

DAIRY PIPELINE

Volume 39, No. 1 January/February 2018



Complete, Accurate Data Means Better Management Information

—Dave Winston, Extension Dairy Scientist & Dairy Youth Program Coordinator; dwinston@vt.edu

“Data collection should enhance herd management by providing complete, accurate information to support better planning and evaluation, which leads to greater profitability.”

Dairy farms are complex operations. Dairy managers and their consultants use a variety of information sources to evaluate the operation. These include DHIA, milk check and plant lab results, parlor management software, and feed management software to name a few. Allocating time to provide accurate data input is critical to get the most benefit. Otherwise, “garbage in, garbage out” becomes the reality. To have value for the farmer and any consultants who are using the records, information systems should truly reflect what is happening on the farm. Seven areas that commonly fall short of completeness and/or accuracy follow.

1. Are all animals properly identified?

Proper identification is the starting point for all data collected, including health, reproduction, and genetic information. A strong identification system is the cornerstone for herd management and breeding decisions.

2. Are reasons for cows leaving the herd accurate?

Knowing when and why an animal has left the herd can provide clues about other issues being faced in the herd. The “when” part can refer to the month/season of the year or stage of lactation when the cow left the herd. It is generally recommended for culling in the first 30 days of lactation to be less than 4 percent, and less than 6 percent in the first 60 days of lactation. Culling at this stage of lactation is undesirable because it would mean that the cow left the herd when expected to be at peak lactation.

3. Are bodyweights measured rather than visually estimated?

Knowing the bodyweight of cows is helpful in fine tuning ration formulation. Bodyweight information is necessary to evaluate heifer growth and performance. In the past, growth charts were published with the premise that one size should fit all animals in a breed. Today, we recognize that there are differences in mature bodyweights between herds. Goals for heifer growth are now based on percent of mature bodyweight within a herd. For example, heifers should be bred at 55 percent of

mature bodyweight and calve for the first time weighing 85 percent of mature bodyweight.

4. Are all heats recorded, regardless of whether the animal was bred or not?

Recording a heat even when a cow is not bred provides good information to predict when the animal will be in heat again. Heat detection efficiency reflected through percent heats observed in the DHI-202 Herd Summary is more accurate with complete reporting.

5. Is the herd’s voluntary waiting period reflective of when cows are being bred after calving?

The voluntary waiting period (VWP) is a value set by the dairy manager that indicates the herd’s policy on when to start breeding cows back after calving. The most common VWP is 60 days, but adjustments may be made based on herd production level and reproductive health. Many measures of reproductive efficiency are based on this value. If a herd does not comply with the VWP, reproductive parameters related to the VWP may be misleading. If the percent of cows bred less than the VWP is greater than zero, it may be time to review the VWP. One could then decide to reset the VWP or enforce adherence to the one already in place.

6. When an animal is sick, is the diagnosis recorded? The treatment? The outcome?

Health records are a challenge because they can be very complex. However, they also offer a tremendous opportunity to collect meaningful information. By recording every disease event, regardless of whether or not an animal was treated, incidence of diseases can be determined. Treatment documentation is important to meet regulatory requirements, but is also important for tracking milk and meat withholding times. The piece that is most often missing is outcome documentation. By tracking treatment successes and failures, one can better plan future treatment strategies.

7. Is the cause of death recorded when an animal dies?

Cow mortality is not entirely preventable on dairy farms, but it is in the herd’s best interest economically to minimize it. While knowing the herd mortality rate is important, it is equally important to know when cows die (season and



Upcoming Events

See [VTDairy](#) for details.

