

# The Dairy Business

By Newton Bair

## How safe is the water?

**HOW SAFE THE WATER?**  
Water is so common and so necessary in our everyday life. The old adage that "you never miss the water 'till—" is only too true. But there is another aspect of water than having the well run dry. How safe is the water that we take for granted every day? The question arises because of a rash of problems encountered on farms, that seem to point that way. The problems often involve subtle health problems that defy diagnosis and spurn treatment.

For example, breeding problems that have no relationship to nutrition or known diseases. This seems to be the biggest headache in high level herds, where nutrition is watched carefully and herd health is under constant monitoring.

There are many reasons to be concerned about the supply of water that our cows drink. In the first place, a dairy cow will drink about fifty gallons of the stuff every day. If that fifty gallons has only a small, say 50 or 10 parts per

million of tox substance in it, the cow ends up with a substantial amount of toxic intake. It could have a profound effect on the delicately balanced metabolism of a heavily stressed high producer.

Why should we be more concerned about water now than ever before? Simply because there are more things happening now in agriculture than Papa ever thought possible. In the first place, dairy cows are becoming more and more concentrated in small areas of the land. When this happens, the manure is also more concentrated, and in some cases the land is already saturated with more nutrients than it can handle.

The only place to go, even for nature, is to dump the excess into the water table. One of the most abundant of these excess nutrients is Nitrogen, which finds it's way into water in the form of ammonia, nitrates, and/or nitrites.

Nitrogen is a mixed blessing, because it is often the most necessary and one of the most expensive plant nutrients we have to buy. If it is so abundant on our dairy farms, why do we need to buy large amounts to grow corn?

The difficulty is that it is so elusive when we go to measure it that we are forced to make

assumptions about how much is there, where and when we need it. We also end up making assumptions about how much is wasted, and how much gets into the water we drink. Even our best laboratory tests for N will vary from day to day, because of this characteristic of volatility and instability.

Other things are happening to the water supply. Where do the tons of chemicals we dump on the land end up? Some pesticides as well as dairy chemicals do degrade into harmless substance, and some get locked up in the complex chemistry of clay in the soil.

But some are bound to get into the water that the cows, as well as you and I, drink every day. And if you drink a couple of glasses a day, a cow drinks a thousand times as much! More, in proportion to her size, than a human does. Any impurity or toxicity is multiplied that much in a cow.

I don't mean to imply that all water is unsafe to drink or to give to the cows. Don't rush out to the vendor of "Water purifiers" and buy an expensive gadget. At least, not before checking carefully every aspect of the farm water supply. Have several laboratories

check the water, if you suspect trouble from that source. Not because the vendor is dishonest, heaven forbid, but because the water samples differ, and mistakes can be made. It's better to get a second opinion from a disinterested source.

If herd health problems are plaguing you, and can't be attributed to disease or nutrition, suspect the water supply. If toxicity is suspected, have at least TWO labs test it. And get a second opinion about what to do to correct it.

The easiest and cheapest correction may be to change some of your habits of purchase and disposal of chemicals so that they stay clear of the surface and subsurface water supply.



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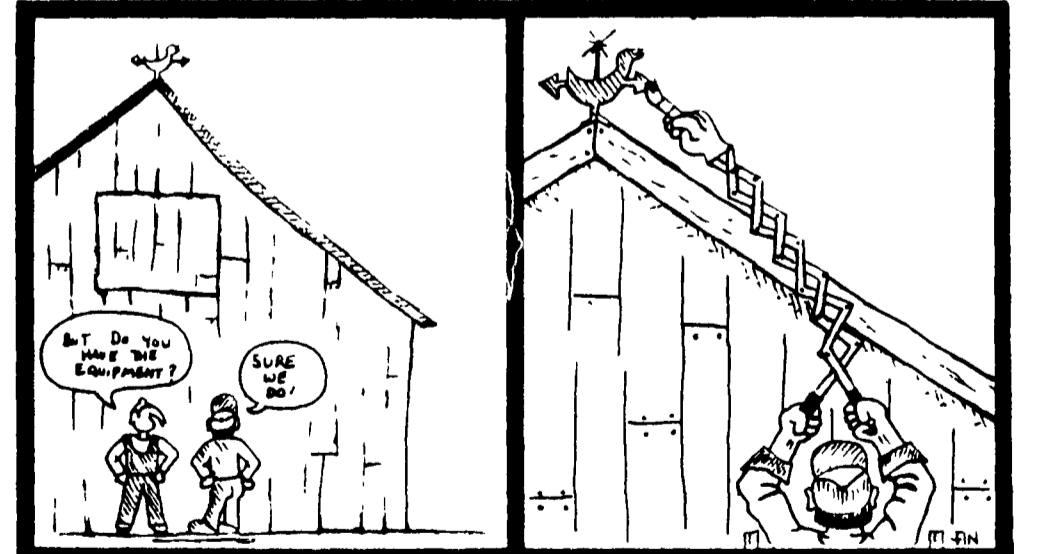
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