

How Is Your Monitoring Going?

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Where does the time go? Do you ever feel like you're working as hard as you can but you're still not getting everything accomplished that you "should" each day? When there is an equipment breakdown or cow problem it can be difficult enough just to get the cows milked and fed let alone having time to do any additional tasks. Throw in field work and upkeep and it becomes hard to stay motivated to do the extras on the farm, however, the extras are sometimes what make all the difference in profitability.

Our goal is to produce safe, healthy milk as efficiently and cost effectively as possible while ensuring our animals are well looked after. How do we know if we are achieving this goal if we are not monitoring performance in a few key areas? How do we know if with a few minor changes we may be able to save a lot of money, or produce significantly more milk with minimal inputs if we are not looking for areas we can improve?

Do you know how you are doing with your colostrum feeding? Are your heifers growing as well as they should? What is the level of disease in your calves? Heifers? Cows? (pneumonia, diarrhea, lameness, ketosis, mastitis, milk fever, metritis, etc.) Is it different from last month or last year? How does it compare to other farms? What is the body condition score of your animals? Are they over-conditioned? Under-conditioned? Are you feeding the ration your nutritionist has prepared for you? Where are you meeting targets and where can you improve?

ProAction ensures we are keeping good records for treatments so we know when milk and cows can be shipped. This helps us to keep track of some diseases but there are more things we should be monitoring. It can be time consuming to monitor everything and it rarely gets done if it is not done in some sort of systematic manner. There are some things that need to be done at very specific times, for example, colostrum testing needs to occur immediately after collection so it can be frozen, fed, or thrown away. However other things like weighing, and testing for failure of passive transfer in calves, and ketone testing, checking vaginal discharges, and temperatures of fresh cows can occur daily, twice weekly, or once a week depending on the time available in your schedule. The point is it should be done as some sort of routine so that minor problems can be found early before they develop into larger ones.

We want to know when calves aren't receiving appropriate colostrum or aren't growing well. This can be monitored by testing total proteins on calves 2-7 (ideally 2-5) days of age and with regular weights on calves (near birth, 8 weeks of age, and at 12 - 15 months of age, for example). Good colostrum feeding practices and optimal heifer growth can affect days to first calving as well as milk production for that heifer for her entire milking career. Finding and fixing weaknesses in our heifer rearing program can allow our heifers to achieve their full genetic potential and improve the performance of our heifers and our future herd.

For fresh cows we need to know when ketosis is present so we can treat and hopefully minimize milk loss and twisted stomachs. We need to find metritis and endometritis early to allow for timely treatment and to minimize days open. More importantly with both these transition issues we need to know when their incidence is increasing or if levels are unacceptably high in the herd, so changes

can be made to the entire transition program. Routinely testing for ketones, doing vaginal exams and taking temperatures which are very inexpensive tests can help us to derail train wrecks before they occur.

Other monitoring can follow other routines. For example, body condition scoring can occur with vaccinations, especially if some are given when one month fresh and others when drying off. Mastitis monitoring can occur with California Mastitis Testing (CMT) of cows at dry off and after freshening, as well as through routine DHI Somatic Cell Testing testing. As we move into an era where we need to be mindful of overuse of antibiotics, the CMT and bacterial culture option should be considered with each treatment. Knowing a pathogen is highly unlikely to cure with antibiotics, can save money and time in making alternative decisions for that quarter or cow and decreases antibiotic use.

Monitoring bulk tank milk volume, fat, and protein can help us to know when things may be changing with the ration. We often want to blame the ration printed for us, but we need to ensure we are monitoring all things that contribute to the ration consumed including dry matter of ingredients, mixing order and volumes, particle length of feeds, feeding frequency, feeding routine and push up intervals, etc. We also need to monitor the cows for manure consistencies, ruminations, amount of refusals, how the refusals compare to the ration fed (sorting?), dry cow urine pH's (if feeding anionic salts), cow comfort, lameness, etc. Monitoring these things can help us to catch ration problems early and help to improve things more quickly. Having a keen eye when dealing with cows daily helps but taking the time to actually measure some of these things and share them with your nutritionist can really open up opportunities to better tailor feeding.

We need to be consistently looking for places to make improvements to stay competitive in today's world. If you need help with some of these tests speak to your advisors. Some things can be completed at regular veterinary herd health or nutritionist visits. Others can be done by registered veterinary technicians between visits and in some cases your advisors are a source of training for you or your staff so you can complete this monitoring yourselves. Finding problems quickly and being able to see where you stand relative to other producers creates opportunity for improvement and efficiency. We need to be proactive and efficient in today's evolving business of dairy farming.