

Selective culling results in efficient use of facilities

ST. LOUIS, Mo. — Regardless of where dairy farmers get news, they've no doubt heard statements from industry experts calling for herd culling. Many of these spokespersons use the reasoning that overall herd reduction will reduce national production, thereby reducing the milk surplus and strengthening the market, says dairy research manager Larry Prewitt.

Although he neither supports nor questions this recommendation, Prewitt says, culling can still be a beneficial practice, but for another-slightly selfish-reason. With operating costs rising almost daily, selective culling can allow the producer to focus attention on the top cows in the herd, resulting in a more efficient use of existing facilities and resources.

If the dairy farmer's feeding program is doing the job, but the rolling herd average is not up to par, then odds are some of the cows are not doing their jobs. Now's a good time to evaluate each animal's contribution in terms of both milk and reproduction.

Production On Rise

We've almost doubled the milk production potential of cows over the past 25 years. Much of this progress is due to better

management, feeding, research and quality of the cow.

The majority of future improvements will be accomplished with even higher-level milk producers. In fact, most of the research work being done now centers on how to make top-producing cows produce even more milk.

As things continue to progress in this manner, the low-producing cow simply doesn't fit into the picture of future dairying.

Fixed Costs Rising

The reason for this is economics. The operating costs in a dairy herd are not greatly effected by the level of milk production. But with operating expenses rising rapidly because of inflation, low-producing cows simply cannot offset their costs. They become a financial burden.

Considering feed costs, the case for culling grows even stronger.

A cow producing 16,000 to 18,000 pounds of milk per-year is going to consume more feed than a cow producing 12,000 pounds. But the added costs are more than compensated for by the increased amount of milk produced. In fact, it will probably spell the difference

between profit and loss in considering today's milk prices.

Open Cows Costly

Although the cow's paramount contribution is the amount of milk she produces, she's also demanding that she produce vigorous offspring, stay healthy and cycle consistently. While a cow producing 17,000 pounds of milk is certainly going to be a top milker in any herd she isn't necessarily a top profit-maker.

The money made on the extra pounds of milk can be lost very quickly if she remains open and dry for an extended period of time. So, calving interval is another essential consideration in culling.

Dairymen should be looking for no longer than a 12-13 month calving interval for each cow. A cow taking longer than that is not performing to her fullest potential. She isn't producing enough calves and she isn't giving a fair return on the hefty investment the farmer has in her.

A delayed calving interval through successive lactations also means a reduced volume of milk in the cow's productive lifetime. It also reduces the reproductive rate and lowers the number of calves produced in the cow's lifetime.

This slows genetic progress and puts a crimp in the dairyman's cash flow.

But before culling all those cows which don't calf within 13 months producers should first determine if they are taking the necessary steps to promote reproduction. Careful monitoring of recycling and gestation periods can shorten calving intervals. It's easy for producers to spend all of their time doing other chores. But, if rebreeding is neglected, milk persistency will be effected and per-cow production will decrease over successive lactations.

Weight Loss Hurts

Improper feeding can have a ripple effect on other aspects of the dairy operation. Weight loss at the wrong time reduces rebreeding efficiency which in turn delays the onset of lactation. So, in one sense,

your feeding program is a maintenance effort. It must maintain body weight, breeding condition and milk persistency.

But, on a second level, a sound feeding program is helping the cow produce the most milk possible. Unfortunately, many producers believe this second level is the only level. They pay for this misconception when their cows don't freshen on time and remain dry longer than they should.

These are the cornerstones of a good dairy operation. Producers can't help but get peak performances from their cows if they're truly doing the best they can in these areas.

And if it means milking a few less in order to provide this management, proper culling could be the answer, he concludes.

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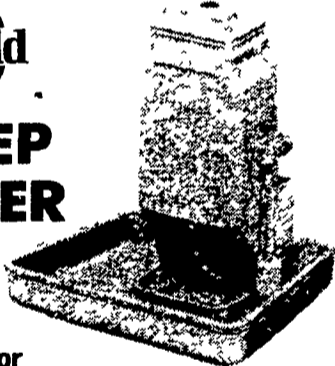


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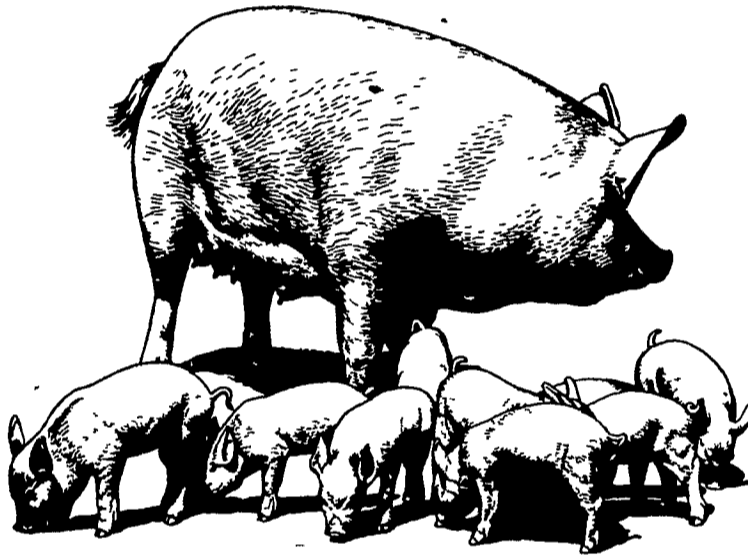
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