



Dairy Pipeline

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Water Quality Problems

In my last column, I focused on cows' need for water, water intake, water quality and water testing. This column focuses on preventing and correcting water quality problems.

When you discover that you have poor quality water, what do you do — install a water treatment system? That may be an appropriate solution, but remember, you're treating a lot of water when you consider how much cows drink, and that can be very costly. For this reason, other alternatives should be considered, too. The cost

of installing and operating a treatment system must be weighed against herd losses incurred as a result of poor quality water. Marked improvement in herd performance can make an expensive system look very reasonable. However, let's explore some other alternatives.

What are the chances of finding better quality water by drilling a new well or drilling your present well deeper?

Many of our older farmsteads are located in low spots near springs and streams or where shallow wells could be hand dug. That may have been convenient for

our forefathers but it can be a problem for today's farmers who are managing many times more cows on that same site. The concentration of manure is much greater. The shallow wells and springs are also very vulnerable to contamination.

We are also applying more manure, fertilizer and chemicals to our fields. Some of these nutrients and chemicals are carried away in the runoff water. If this runoff water collects in the low spots around our buildings, it may be concentrating nutrients and chemicals from the fields close to our water supply. There are several things you can do to minimize this problem.

Haul more of the manure to distant fields and minimize concentrated applications close to the buildings.

Runoff from lots can also concentrate nutrients close to our water supply. Perhaps you can catch the runoff and haul it to the fields where it will do more good. Divert surface water away from feedlots to help prevent contamination.

Another alternative is to keep more of the water and nutrients on the field where they were applied. Good conservation practices such as minimum tillage, cover crops, contour farming, and strip cropping can help. Water terraces can help you intercept the water and nutrients before they move too far from the fields. Incorporating manure and fertilizer soon after application can minimize run off pollution.

Most of these ideas are preventive in nature and may not solve existing problems rapidly. To cope with existing problems you may have to look at ways you can help cows better tolerate poorer quality water, or install a treatment system.

In my last column, I alluded to the fact that healthy cattle under good management, consuming a balanced ration and good quality feeds, might have a higher tolerance for off-quality water than cows that are experiencing stresses of various sorts. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to review feeding and herd management practices.

Maybe you can dilute the effect of poor quality water by blending it with some better quality water. If the water contains elevated levels of nitrates, consider using feeds of lower nitrate content; chances are the cows are consuming much more nitrates from the feed than from the water.

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