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TIPS FOR CONTROLLING HEIFER FEED COSTS

Feed costs comprise 55 to 60 percent of the total cost of rearing dairy replacement heifers, so keeping a sharp eye on feed expenses can have a tremendous impact on enterprise profitability. Pat Hoffman, dairy scientist and heifer management specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says managing feed costs need not mean sacrificing heifer quality. To achieve both, he recommends:

- **Understand heifer nutritional requirements –** The nutritional requirements of heifers are much different than those of lactating cows. Use published guidelines specifically for heifers when formulating rations, and work with a knowledgeable dairy nutritionist.
- **Adjust ration to changing environment –** Energy adjustments based on environmental conditions are important for heifers, because they often are reared in conditions outside of thermal neutrality. This is especially true for younger heifers (<300 pounds).
- **Avoid over-conditioning –** Too much energy in the ration adds up to unnecessary expense plus over-conditioned heifers. Those animals are more prone to calving difficulties and metabolic diseases at freshening.
- **Produce high tonnage forages –**High-tonnage crops such as corn silage usually are the lowest-cost forages to produce. This high-energy forage source can be tailored to heifer rations by altering agronomic practices to increase tonnage and decrease energy content. Many low-energy forage sources work well in heifer rations.
- **Feed protein wisely –** Younger heifers need more protein, but levels should be adjusted down as heifers age to avoid unnecessary feed costs. Excessive protein does not enhance stature growth.
- **Feed precise amounts of minerals & vitamins –** Minerals and vitamins often are over-fed in an effort to ensure adequate levels. Save on unnecessary costs and feed heifers precisely by testing feedstuffs and then supplementing accordingly.
- **Don't waste feed –** Do not feed heifers off the ground, and do not provide unlimited feed. A simple bunk scoring system has great utility in precisely feeding heifers. In general, heifers should be fed to near-empty bunk scores.
- **Consider ionophores –** Studies have demonstrated that these supplements improve feed efficiency in heifers. To capture maximum benefit, diets may have to be slightly limit-fed. True ionophores also control coccidiosis.
- **Consider genomics –** Genomic testing can be done on dairy calves, with results available by the time a heifer is four months of age. Consider culling dairy heifers with poor genetics at a very young age to reduce the number of heifers reared. This strategy is most effective when a dairy has an excess supply of heifers. (Patrick Hoffman, UW-Madison Extension)

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Cow Milking Prep & Income

Would you like to decrease somatic cell count (SCC)? Would you like to increase milk flow rate and shorten milking time, while improving teat end health? The income maker on any dairy farm is the production of large quantities of high quality milk. So, why is milk prep of your cows often a forgotten priority? To quickly assess your farm's milking procedure, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Are all milking employees trained in the prep procedure established for your farm?**

Proper milk prep increases milk flow rate considerably. Improving the milk prep procedure can speed up milking times by up to 20% while also improving teat end health.

- **How often do you evaluate what's happening in the parlor?**

Many successful producers would argue that spending at least a few minutes every day in the parlor communicating with employees is among the most profitable and productive time spent managing the dairy farm.

- **Are cows stimulated for at least 20 seconds?**

At least 20 seconds of rubbing and/or cleaning is needed to trigger oxytocin, which stimulates milk let down. Let the cow give you the milk instead of taking it. Without this stimulation, milk can be harvested from the udder but requires longer milking times and may harm udder tissues and teat ends.

- **Is teat dip left on the teat for at least 20-30 seconds before wiping the teat end dry?**

A minimum of 20-30 seconds is needed to kill bacteria on the teat surface

- **Is an effort made to specifically clean and dry the teat end?**

If unsure, have employees prep the cows normally. Then swab the teat end with an alcohol pad. Is there dirt or teat dip left on the pad?

- **Is machine attachment occurring within 60-90 seconds after teat stimulation begins?**

Oxytocin has a short-lived effect; waiting too long to attach the milking machine after stimulation simply wastes its effect.

- **How often are employees retrained?**

Refresher courses for employees can help maintain high milk prep standards. Make sure employees on all shifts are trained in the established procedure.

- **Is there a written standard operating procedure for milking preparation posted in the parlor?**

Proper milk prep is one area of management that will pay off handsomely with very little cost. Quicker milking times, lower somatic cell counts and improved teat end health are all dividends of proper milk prep.

Lastly, a focus on fore-milk stripping, which is the practice of removing two to three squirts of milk from each quarter during the udder prep process. Fore-milk stripping should not be omitted because it serves several important purposes.

- The cisternal milk, or milk residing in the lower portion of the teat prior to milking, often has a higher bacterial count. Eliminating this milk in two to three squirts of fore-stripping per quarter may improve bulk tank SCC and overall milk quality.
- Fore-stripping serves as additional stimulation to improve milk let-down and flow rate.
- Fore-stripping can allow a quick check for signs of clinical mastitis.

Research shows that fore-milk stripping is a proven management practice that serves several purposes, all of which lead to increased milk quality and therefore income. For additional information on milking procedures, the National Mastitis Council has excellent resources. (R. Osborne)

Ready for Summer Heat?

It's time to plan ahead for those hot and humid days of summer. Cows prefer a cooler, more moderate temperature and humidity than we have in most areas throughout the late spring and summer months. Their ultimate comfort has a direct correlation on how well they eat and produce, along with your profitability. The potential impact of heat, humidity and the stress this can cause on your cows can be countered in many ways, including such things as water, airflow and nutrition. Talk to your sales representative about heat stress. They will work with you all summer, keeping your cows "happy" and performing year-round! Don't wait until the first "hot day" arrives. Unfortunately, that will be too late.