

Making Money With Heifers

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NEWARK, Del. — In these hard times for dairy farmers, when milk prices have hit rock bottom, advice on how to survive on the farm is widespread and varied, from how to make more money, with a new "wrinkle" in production equipment perhaps, to how to cut expenditures--the so-called "fat" in farm management.

Certainly, the calving interval, current and projected, is an accurate barometer for where the "fat" in a particular farm management might be.

The calving interval could reveal where something is wrong in the reproductive management of the dairy herd.

According to our recent DHIA herd summaries, 25 percent of the herds showed 14 months and longer calving intervals instead of the optimum 12 to 13 months. One herd actually averaged 17.0 months!

Another way to look at the calving-interval barometer is to find the average stage of lactation of all cows in the herd. Cows peak in lactation and then trail off, with less and less persistency towards the low end of productive levels at the cessation of lactation.

Thus, the "smart" dairy farmer maximizes the majority of his herd to be always at or near peak lactation level. This means in terms of "days in milk" an average not much beyond the ISO-day halfway mark of the normal 305-day lactation.

But, again according to our recent DHIA herd summaries, there are few "smart" dairy farmers, only one in four to be exact.

Twenty percent of all herds with averages of more than 200 days listed the worst 280 days!

These farmers also had cows with the longest "days open," that

is, not bred or at least not pregnant. These dairy farmers no doubt are working as hard as their neighbors, seven days a week, but with the majority of their cows beyond peak lactation, they are getting less money for their hard labor.

An additional consequence of such management is that these farmers are short of calves and short of replacement heifers.

Fewer pregnant cows means fewer available calf replacements, and with an average herd age of less than 5 years, at least one-fifth of the herd has to be replaced annually to maintain herd size.

A good conception rate is about 75 percent, and if half of the calves born are normally bull calves, one can expect half of 75 in a 100-cow herd, or a little better than 35 heifers, provided mortality is not too high.

This means when one-fifth of the herd needs replacement annually, only 20 of the 35 heifers are needed and 15 heifers are spares that can be sold for profit to neighbors or culled to maximize genetic progress.

However, our bottom herds that averaged 200 days in milk or more and went beyond 14 months' calving interval will not come up with more than 40 to 50 percent conception rate.

You can easily check this figure for your herd by counting how many cows calved during the last 12 months in your herd. Compare this figure to the total number of cows in your herd to arrive at an approximate current conception rate percentage.

With a 40- to 50-percent conception rate, you can expect at best no more than about 20 heifer calves per year in a 100-cow herd.

If you need one-fifth for replacements, you would have barely enough for yourself, and certainly none to spare for sale to neighbors or for genetic culling.

So, the first way to make money with heifers is to have some to sell and cull by having a good herd conception rate.

However, at least two more ways of making money with heifers exist.

Looking at our DHIA herd summaries again, more than two-thirds of all our herds have first calf heifers coming into milk for the first time at 26 to 28 months of age or later, instead of the optimum 24 months, which adds up to 2 to 4 months of milk income not received by the dairy farmer for every one of those heifers!

At a daily average of 50 pounds milk and about one-third heifers in most of our herds, this means that for a 100-cow herd the following is true: 33 heifers X 60 days X 50 pounds milk/day X \$11.00 per 100 pounds of milk = \$10,890.00 per year, a significant sum of money lost because the heifers were raised too slow, bred too late, and calving 60 days, on average, beyond the optimum 24 months of age.

And this sum of more than \$10,000 in a 100-cow herds translates from the 60-days delay to a **LOSS OF MORE THAN \$180 — MONEY NOT MADE FOR EVERY DAY BEYOND 24 MONTHS DELAYED FIRST CALVING!**

You can blame it on feeding, heat observation, genetics, but in any case, the bottom line is the same: in these hard times, you can survive better if your heifers calve at 24 months the first time.

There is a third opportunity for making more money with your heifers — A.I. (artificial insemination).

Sure, you might say, I do A.I. with my cows. It is good enough for genetic progress, but I do not want to hassle with heifers for breeding. I am too old for this and I do not have a restraining breeding chute for catching heifers in heat.

But when you need a new tractor, don't you go and buy one?

Why, then, if you need a breeding chute and a catching gate, don't you just buy one? It will make you money and I can tell you how.

The latest figures just released nationally on the genetics of U.S. dairy bulls tell the story.

Natural-service bulls, that is bulls used on heifers or as "clean-up" bulls, on average have about only one-tenth to one-hundredth the genetic values of all current U.S. A.I. bulls.

This is an enormous advantage that dairy farmers not using A.I. on their heifers forego, and only because it is more "convenient" to let a bull do the job! What a price to pay!

Current Holstein A.I. bulls average + \$160 predicted transmitting ability difference (PTA) versus natural service Holstein bulls +\$10; for Brown Swiss, the respective difference was +\$103 vs. +\$3; for Guernseys +\$117 vs. +\$13; for Jerseys +\$139 vs. +\$8;

and for Ayrshires +\$97 vs. +\$1!

Many of our dairy farmers are now very particular about picking the best A.I. bulls possible for their cows, even at premium prices for the semen.

Why, then, breed the heifers of such cows back to less valuable natural-service bulls, diluting the initial expensive semen investment in the good cows?

Furthermore, heifers usually have a 10 percent better conception rate than cows, so using expensive semen is wiser on heifers in which the conception success rate is likely to be higher.

Overall, there are at least 3 ways that you can make money with heifers: 1) get the herd average calving interval in line with 12 to 13 months; 2) get first calf heifers to come into milk at 24 months of age; and 3) use A.I. sires on all heifers, even if it costs buying a breeding chute.

Accomplishing these 3 aims will pay you handsomely in these hard times.

Manure Handling Tour Set

ELIZABETHTOWN (Lancaster Co.) — The Chesapeake Bay Program is now over five years old. Since then, major emphasis has been placed on manure management and nutrient loading on farm fields.

The cooperative extension and conservation district offices of Dauphin, Lancaster, and Lebanon counties have arranged a traveling tour of six farms to highlight manure storage management practice alternatives.

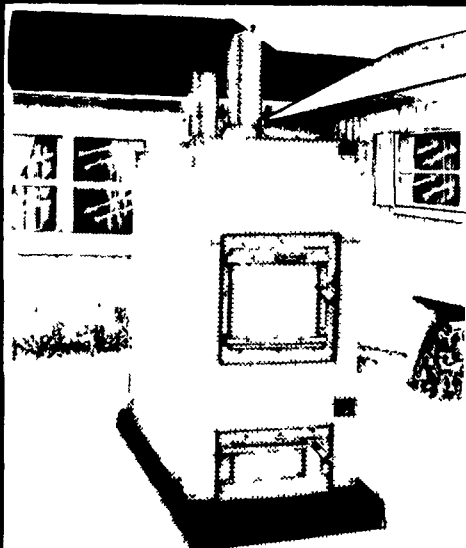
The tour will be on Tuesday, July 16, from 9:30 a.m. until 3 p.m.

in the area near Elizabethtown, Campbeltown, and Deodate. A map is available upon request from any of the above offices.

The tour features manure stacking, gravity flow transfer systems, barnyard runoff collection, concrete tanks, and reception pits. Lunch is available for no charge for anyone pre-registered by Tuesday, July 9. To register, call the Dauphin County Conservation District at (717) 921-8100.

For additional information, contact your local cooperative extension or conservation district office.

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	Pennsylvania Study	Cargill Research Farm Study
Increase in dry matter harvested	+ 29.2%	+ 28.0%
Increase in protein harvested	+ 44.2%	+ 39.7%

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