



Dairy Herd Monitoring - A Tool for Success (Part 1)

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As a representative of Ontario's feed industry, I am fortunate to visit many dairy herds across the province. It is very interesting to observe how on-farm information is collected and analyzed to make management decisions that can greatly influence the entire dairy enterprise. In some operations, there is not always a concise and effective system for collecting this information and using it to meet the producer's goals for their operation. Sometimes these decisions are based on a perceived challenge in the herd, but careful analysis of different sources of on-farm information may yield different interpretations or alternatives to consider. This two part article will focus on developing and implementing an effective data collection system and monitoring program that can apply to any Ontario dairy enterprise. The first article focuses on : 1) Establishing an effective monitoring system that works within your herd, 2) Turning the data collected into valuable information to establish realistic goals for herd improvements, and 3) Determining which parameters should be used to evaluate and measure any changes that are implemented. The second article focuses on some common challenges that I've seen in dairy herds and how an effective monitoring system can be used to facilitate progress towards achieving producer's goals for their operation.

Asking Questions is the Key to Identifying On -farm Opportunities for Improvement !

How many times have you asked yourself " Should I change the nutrition program for the milking herd or stay with my existing program?" or " Should I buy quota - What are the pros and cons and How much can I afford to bid ?" or " Should I buy a TMR system for my herd ?". Unfortunately many of these types of decisions are made without reviewing the potential benefits and costs to the entire farm operation, instead the overall result is evaluated as only a minor component of the change. When was the last time an agriculture representative asked you "What do you want to improve on your operation and can I help you to achieve these goals ?" I believe Agribusiness needs to focus more on offering value to their customers, based on meeting their individual needs / goals, and then provide products and/or services which would best achieve the desired results. In order for Agribusiness to be a part of any dairy producer's management team requires that the producer have a clear set of operation goals and can thoroughly discuss them with Agribusiness representatives.

As I travel across the province, I am always impressed with the fact that producers who manage their operations most effectively are able to step back from the daily events and look at their operation as a whole. They continually ask questions like : "What aspects of the operation am I currently satisfied with ?" "What areas would I like to make improvements this year?" "Which improvements are short term versus long-term?" "Who can best help me achieve these different goals ?" and finally, " How will I measure and evaluate performance to determine if my initial goals were achieved?"

As dairy producers continue to increase herd size, they need to manage the different aspects of the operation and not let the daily events of the farm manage them !!

In order to establish a priority list for your dairy operation, it is important to take the time and look at your operation objectively. Decide what you would like to accomplish as short, mid, and long term projects. Next, you should evaluate all of the different components of your operation (milking herd, replacements, calf program, dry cows, crops, etc..) and evaluate which areas are meeting your expectations. For those components that aren't meeting your expectations, what is required to achieve these goals. This step requires accurate benchmarks or performance standards so that you can evaluate your farm against provincial or industry averages in such areas as : financial / profitability, calf & heifer programs, reproductive performance, milk production, health and labour management to name a few. This is not an easy task - it requires time and effort on your part to collect the proper data and convert it into useful information that can then be acted upon.

After you have decided what areas to focus on, pick only one or two strategies that you feel are most important in meeting your operation goals. There is no point working on 12 strategies at once, you will quickly become frustrated and go back to the old system. The reasons for deciding whether a particular aspect of your operation is one to focus upon is also a critical part of the process. Any reason is valid so long as you feel it is important, after all you are the manager. Perhaps you would like to spend more time with your family or make it easier for a family member to buy into the farm.

Often goal setting is based on a popular press article or information presented at a meeting. This information can present a challenge because it is often reflective of the whole industry rather than your specific dairy operation. For example, building a commodity shed could have financial value for a 4000 cow dairy in California but might not be so applicable to a 50 cow herd in Ontario. Ask yourself "Does the article or presentation tell the complete story?" "Does it apply to your farm and your specific goals?" "Does it discuss all of the advantages and disadvantages of the idea?" That is certainly not to say that there are no good ideas in magazines we read or meetings we attend, but those ideas should be further researched, evaluated carefully and then calculate the expected benefits prior to implementing them on your operation.

You can use many resources, such as your feed consultant, veterinarian, DFO field representative, or equipment dealer, to help you organize and provide information that can be used in your operation to help establish goals . Expansion, new equipment purchases, quota purchases and changes in enterprise focus (cropping vs. livestock) are just some of the issues that are affecting everyone in today's Canadian dairy industry today.

Goal setting is not an easy process but these few guidelines can make the process easier :

1) Goal setting is not a rigid process. The goals you make today may change over time. Some goals are short term (< 1 yr.) and others are more long-term (5 yr.). External factors may cause you to change your priorities and/or goals as well. This is a normal and necessary component of any dairy enterprise. For example, a producer has decided that his herd goals during the next 12 months is to reduce the somatic cell count and incidence of

mastitis. He consults with the herd veterinarian and the DFO milking specialist to develop a strategy that will lower the mastitis incidence and improve milk quality. During the second month of the program, he discovers that a longtime employee is leaving in 4 weeks. Now his priority and goals shift to a new situation and his new goal is to find a qualified and reliable herdsman. He still hasn't forgotten about the somatic cell count, but believes it is more important to the whole operation in the short-term to hire a new employee and devote his time and efforts to the new person.

2) Goals should serve to motivate you. Goals should be specific and measurable so that when it is achieved, you can acknowledge it and create new goals. Having a goal like "Improving herd milk production" is certainly justified, but is not specific enough. A more appropriate goal would be "Increasing the herd management milk by 1 kg during the next 6 months." This is a specific goal, it can be measured and attained.

3) Goals should be rewarded. When you achieve a goal, take the family or employees out to dinner. If you have set employee goals, recognize their accomplishment and provide a reward such as an extra morning off from chores. Once a goal has been achieved, ensure that measures are in place so that it can be maintained and then establish new goals.

4) Goals don't always have to improve financial returns. Making chores less complicated is desirable to some individuals while recognition from your industry or community can be equally as important to others. Some producers prefer to see improvements in herd production level, herd genetics, or facility improvements. Having extra time to share with family and friends or being recognized for your achievements at the annual local production banquet can be just as rewarding as an extra \$200 per month of income. The important part of goal setting and achievement is that the end result makes you feel pride in your accomplishment and motivates you into the future.

When do you know your goals are achieved?

In order to accurately answer this question, it is important that you have collected reliable, concise information from the various management areas within your operation and use this information to identify and focus on particular projects. An accurate picture of where you are, a vision of where you want to be in 10 years, and ideas on how to achieve these goals are critical to succeed in today's dairy industry.

A concise, objective monitoring system for the different aspects of your operation is critical to show where you are presently and what challenges in your herd are preventing you from achieving your goals. In the second article, the different elements of an effective monitoring system will be discussed, along with some examples of how this goal setting and monitoring can be successfully implemented.