

Record keeping becomes key to dairy survival

NEWARK, Del. — Milk in the tank on one farm looks like milk on another. Both farmers probably own Holstein cattle, so the chemical composition of the milk is much the same. Both have cows that freshen every month, so the fat and solids content of the milk in the two tanks should be similar throughout the year. Both farmers practice good, sanitary procedures, so the microbiological content of the milk is also basically the same.

But though it looks, and tastes identical and sells for the same price, there may be one big difference between milk in the two tanks — profitability. One tankful may return a profit. The other may have been produced at a loss.

What made the difference? Record keeping. The owner of the profitable tank keeps DHIA records on the performance of his cows; the second farmer doesn't.

This is a familiar scenario in American dairying, says University of Delaware extension dairy specialist George Haenlein. At present, only half the cows in the country are on a record-keeping system.

How much money did it cost that second farmer to fill his tank with milk? He doesn't know.

But the first farmer does. He also knows that some of the milk is from cows that are three times as productive as some of the others. Because he keeps records on each, he can identify the cows that brought in little or no income over feed costs and replace them with more productive animals. As a result, he can fill his tank with milk that yields a profit instead of just meeting expenses or less.

"That's the difference between the milks in the two tanks," Haenlein says. "To pay the bills in these tough times, farmers can only afford milk in tanks like the first one."

Feed costs make up about half the total cost of milk production, so they're the top item in evaluating herd productivity. DHIA records provide information on milk yield every month. Feed costs are determined by multiplying the price of feed times the amounts eaten by cows. It's easy to figure the total feed bill. Knowing what the cows actually ate is harder.

"This is where many dairy farmers give up," Haenlein says. "They don't provide DHIA records with good feed consumption data. So the DHIA computer can't calculate their income over feed costs."

Agricultural technology is now coming to the dairy farmer's aid. Several companies manufacture feed metering devices which fit right into the DHIA record-keeping system and are fast becoming a valuable tool in determining herd profitability.

"Soon," predicts Haenlein, "few dairy farms will be able to stay in business without feed metering devices and cow record-keeping systems. And since genetics also is involved in identifying profit-producing cows, more farmers will find it essential to include sire and dam identifications on cow records. Keeping track of this information will be the key to economic survival."

Based on the most recent data from 6,436 Holstein dairy herds on DHIA record-keeping in the Northeast, how much income over feed costs are the top producing herds and cows bringing in? Cows in the top 25 percent group were fed an average of 18 pounds of concentrate supplements per day plus 44 pounds of silage and 8 pounds of hay, for a return over feed cost is \$4.41 per day. This compares to cows in the bottom 25 percent group, which received 13 pounds of supplements, 36 pounds of silage and 10 pounds of hay, for

an average return over feed cost of only \$2.89 per cow per day.

"Of course," says Haenlein, "all the farmer's other production expenses must come out of that return-over-feed-cost, so it is by no means clear profit."

Top paying cows also had a shorter calving interval, no excess dry days, and fewer were open at 100 days after calving. First-calf heifers in the top group were younger and heavier. All cows had a heavier body weight, as well as higher production per day of life after two years of age, and fewer lacked sire or dam identification.

So, milk in the two tanks in Haenlein's example may look and taste the same, but it certainly doesn't cost the same to produce. The big challenge for dairy farmers who want to stay in business,

he says, is to make sure the milk brings in the highest possible return. And that requires good records as well as other efficient management practices.



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