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COLLEGE PARK, Md. — More than 400 years ago, the great Spanish author Cervantes observed in his timeless novel, Don Quixote, that, "To be prepared is half the victory."

Dairy farmers who escaped the devastating ice storms and electrical power failures that hit New England and eastern Canada last winter ought to take Cervantes' words seriously, according to Cooperative Extension specialists at the University of Maryland.

As a producer, you should disprove American author Mark Twain's observation that, "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it."

What you need, says Lee Grant, Extension specialist in agricultural engineering, is a generator for emergency standby power — available on short notice — that won't break down under continuous usage for long periods.

The generator may be a self-contained stationery model, or more likely it'll be run by your tractor's power take-off (PTO).

Dr. Grant recommends testing your generator once a month — or every six months at the very least — to make sure it is ready to go when needed.

He also advises that you hire a qualified electrician to install a proper-sized transfer switch in or near your milking parlor to isolate your generator from the incoming utility line. (See illustration).

Store your generator in a clean, dry place with other power equipment — not in the rear of a dirt-floor shed.

Before starting a periodic test, clean out all vents and other openings in the generator; lubricate; check and/or change gearbox oil; inspect for rodent damage, food and nests. Rotate slowly by hand to make sure there is no hindrance to smooth operation.

Run the test with heaters and lights on, because they draw a constant electrical load (amperage).

Check nameplate for voltage capacity.

If your generator is rated at 40,000 watts (40 KW), it can stand a load of 80,000 watts for a few seconds. This would be the surge necessary for the generator to get a milking machine motor started.

Make the test run at full load for at least 25 minutes; one hour would even be better. When you shut your generator down — after disconnecting the power — let it

idle for a few seconds to blow out the heat.

What if you don't have a generator on your farm and can't afford to buy one?

The Maryland Cooperative Extension specialist suggests checking with the administrators of local disaster plans to see if those plans include provisions for loaning generators to dairy farms. Nearby military bases or National Guard armories could be another loan source of generators for emergency use. **How Often To Milk Cows?**

In emergency situations when a standby generator is your only power source and milk haulers are not able to reach your farm, it's tempting to milk your cows only once a day.

Is this a good idea? Not according to Bob Peters, Extension dairy specialist at the University of Maryland.

Dr. Peters notes that milk production can drop significantly when cows are milked only once a day, instead of twice daily. And any cow with a history of mastitis is likely to have the problem flare up when she is not on regular twice-a-day milking.

A 1992 study with Friesian and Jersey cows at the Ruakura Agricultural Research Centre at Hamilton, New Zealand, showed that cows milked only once a day produced 10-28 percent less milk and milk solids in early to mid-lactation than cows milked twice a day.

The loss was only slightly less for cows in late lactation.

"From the standpoint of maintaining herd production and keeping udders healthy," the Maryland Cooperative Extension specialist conclude, "twice-a-day milking is worthwhile — even if you have to dump your milk for a few days."

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