

# Dairy Production Medicine Program Enhances Herd Health, Profits

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — A Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences educational program for practicing veterinarians is contributing to healthier herds — and healthier bottom lines.

The Dairy Production Medicine certificate program, offered by the college's veterinary science department, graduated its fourth class of animal health practitioners earlier this year. A recent survey reveals that what the veterinarians learned in the course is making a positive difference in their practices and in the dairy operations they serve.

"The program is designed to teach and reinforce herd performance medicine, as opposed to the more traditional individual animal care that most people learn in veterinary school," said David Wolfgang, Penn State extension veterinarian and senior research associate in veterinary science. "Individual care still is important. But herd care and production medicine require different skills and knowledge that often is best learned and applied after some years of clinical experience."

Wolfgang said the typical veterinarian in the program has been in private practice between eight and 15 years. The class of 2002 consisted of 20 practitioners from seven states.

"With their training and experience, they realize that to make the greatest impact on animal health and farm profitability, they need to become more proactive and prevent problems or eliminate production-limiting conditions," he said. "Typically, these areas involve interactions between the animals and their environment, nutrition and management."

Dairy producers surveyed said that as a result of the program, fewer unscheduled visits by their veterinarians were required to deal with herd health problems. Producers reported the greatest progress in forage evaluation, milk quality analysis, records analysis and improvement in animal environment. They also said their veterinarians were helpful in addressing complex issues currently facing the dairy industry, such as Johne's disease prevention and biosecurity.

"These improvements translated into higher productivity and profitability through reduced feed costs, higher milk yields, reduced somatic cell counts, premium bonuses on milk and increased pregnancy rate," Wolfgang said. "For instance, one producer reported that he was able to reduce purchased feed costs by \$80 per ton. Another reported that milk yield increased eight pounds per cow in only two months."

Veterinarians reported that by implementing concepts learned in the course, they were able to reduce the number of emergency calls from clients by 20 percent. Graduates said proactive, preventive health care programs to address mastitis and milk quality problems and to improve reproductive performance and heifer health also increased significantly.

The Dairy Production Medicine program is offered in 10, three-day modules over a three-year period. Wolfgang said Penn State is accepting inquiries from veterinarians interested in enrolling in the next round of the program. For more information, contact Wolfgang by phone at (814) 863-5849 or by e-mail at drw12@psu.edu.

## Loafing Areas

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- **Reduced soil and nutrient loss** — The loafing lot system helps prevent excessive nutrient runoff to above and below ground water sources.
- **Improved foot health** — Manure, urine, and concrete work together to erode the soft tissue of the hoof. The grass lots help clean and dry the cow's hoof.
- **Milk Quality and Cow Cleanliness** — Cows that rest in clean, grassy areas are less likely to contract environmental mastitis, and they will come into the milk barn with cleaner udders.
- **Mowing and Hay** — The paddocks should be bushhogged to maintain growth and promote sod vigor. In years of plentiful rainfall, some producers graze heifers and/or dry cows on in the paddocks. Harvesting hay is also a good practice when possible as it "mines" the nutrients from the soils and makes good heifer hay.
- **Farm Appearance** — What could be more beautiful than a herd of healthy cows on lush grass fields? Muddy lots and dirty cows send the wrong message to the general public about agriculture.

