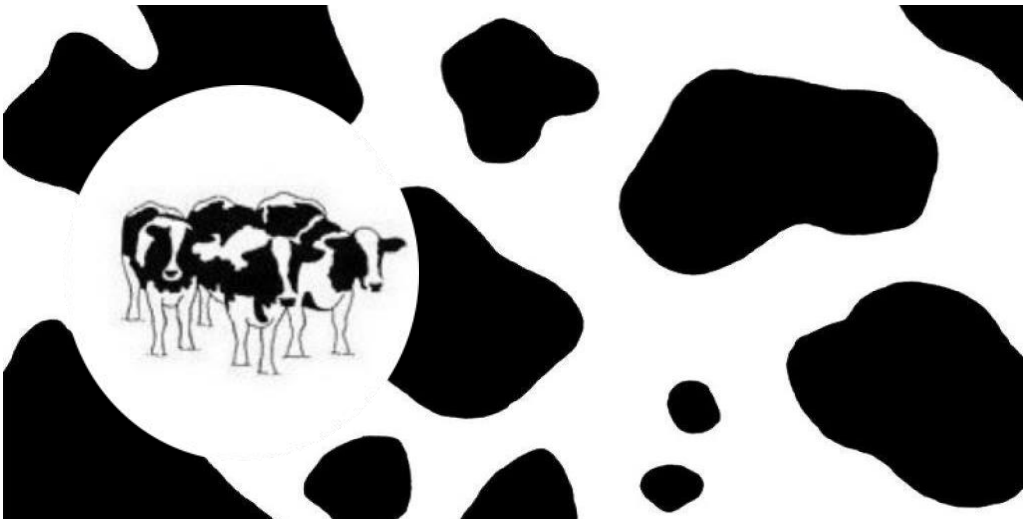

Dairy Details

October 2019

Editor: Lindsey Borst DVM

NORTHERN VALLEY DAIRY PRODUCTION MEDICINE CENTER

Health Goals: Where Should We Aim to Be?

This month, I want to continue the discussion on why keeping good health records to monitor health on dairy farms is important to both animal welfare on your farm and your pocketbook. Now that we have records, what should our goals be as far as health for our dairy herd? Every farm's goals will be different. What your goals are depends on where you are starting and where you want to end up. I've listed some common goals within the dairy industry and how much money savings some of these goals equate to. Hopefully, seeing these goals on paper will continue to motivate you to keep good health records so that you can benchmark your success against others in the industry.

Cow Health Goals:

Displaced Abomasum: 1% (Divided by # Freshenings)
Retained Placentas: 5% (Divided by # Freshenings)
Metritis: 7% (Divided by # Freshenings)
Milk Fever: 1% (Divided by # Freshenings)
Mastitis (<31 DIM): 1.5% (Divided by # Freshenings)
Pneumonia: 1% (Divided by # Lactating & Dry Cows)
Died: 5% (Divided by # Lactating & Dry Cows)

In last month's newsletter I gave you an idea of what an individual case of some of these diseases cost a dairy on average. But, when looking at cost of diseases and death on farms, it's not only about the cost of each individual case. Compeer Financial and Zoetis teamed up a few years ago to compile data from dairies along with their financials to see what made some dairies more profitable then others. Not surprisingly, they found that if a farm is good at one thing such as milk quality, they are probably good at another thing, such having a low death loss. The Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) they looked at usually are correlated on farms.

When one looks at their data for death rate, we find that farms lose ~$32/cow/year for each 1% death loss that they have. For example, a 500 cow dairy with a 7% death loss is estimated to lose ~$112,000 per year, compared to the same size farm that has a 5% death loss who would lose ~$80,320 per year. The take home from these numbers are that these KPI's are correlated, meaning the farm that has a lower death rate most likely also pays more attention to details when it comes to cow disease, milk quality, reproduction, etc. Those items are included in this number.

Northern Valley Dairy Production Medicine Center
900 N Wabasha, Plainview, MN 55964 507-534-4356 northernvalley900@gmail.com

Calf Health Goals:
Serum Total Proteins >6.0: 100%
Scours (<61 Days): 25%
Pneumonia (<61 Days): 10%
Navel Infection: 2%
Died <61 Days: 3%
Died >61 Days: 1%

We've seen several studies showing that anything that decreases intakes and gains in calves in the first two months of life will decrease milk yields when these calves enter the milking herd. These studies show animals that had higher gains early in life will produce between ~1,000-3,000 pounds more milk in their first lactation depending on what study you look at. Any disease occurrence will obviously decrease intakes as well as make these calves more likely to get sick again later on in life or leave the herd early.

Because colostrum management is so vital to preventing diseases in calves, I've listed serum total proteins as the first calf health goal. Serum total proteins are something that is measured in a blood sample taken from a calf that is between 24 hours and 7 days old. It's a fairly accurate and affordable way to measure if a farm's calves are receiving good quality colostrum in a timely manner. It's something we run at our clinic or there are many producers out there who can take and measure these blood samples themselves with a little training. Ask your veterinarian for more information about serum total proteins.

With heifer rearing costs being one of the highest expense categories for most farms, many farms are creating only as many heifers as they need. Keeping your calf death rate in check and monitoring it will be important as farms run tighter and tighter heifer inventories. Another good reason to shoot for an extremely low heifer death loss is that these young animals are your farm's future and have the highest genetic potential. It's a shame to lose a calf before she's had time to live up to that potential.

Some Final Tips for Excellent Health Records…
Correctly diagnosing these diseases will be the first step in correctly recording and monitoring them. Don't be afraid to work with your veterinarian to review what to look for with each disease. Maybe even take some time to walk through fresh cows or calves with them on a regular basis to keep your diagnostic skills sharp.

Don't forget to record an animal that has a disease event, even if you don't treat it with anything. "No Treat" is a treatment! For example, if you find a cow with a DA, but decide to sell her instead of do surgery, still write her down as a DA event to track your true DA incidence.

And once again, feel free to ask your veterinarian for their advice on what a good health record keeping system looks like. We love looking at good, organized health records. Every year when I put together our Benchmarking Project for many of the herds in our practice, I am only able to put health events in for ~1/3 of the herds that are in the data set. I'd love for 100% of our herds to have usable health data someday.

In closing, remember that you can't monitor what you don't measure. And if you aren't monitoring health, you can't set goals for it on your farm. Happy goal setting!

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