Question: We are debating the need for a prefresh diet for our heifers. What are some indicators that would tell us if this management change would be beneficial?

When this question came in, I checked some PA DHIA records before giving an answer. I always recommend a transition or prefresh diet for all animals before their next calving. I believe this is especially beneficial for heifers that calve for the first time, due to all the changes that happen to them during this period. What are some statistical indicators that lead me to this conclusion?

One place where I evaluate heifer performance and how well prepared the heifers are to become cows is found on the third section down on Herd Summary II. Here we see "Profile of Cows by Lactation Number." Near the center of the page is a column that states the average days to peak and the average milk at peak. As we compare days to peak in this particular herd, we see a large contrast between older cows and first lactation heifers. The second lactation cows reach peak at 80 days and the older ones at 60. In contrast, we see that the first lactation heifers take 130 days to reach peak. It is normal for heifers to reach peak slower than their older counterparts, but certainly not this slow. Past first lactation, cows should reach peak milk production two to three weeks ahead of reaching peak dry matter intake. With this bit of knowledge, we recognize the need for proper body reserves and transition diets can reduce the weight loss that is seen as cows reach peak around 60 days in milk. Heifers that obviously are going through more changes at this time usually hit peak milk a bit later at 75 to 85 days in milk. The heifers that are peaking much later than this are telling us we have not prepared them very well to be milk cows.

Another evaluation that tells us if we are meeting the needs of these changing animals is looking at some reproductive performance parameters and how they differ from one age group to another. Again, we use our PA DHIA Herd Summary II for this information. The second section down is the "Reproductive Profile of Breeding Herd." Going right to left we come across the column labeled average days to 1st service. This herd again shows great disparity between first lactation and older cows. Performance differs little between second lactation and older cows with the average days to first service at 110. When we look at the first lactation animals, we see a substantial difference. Noting that the performance of the older cows can be improved reproductively, the first lactation animals show a more severe problem. Here we see these cows being bred for the first time at over 160 days. When we see that the first lactation cows make up 45% of the herd, it is no wonder the overall herd reproductive performance is not at all what we would like.

These two evaluations do not exclusively point to problems caused by the lack of a transition period. Bunk management and grouping needs can be indicated when first lactation performance lags behind the rest of the herd. The numbers seen for this herd suggest that the lack of a prefresh period might initiate problems as these new animals come into the herd. Certainly, getting off to a good start by proper preparation should be your first step.

PA DHIA offers a consultation service to address these types of concerns. For those of you who are testing for MUN, you have the opportunity for a free farm visit that will help in record evaluation. Remember, these are your cows evaluation what you do...and sometimes what you do not do.

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 — 2.51 bu., 4.49 cwt.
Wheat, No.2 — 2.41 bu., 4.02 cwt.
Barley, No.3 — 1.75 bu., 3.74 cwt.
Oats, No.2 — 1.55 bu., 4.84 cwt.
Soybeans, No.1 — 4.95 bu., 8.25 cwt.
Ear Corn — 76.63 ton, 3.83 cwt.
Alfalfa Hay — 123.75 ton, 6.19 cwt.
Mixed Hay — 122.50 ton, 6.13 cwt.
Timothy Hay — 132.50 ton, 6.63 cwt.