

Improving Milking Quality and Profit

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The goal of every dairy should be to continually improve the quality of the milk they ship off the dairy. This will not only insure that the finished milk product will be of high quality and acceptability to the consumer, but will also increase the profit of the dairy. Profits will be increased due to less mastitis, reduced treatment costs, less discard milk and fewer cows going to market as a result of severe or chronic cases of mastitis.

Here are some ideas to consider for your dairy:

Make the production of quality milk a priority. The management of the dairy, the owner and herdsmen, must decide to make the production of high quality milk a priority for the dairy. They must let the milkers and other dairy works affecting milk quality know that they are serious about milk quality. The management will have to lead the way if they truly expect the milkers to care about milk quality.

Involve your veterinarian in mastitis prevention and control. Each dairy needs a veterinarian that is keenly interested in working with you to prevent and control mastitis. As you know, there are plenty of vets willing to do the reproductive work. The key is to find a vet that will provide complete veterinary care for your dairy herd to include the control of mastitis and production of high quality milk. Your veterinarian should be willing to help you develop written mastitis treatment protocols as well as designing a monitoring program. They should also be involved in your milker training sessions.

Involve milkers in decisions affected milking procedures. There are several TQM-like programs available for dairies interested in producing high quality milk. One thing they all have in common is that they insist that milkers and other workers be involved in decisions affecting milk quality. The workers need to “buy into” the concepts and strategies that management wants to employ to produce high quality milk. “Top-down” implementation is doomed to failure. Owners who listen to their workers and involve them in development of a program will gain their support.

Provide milker training. Few successful enterprises hire new employees without providing them training when they begin the job. On-the-job training with an experienced milker is not always the best method. Many experienced milkers also know all the shortcuts and these shortcuts may lead to continued cases of mastitis and poor milk quality. Periodic training sessions provided by your veterinarian is a good way to go and all milkers should be required to attend. You can't afford to keep a milker that resists training.

Have written work assignments. By having milkers involved in the milk quality program, you secure their “buy in”. By having written work assignments for each person, you insure that everyone knows exactly what they are responsible for and expected to do each day. Each work assignment should be clearly identifiable with an area that impacts milk quality. When milk quality goals are not reached, a quick check of the work assignments will identify who is responsible. It also allow for a quick “attaboy” when the goals are reached or exceeded.

Make periodic observations of milking and give feedback. Owners and herdsmen committed to the production of high quality milk will frequently be found in the milking parlor. These owners will really know what is happening in the parlor on a day-to-day basis. They should not hesitate to let the milkers know what they are seeing and what needs improvement. Milkers that routinely fail to follow the prescribed milking techniques for your dairy should be milking for some else! Milkers should also give compliments or rewards when they continually do good work.

Set goals for milk quality and review results with milkers. It is often heard that “if it is not measured, it will not be improved”. Management and milkers should work together to set some realistic goals for bulk tank somatic cell counts, plate counts or coliform counts. Other goals may relate to discard milk per case of mastitis, average days in the hospital pen or numbers of cows marketed primarily for udder health reasons. The workers that produce and replace bedding for the free stalls or work in the corrals should be involved, as their efforts will influence the cases of environmental mastitis. Once the goals are set, they should be monitored on a monthly basis. Posting them where all the workers can see the results. Rewards for meeting goals are in orders. When goals are not met, management and workers should investigate the reasons for failure.

Develop a written treatment protocol. Your veterinarian can help you design a written treatment protocol that will reduce costs of mastitis treatment, reduce the number of chronic mastitis cases and decrease the amount of discard milk due to mastitis. Based on culture results, your vet can tailor the antibiotics needed for your herd. When the milkers follow written protocols, the chances of expensive residues in the bulk tank milk can be minimized. Treatment protocols should also include a written or computerized record of all treated cows and their meat withdrawal times. These treatment records should be checked prior to sending a cow to market. Periodically, the herdsman should check with the person treating the mastitis cases to be certain they are following the written protocol. Like everything else, subtle modifications can creep into the treatment protocol if they are not reviewed every so often.

Monitor mastitis cases. With your veterinarian, develop a mastitis monitoring program specific for your dairy. This may include collecting milk samples for culture from the bulk tank, clinical cases, fresh cows, high cell count cows and new additions to the herd. Monitor programs are your mastitis insurance policy and will prevent serious outbreaks of mastitis like Staph aureus or mycoplasmas. Results of the monitoring program should be shared with the milkers and other workers.

Apply the National Mastitis Council control concepts. These practices have reduced the impact of both contagious and environmental mastitis in herds that routinely apply them on their dairies. They are good milking hygiene to reduce teat end exposure while insuring good milk let-down, teat dipping (pre- and post-milking), total dry cow antibiotic therapy, segregation of new herd additions and clinical cases, using appropriate bedding for your herd situation, along with proper nutritional supplementation and J-5-like vaccination. It is also necessary to have properly designed and functioning milking and milk cooling equipment.

Each of these ideas embodies a strategy or concept that will allow for continual increase in milk quality while decreasing mastitis and increasing profits. Like the ad on TV says, “The choice is yours, pay me now...or pay me later”. The choice really is up to you, the owners and managers of dairies. When you choose to increase the quality of the milk coming off your dairy, it will happen.