

Dairy Pipeline

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Which Game Plan's For You

When it comes to the game of dairying, there are many game plans to choose from. The new dairy herd buyout has increased the list of options for many farmers. Much has already been written and spoken, and many meetings have been held, or will soon be held, on the herd buyout. The herd buyout is not for everyone, but it is a plan that can benefit some of you. To participate or not to participate is a decision that needs to be thought through very carefully. Get the facts, think about your future, and push the pencil carefully before making up your mind. Worksheets and computer programs are available from your Extension Agent to help you determine bid prices appropriate for your situation.

In general, these worksheets help you look at how participation in the program might affect your farm and non-farm income and expenses over a span of five years. Also to be considered are: loss of equity, tax consequences, debt reduction, fixed costs that will still have to be paid, new sources of income, changes in cost of living, cost of re-entering the dairy business after five years—if that is one of your options, etc.

Another unknown is how will future changes in milk prices and costs of production affect future profits if you elect to continue producing milk. I wish I had the crystal ball that could help me answer that question!

Management Capabilities

What level of production and what size operation are you capable of managing effectively? Reasonably high levels of production and larger operations are nice to aim for — as long as we don't exceed our management capabilities; otherwise, it can be very costly! Let's look at a few examples

In the interest of attaining a higher herd average, a farmer might elect to: feed high quality forages, higher levels of grain, feed TMR in the bunk and "top dress" higher producers by using a computer feeder, using pelleted fat-containing feeds, etc. All of these would be good practices—in

the hands of the right person!
"How can anyone go wrong with high quality forages?", you might ask. Real high quality alfalfa is low in fiber and high in soluble nitrogen. Fed properly, it's an excellent feed for high producers. Fed in excess, it can increase blood urea nitrogen levels, similar to feeding too much urea. You could also be short changing cows on protein because they are not able to utilize all the protein they consume. If large amounts of grain are also being fed, the cows may not be consuming sufficient fiber to maintain proper rumen pH. Consequently appetites and fat tests may suffer.

When you are feeding TMR, the cow is totally dependent upon you to balance her ration properly; she can't pick and choose to help cover

up any errors on your part. The same is true of computer feeders. If you have the computer programmed improperly, if you do not have the feeder properly calibrated, if you do not make sure that feed is actually getting into the feed hoppers, the cow will not be getting the feed she needs to balance her ration.

Some "exotic" feeds can help high producing cows reach higher peaks and sustain high production for longer periods of time, if they are undergirded with the good management that good cows need to express their genetic potential. Most of these feeds are prescribed to be fed at precise amounts. Mixing errors and "a little extra dab" may cause problems. For example, fats and oils are excellent sources of concentrated

energy. However, if fed in excess, they can impair digestion and interfere with mineral absorption.

The point of all this discussion is when you are trying to play in the big leagues — 18 to 22,000 lbs. milk per cow, you'd better be prepared to play by the big league rules. If not, be satisfied with a 16 to 18,000 lb herd average, and concentrate

on a simpler, more foolproof, cheaper type of feeding program built upon the abundant feeding of good quality, home grown forages.

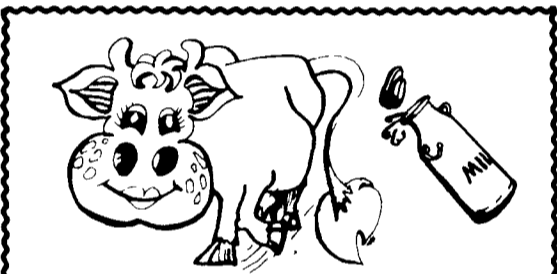
I mention size of operation earlier. Big is not always better. Be careful not to bite off more than you can chew. It's better to have fewer cows—and fewer heifers—and tend to them properly, than it is to have more than what you can

adequately house, feed and care for. Fewer cattle will also permit you to rely more heavily upon home grown feeds; it can also help reduce your overhead costs.

As we look ahead to an uncertain future, attempt to build your business on a solid, unshakeable low overhead base. Perhaps some of these concepts will help you accomplish that.



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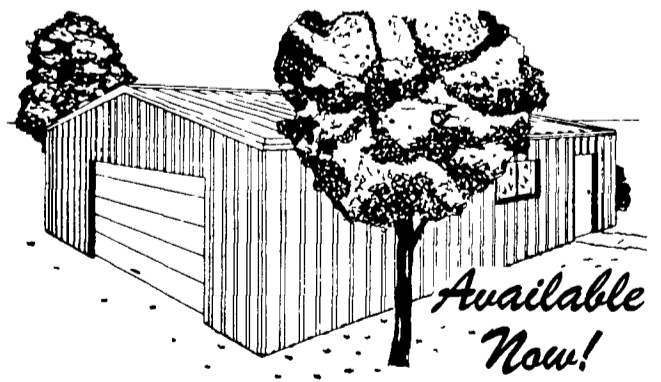
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