going to try is to take the feed when it arrives and put it in the mixer wagon to homogenize the feed. We know from our feed docket how much of each feed was delivered so we should be able to create an average analysis for the mixed feed. We are hoping this will help control feeding irregularities that lead to rumen abnormalities and lost milk production. (More to come next month.)

I think that learning all of this information about ration formulation on a grazing dairy will prove extremely useful in Missouri. Because the grass grows all year round in NZ, although at a slower rate during the peak in spring than Missouri, it has made for an easier time meshing the supplement and grass together in one feeding system. I expect what I have learned here will make it much easier to implement a similar system in Missouri.

I cannot wait to finally be able to use the iDataFlow system (each cow wears a collar to track various functions and activities) from MILFOS to be able to track the cow's activity level and rumen function. This should be one of the most powerful tools in honing feeds and routines to optimize the cow's appetite and performance.

### **Other Thoughts**

Another big improvement that we have made in feeding the cows was to find the amount of milk a cow would have to produce in order to be productive enough to be fed supplement. Those cows that are consistently under this amount have been set by the computer to be drafted out after milking and returned directly to the paddock while the cows that are productive are allowed to walk to the feed pad to have some supplements. In figuring up feed costs, cutting out the bottom 10% of the herd has been the biggest money saver, and I mean big. (More to come on this in next month's report.)

In relation to cow performance, the genetic selection used by Livestock Improvement Company (LIC) in New Zealand seems backward to me. From what Ben has told me, they basically send out semen from the "Bull of the Day" that has high breeding worth and then, everyone uses that semen. What I find interesting is they have this great pool of genetics for cows that are good grazers and they are getting semen that they really have no idea how it will improve the cow. They have such good records on each cow's ancestry that it would be easy to look at their EPD's and actually select for milk production and birth weights to specifically improve a cow's offspring, while also making her calf a good grazer.

### **And the Hot Item of the Month**

One final topic that I would like to talk about is Wormade<sup>®</sup>, an oral drench for mastitis cows. It is basically a mineral supplement that acts as a probiotic against mastitis. The salesman here says that if this product doesn't clear it up, the cow should be put on the cull list.

Well, needless to say, I was pretty skeptical. Did I mention that it was labeled as an "organic" form of treatment (Please sense my sarcasm). But we tried the product, and at \$6 per cow, it is one-quarter the price of standard medicinal treatments. One great additional advantage (I found out through my own mistake the other day), was that if you accidentally send some of the milk to the wrong vat, there is no medicine in the milk, resulting in only an elevated somatic cell count, rather than a vat of milk down the drain. While this product does not completely replace medicine, it appears to do a very good job taking care of most cases.