Dairy Bowl practices will start in January

January 10, 2018

BASF On-Target Sprayer Academy, 12:00-3:00 pm, Franklin Center

January 16, 2018

Dairy Herd Book Clinic Franklin Co., on farm

January 23, 2018

Dairy Herd Book Clinic Franklin Co., on-farm

January 25, 2018

PCDart Training, Franklin Center

January 26, 2018

Smyth Washington DHIA Awards Banquet, 6:30 pm, Marion Farm Bureau Insurance Office

February 1, 2018

Vantage No-Till Program, Franklin Co., location TBA

February 14-15, 2018

Virginia State Feed Association Convention & Virginia Tech Nutritional Management “Cow College”

February 22, 2018

Area Dairy Conference—Amelia, Details TBA

February 23, 2018

Area Dairy Conference—Southwest, Details TBA

February 26, 2018

Manure Management Program, Franklin Center

March 10, 2018

State Dairy Bowl Contest

March 24, 2018

Little All-American

May 14, 2018

Hokie Cow Classic

May 19, 2018

District Dairy Judging Workout

If you are a person with a disability and require any auxiliary aids, services or other accommodations for any Extension event, please discuss your accommodation needs with the Extension staff at your local Extension office at least 1 week prior to the event.

stage of lactation) and why. By recording this data and summarizing it, one has much better information to evaluate and troubleshoot herd health and management issues.

Collecting complete, detailed information may take more time, depending on one’s record-keeping system. Collecting data just to collect

data is not always helpful, but careful consideration and design of data collection needs can be impactful. Data collection should enhance herd management by providing complete, accurate information to support better planning and evaluation, which leads to greater profitability.

Producers Take Part in Hands-On Low-Energy Handling Workshop

—*Cynthia Martel, Extension Agent, Rockingham County; cmartel@vt.edu*

Producers in Franklin County are working to meet consumer demand for the healthy, safe, and humane treatment of animals. With recent videos surfacing from a Florida dairy farm showing employees handling cows roughly and inappropriately, it is more important than ever that farm owners and employees receive correct training. Dr. Don Höglund, MS, DVM and owner of DairyStockmanship.com, came to Franklin County for three days to train dairy and beef producers on low-energy handling. It is not about training the animals, but training the workers correctly the first time—and following up—that makes this type of training critical.

Why do cows run? This question was asked repeatedly during the training to ensure understanding—and the importance—of the answer. A common theme in the answers was that the cow is scared or she is being chased. But how can we really know? We can’t exactly have a conversation or communicate directly with the animal. We should not conclude that she is scared. For humans to be able to understand the feelings portrayed by animals (or even other humans) we need to be able to communicate with them. Take this exercise for example: you’re sitting in a large room with a group of people and you are asked to sit in a circle facing each other. Next, you are asked to tell us what the person directly across from you is thinking and feeling without asking the individual. Most people will try their best to tell the crowd what the person is thinking and feeling, but they will get it wrong. This is because without the use of language we cannot begin to answer the question of how someone is feeling or thinking. It’s the same for animals. *Why do cows run?* The answer is: we don’t know. We just know she is running because she can!

Dairy producers worked for two days learning techniques on how to move animals in a low-energy environment: slowing down, correct

hand movement, and where to position themselves for the most effective results. Training calves is where it all begins. For the first 6-8 weeks of life, calves are trained to face you for everything. Producers were trained how to calmly move calves and breeding age heifers in different scenarios. Training calves to move in a calm manner prevents lane runners in the future and can help reduce stress in the parlor. As calves grow into cows, all work moves from the front to the back end, switching to milking and breeding. Dairy producers also learned about how parlor issues can reduce milk production. Parlor design, how workers move in the holding area and what they do during milking can affect animal stress and behavior, reduce milk production, and cause learned responses.

For example, a fresh heifer that has never been in a parlor until the day she calves is asked to enter a space she is unfamiliar with. That’s a lot of stress!

The most important lessons farmers learned from the training were to slow down and to not use force. Training younger animals will, over time, train your entire herd. Workshops for youth are in the works for 2018 with Dr. Höglund. We need to train youth to succeed by starting at a young age, training the herd and handlers correctly, and developing strategies for combating the pressures of animal activities to ensure that animal producers are doing things correctly.

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For more information on Dairy Extension or to learn about current programs, visit us at VT Dairy—Home of the Dairy Extension Program on the web at: www.vtdairy.dasc.vt.edu.

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