



HERD HEALTH

When I think of herd health, I really think of preventative medicine. An ounce of prevention isn't really worth a pound of cure. I think it's really worth 10 pounds of cure. In particular, when I think of preventative medicine, I think mostly of the dry and prefresh cows.

Our experience has been that if we spend a little extra time with the dry and prefresh cows to make sure that their ration is balanced and that they actually get what is on the paper from the feed man, we don't have nearly as many retained placentas, milk fevers, cows off feed, and twisted stomachs. Usually if the cows are going to get sick, it happens about the time they freshen. This really hurts the pocketbook.

Over the years we occasionally have slipped up a bit, and we always end up with problems. About four years ago, we decided it would be easier to feed the trough sweepings from the milking cows to the prefresh cows rather than hauling it out to the heifers. Guess what happened—milk fever, retained placentas, etc. Cows didn't milk well after calving. So after our vet pointed it out to us, we decided it wasn't that

much harder to haul it out to the heifers.

We should have learned our lesson, but about two years ago, we moved our heifers to a barn about a half mile away from the milking herd. We decided that maybe it wouldn't hurt to feed a little bit of trough sweepings to the prefresh group and put the rest out in the bunk feeder for some late lactation cows.

After a couple of months, it was easier to give the prefresh cows more trough sweepings and take less out to the bunk feeder, plus we were busy in the fields, which is when things like that tend to happen. It is bad enough to learn a lesson the hard way once, but we did it twice! Finally we built a cart big enough to get all the trough sweepings on one load, but small enough to push around the cow stable. Then we hook a mule into it and haul it to the heifers.

Now that the trough sweepings were being taken care of, and we were trying hard to make sure the prefresh cows get what they are supposed to, cows were coming fresh and doing quite well with almost no health problems. Therefore, the cows were eating better and peaking higher. Even though I don't understand how it works, I

know it is very important to balance the ration for the dry and prefresh cows. If they don't get started right, we have to wait another year to get top milk production.

Besides balancing the ration, we make sure dry and prefresh cows get free choice grass hay along with the rest of their ration and never have an empty trough. When they calve at night and want to eat later, we want to have something there for them to eat. When I'm working hard, I sure don't like to go 6-8 hours without something to eat or drink.

Although we don't do much grazing with the milking herd, we do split the pasture up into permanent paddocks, including one for the prefresh cows. It allows us to have a good place for them to calve and not be confined to the maternity pen or nice spring and fall days. Having a "hospital clean" and dry calving area is another important way to prevent health problems at calving time.

With grazing we have another challenge. This summer one night the cows broke through the fence and got into some lush pasture. One cow bloated and then calved the next evening. Needless to say,

she isn't doing very well. We now have a separate fencer for the pre-fresh group.

There are two other things that have really helped us. One is to body score the cows at dry off. I also score them when they move into the prefresh group and again right after they calve. I am more concerned that the cows don't lose body condition at this time rather than the actual score, although we do try to get the cows to calve at about 3.5.

We keep a record of these scores and compare them with the body scores of our vet and our feed man. If we can all see the same changes, then we can fine tune the ration and cow management a little better. If the cows lose body condition, we know that we will have fresh cow problems.

The other thing we do is to write down every incidence of fresh cow diseases, such as milk fever, retained placentas, twisted stomachs, mastitis, ketosis, or infections. Then we can see how we stack up to our goals and adjust our management accordingly. It's a lot more work to write all this

down, but when we do this, we don't forget how much trouble we're having. We also don't remember just one cow and think it's a hard problem. When we have the real numbers we can better talk to our vet and feed man about correcting the problem. To me, it's like milk weighing and figuring crop yields. When we measure the result, we can manage better.

In looking back over our experiences, it sure looks like the pre-fresh group is an area where we can't take short cuts. When we do our homework, the cows do much better for us. Again, an ounce of prevention is really worth 10 pounds of cure.

Note: Readers may send any questions or comments about these articles to the Lancaster Farming office. I received a letter from a reader who likes grazing better than conventional dairying. I will discuss this issue in next month's column. Thank you for writing—we want to have an open discussion going.



Cousins Keith Bollinger, seated, and Andy Bollinger beat competition at the FFA Youth Tractor Contest at the Ephrata Fair. The cousins, both students at Ephrata FFA, attribute their driving expertise to FFA training at Ephrata High School. Keith also has a part-time job on a farm that gives him driving experience. Keith, named champion, is the son of Sharon and Raymond Bollinger. Reserve champion Andy is the son of Jim and Gerry Bollinger.

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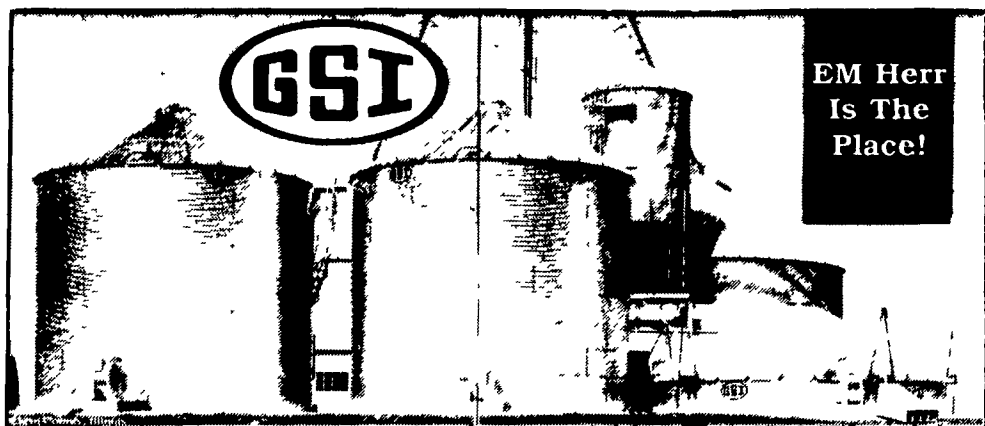
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