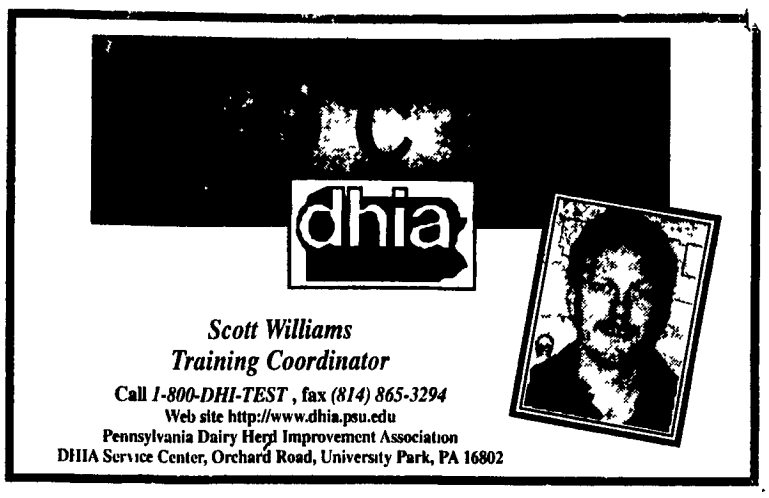

Dairyman To Dairyman

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QUESTION: Could you elaborate on some indicators that show when competition between first lactation heifers and older cows becomes a problem?

ANSWER: This question comes in response to an earlier article that listed what is expected between peak milk differences of 2-year-olds and older cows.

The first indicator of course in this scenario is establishing a ratio between first lactation peak milk and older cows.

When this ratio falls below 73 to 75 percent, one consideration may be that the younger animals are being shortchanged by older and more aggressive cows.

Doing things right during heifer development can go a long way in keeping age difference effects to a minimum, but often that is not enough.

Therefore, where do we look when we think that growth, transition, and health considerations are at their best?

Often times, when heifers peak at levels that are less than predicted, other trends can be noticed.

If these first lactation animals also reach their peak later than the normal 75 to 90 days in lactation, we should suspect that the cause could be from competition with older cows.

This time period often has younger animals showing persistency well over 100 percent from test to test, but they may take 120 to 150 days to hit peak milk. Reproduction statistics are usually lower than the rest of the herd when competition is the holdback.

Many times, the performance paramters can tell us there is a problem. We need to make physical observations if we are to be truly successful in determing the source of our problem. These observations should include feeding areas, water access, and resting places.

Feeding areas should be large enough to accommodate feed availability needs. For those that have three rows of stalls to one feed area, it is a common mistake to not notice the young and more timid cows being pushed back until everyone else has their fill.

Make sure the bunk has plenty of feed left for the second wave of consumers and make sure it does not take a 36-inch span to reach it.

We need to maximize the time that feed is available to the cows in a crowded environment. Bunks that are accessbile from both sides can be too narrow and head butting can limit feed access, therefore making it the same as a short fence line bunk.

One of the biggest problems that I commonly observe is that the total area of the bunk is not used. Feed is dispersed so that the ends of the bunk are unused or become empty very fast.

The fact that you provide 150 feet of bunk for 75 cows is not important when there is no feed at the last 20 feet of either end.

Water access is just as, if not more important than feed access. Cows have the tendency to drink more heavily at certain times than others. After milking is one of these times.

It is important to be able to accommodate the number of cows leaving the milking area at one time. Causing bottlenecks will result in less than optimal water intake. This is especially true when younger, less aggressive cows are commingled with older cows.

The last area that I will mention is that of the resting place.

Do you observe that some areas in your facility are favored over others? Guess who will be pushed to the less desirable areas.

Here it becomes advisable to correct the problem, because first lactation or not, there will be cows that are forced to use this poorer area.

What we especially want to avoid is first lactation animals using the floor instead of the stall, to allow quicker escape from one of more boss cows that may pick on these youngsters.

It is not my intention to recall every reason to segregate first lactation from the rest of the herd. I believe that it is good management to do so.

The truth is, you need to ask your cows if this might be good for them.

Do heifers make less than 73 percent of mature cow peak at the time when we expect them to peak?

Take the time to develop observation techniques that will guide you along with your records in making management decisions.

Average Farm Feed Costs For Handy Reference

To help farmers across the state to have handy reference of commodity input costs in their feeding operations for DHIA record sheets or to develop livestock feed cost data, here's last week's average costs of various ingredients as compiled from regional reports across the state of Pennsylvania.

Remember, these are averages, so you will need to adjust your figures up or down according to your location and the quality of your crop.

Corn, No.2y — 2.42 bu., 4.34 cwt.

Wheat, No. 2 — 2.44 bu., 4.07 cwt.

Barley, No. 3 — 1.44 bu., 3.08 cwt.

Oats, No. 2 — 1.46 bu., 4.56 cwt.

Soybeans, No. 1 — 4.35 bu., 7.26 cwt.

Ear Corn — 73.13 ton, 3.66 cwt.

Alfalfa Hay — 97.50 ton, 4.88 cwt.

Mixed Hay — 88.00 ton, 4.4 cwt.

Timothy Hay — 93.50 ton, 4.68 cwt.