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Calving Them in Right

How do you measure a successful calving event and entrance into early lactation? As simply as 'Everyone lived!' or 'I came to the barn and she was up licking the calf off.' For such a complicated and remarkable event it is to have a healthy, live calf from a cow well prepared for the process, the numbers are fairly good to great for many farms. But what are the best measures of that success, and which measures indicate the most profitability?

Transition cow management is the most critical piece of the puzzle on the dairy farm and is the starting place for reaching almost every goal the farm may have. Want a better preg rate? -calve them in right, want lower cases of milk fever, ketosis, mastitis? -calve them in right, want to lower antibiotic usage? -calve them in right, want better calf health from improved colostrum? -you get the idea. But where to start if any or many of those goals are sub par? If you have indication that the goals are not being met than there must be some measuring in place to lead you down that path. Measuring and tracking of key indicators works to promote change and improvement. But comparing them to industry benchmarks is not the total answer. When trying to improve within a farm, we want to show a trend in the right direction from what was being done before on that farm. Comparing your performance to your previous performance (and the cows performance) is the most meaningful to know things are getting better.

Getting a cow dried off begins with getting her pregnant early in lactation. The first goal is to have that cow dry for no less than 42 days and no more than 75 as cows outside this window trend towards trouble. One of the first measures done is to look at average days dry along with the percentages of cows that fall within this window. This measure includes looking at average gestation length on each farm as there can be a variance. Body condition and lameness scoring of cows entering the dry period and again at day of calving can be an indicator of nutrition and environmental factors occurring in this pen. There is plenty of research looking at the far-off dry cow ration and environment as a source of success or failure at calving and early lactation. Getting them dried off, into a quiet clean space with appropriate nutrition is the starting point. Many farms have a white board where the

number of cows in this pen is recorded daily to aid in measuring dry matter intake and adjusting in real time.

Fast forward to after calving and how is success measured? There are cow side tests that we use to screen all fresh cows to find those that need help. Compiling these findings give us our disease rates and risk of a cow successfully or unsuccessfully coming through the transition period. Obviously, since we worked so hard to get her pregnant, losing a cow in this period is very costly as all 'opportunity profit' is not realized. Subclinical disease monitoring includes ketosis screening - one of the most efficient and effective ways to monitor transition success and early lactation performance. It identifies the ones needing help and is an early detector of herd trends when consecutive cows are found positive.

Using early milk production benchmarks helps to identify that your herd may be under performing with measures at week 4, 6 and 8. This historically was lumped into peak milk but using 2-week intervals can yield a bit more information. These production measures may be off in spite of low to no clinical disease pressure.

We have worked through Lactanet to utilize a check list of all key performance indicators from dry off to first service conception as a means of measuring the transition success on farms. When combining the metrics it can show a clear path to the bottlenecks needing attention that will help maximize profitability during these tighter margin times. Over the next few weeks we will be bringing along farm data to herd health for a closer look at what the cows are telling us.



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