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G97-1325 What Management Practices Are High Producing Dairy Herds Using?

Jeffrey F. Keown

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, jkeown1@unl.edu

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What Management Practices Are High Producing Dairy Herds Using?

This NebGuide outlines management practices used in high-producing dairy operations.

Jeffrey F. Keown, Extension Dairy Specialist

- [Table I. Relationships between management practices and milk production by herd size.](#)

In 1996, a national dairy survey was undertaken by the National Health Monitoring System. This survey of management practices was sent to 2,500 herds in 20 states representing 83.1 percent of all dairy cows in the United States. The states included in the survey were California, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin. The survey asked 13 questions ranging from computer use, ration balancing, BST use and veterinarian usage to various calf rearing procedures. The survey results were categorized by various herd sizes, as well as high and low milk production groups. These results can be used to help you identify where your herd management practices rank nationally. Look through the results in [Table I](#). Find your herd size and production grouping and check where your herd falls in the various categories. After checking your rank, look at the most common management practices used in higher-ranked herds. Take an objective look at the "best management practices" for your herd size and determine whether they are reasonable and feasible changes you could make to increase your production.

This table is also useful if you are considering expanding your herd. If you fall in the high production grouping for a given herd size, look at the management options high milk production herds follow in the next herd size category. If you are considering expansion, you should attempt to incorporate the "best management practices" used by the next higher herd size. If you are not in the high production grouping and are considering expanding your herd, then it would be more cost effective and beneficial to change management practices to increase production rather than consider expansion. It is more important to get better before getting bigger.

A few things on *Table I* are of special interest. The use of on-farm computers is an integral part of the record keeping system as herd size and production increases. With the closing of the Mid States Dairy Records Processing Center (DRPC) and the merger with the Raleigh North Carolina DRPC, this is an excellent time to purchase a computer and learn to use the PC DART program for record keeping. PC DART offers producers the opportunity to access all their herd's production data as well as graphing

options. For more information on PC DART, contact either Jeff Keown or Dennis Drudik (402/475-DHIA). PC DART has become the industry standard for on-farm record keeping.

In the feed area, use of both a Total Mixed Ration (TMR) and testing forages is a common practice among all high production herds in each category. These feeding practices have been shown to be an effective way to increase production over time. Feeding a TMR allows the cow to consume exactly the proper feed constituents with each mouthful. This feeding system allows the cow's rumen to function properly.

The grazing of heifers and cows has become an area of interest over the past few years. As can be seen in [Table I](#), the percentage of producers who graze decreases as herd size increases. This is not unexpected, as rotational grazing of large numbers of cows and/or heifers would require considerable land. Grazing heifers and dry cows has several advantages for smaller dairies and should be considered during the spring, summer and early fall. There certainly is a place for rotational grazing on many farms.

One interesting finding from this survey is that even in the largest herd category, over half the producers still prefer to raise their own forages. Results show producers want to control their own forage growing and harvesting management.

Bovine somatotropin (BST) tends to be used more widely in larger herds. Another statistic supporting BST as increasing milk production is the fact that over five times the percentage of high production herds use BST as do not.

The rest of the categories are self-explanatory. Separating calves from their mothers soon after freshening and getting at least four quarts of colostrum into the calf as soon after birth as possible are simply good management practices which should be a routine part of a good heifer rearing program.

As Nebraska herds continue to expand, opportunities to custom raise heifers will arise. The survey shows that as the dairy enterprise expands, the number of producers who are not raising their own replacements increases. Many Nebraska producers should consider possible opportunities in custom-rearing heifers. If you are tired of milking, this may be an enterprise of interest.

The last category concerns veterinarian services. This section points out the benefit of having a routine herd health program. Monthly veterinarian visits will alert you to potential problems before they become major obstacles. Having someone else look at your herd can also help identify problem areas you may have overlooked.

The information presented in this NebGuide discusses good management practices that can be implemented by dairy producers. If you would like more information on any of these management practices, please contact Jeff Keown at the Department of Animal Science, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, P.O. Box 830908, Lincoln, NE 68583-0908. Phone: (402) 472-6453; FAX: (402) 472-6362; email: mailto:ansc407@%20unlvm.unl.edu.

--Nurse only	21.5	43.0*	24.2	57.7*	22.7	59.4*	15.8	42.1*
Dairy heifers contract raised	8.9	1.6*	5.3	4.1	15.2	5.8	21.1	41.1
Services provided by a veterinarian								
--Animal diagnosis & treatment	95.6	91.0*	95.8	97.9	98.5	91.3	97.4	92.1
--Provide drugs or vaccines	94.3	82.8*	92.6	90.7	92.4	82.6	92.1	86.8
--Vaccination consultation	89.5	69.5*	91.6	72.2*	92.4	84.1	97.4	81.6*
--Reproductive consultation	90.2	67.2*	89.5	75.3*	89.4	76.8	94.7	81.6
--Herd diagnostics	58.7	45.7*	72.6	59.8	75.8	62.3	81.6	79.0
+ Values for high herds are minimum production per cow. Values for low herds are maximum production per cow.								
* Difference between high and low percentile producers is statistically significant at the .05 level.								
^ Top and bottom quartiles differed in number of herds due to a number of herds falling at the cut point.								

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