

Docking Dairy Cow Tails Becoming Popular

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Dairy producers interested in better farming efficiency and improving herd health may want to consider docking their cows' tails, according to a veterinarian in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

Larry Hutchinson, professor of veterinary science, said removing two-thirds of a cow's tail — a practice called "docking" — is catching on in Pennsylvania as producers with large herds change over to parallel milking parlors.

In parallel parlors, milking equipment is attached between the

cow's hind legs, and the animal's tail becomes an obstacle to efficient milking.

"The tail is not just a physical obstacle," Hutchinson said. "There also are sanitary considerations during milking. The tail's 'switch' — the long-haired end of the tail — is not clean, and it can contaminate the milking equipment, the cow's teats and the hands of the person doing the milking."

Hutchinson said more Pennsylvania dairy producers are switching from herringbone milking parlors to parallel configurations as

their herds expand.

"I've seen several producers who still use herringbone parlors dock their cows' tails as well," he said. "They feel the cows remain cleaner, and milking is easier."

Hutchinson explained that a cow's tail often can be the dirtiest part of the animal. The tail often is dropped into the milking gutter, manure or mud. When the cow swings its tail, mud and filth are sprayed onto her back, onto the udder or into the face of the person milking the cow.

"One of the biggest questions about tail docking is how the cow

can control flies without a tail," Hutchinson said. "In reality, the cow's tail is pretty ineffective fly control. In fact, when a cow flicks a manure-laden tail onto its back, it tends to attract more flies."

Hutchinson emphasized that farmers who choose to dock their cows' tails must be extra vigilant about fly control and cleanliness.

"A cow with a docked tail can get just as dirty, if she is lying in manure and mud," Hutchinson said. "Tailless cows should be kept in clean and dry areas, and farmers should take fly control as a serious responsibility."

Cows can have their tails surgically removed by a veterinarian, or producers can remove the tail by using elastrators, rubber bands that are placed around the tail, cutting off circulation to the remaining part.

"The tail will fall off within two to four weeks," Hutchinson said. "It's better for the cows if the tails are docked within the first few months of life, because the blood vessels in the tail are less developed in young calves. But you can use this method on adult cows as well."

Hutchinson suggested that producers who have no experience in docking tails should consult with their veterinarian for a recom-

mended docking procedure.

Hutchinson said studies have shown that cows experience little stress when their tails are docked using the elastrator method. "There are no observable signs of stress or pain, and cortisol — an enzyme that indicates pain levels — remains unchanged," he said.

Hutchinson recommended leaving one-third of the tail. For young heifers, that means placing the band approximately two finger-widths below the calf's vulva. For older heifers and cows, place the band two hand-widths below the vulva.

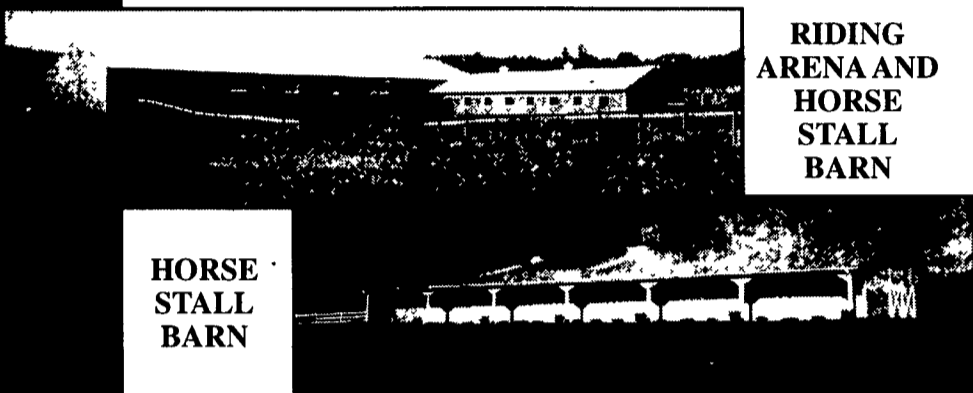
"Cutting the tail too short may result in vaginal infections," Hutchinson said. "If it is cut too long, the tail can act as a club. It can knock a person unconscious or flick equipment out of the hands of a farmer."

Hutchinson pointed out that the remaining stub is large enough to hold onto when restraining a cow. It also can be moved aside easily during insemination, lessening the chance of contamination.

"Many producers, particularly those who show cattle, choose not to dock tails," he said. "As producers seek more efficient methods, the practice probably will become more common in the next decade or two."

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