Allocating Time to Observe Your Dairy Cows Pays Dividends

Cooperative Extension Service

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Observation #1: Two hours before milking, are less than 20% of your dairy cows standing in their stalls?

Importance: The amount of time cows spend standing half-in or completely in their stall is a direct reflection of freestall comfort. Comfortable cows spend about 12 hours per day lying down and resting. As cows spend more time standing, the incidence of lameness increases and those cows which are already lame get even more lame. We all realize that lame cows do not get around as well, do not visit the feedbunk as often, and do not milk as well as we think they should. Studies by Dr. Nigel Cook at the University of Wisconsin have shown that lame cows housed in the freestalls with mats spend more time standing than those cows housed in freestalls which are deeply bedded with sand. The bottom line is that deeply bedded stalls with sand may be more forgiving for lame cows than mat-based freestalls.

Observation #2: When you walk through the milking herd, are 50 to 70% of your dairy cows chewing their cuds?

Importance: Excellent "cow managers" have always said that healthy cows are those chewing their cuds. When cows chew their cuds, they secrete saliva which contains a natural antacid which helps buffer the contents of the rumen or cow's first compartment of the stomach. When cows are fed adequate amounts of effective fiber (or chew factor) to stimulate cud chewing, 5 to 6 lbs of saliva help buffer the rumen contents. This amount is huge in comparison to the 1/4 to ½ lb per cow we add as sodium bicarbonate or bicarb (baking soda) to the grain mix or total mixed ration. Proper buffering of the rumen allows cows to digest forages better, eat more feed, maintain normal butterfat tests, and prevent health problems such as lameness and displaced abomasum or twisted stomach. If your cows and especially your fresh cows are not chewing their cuds, talk to your nutritionist and work together with them to see what is happening and develop a solution to this problem.

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Observation #3: Just before feeding your cows, take a few minutes to look in the feedbunk and see if there is quality feed - not cobs or moldy feed- left in the feedbunk? When you feed your cows, are there cows waiting for their turn to get to the feedbunk to get something to eat?

Importance: Ask yourself, if you were a timid first-calf heifer in your herd would you want to eat what was left in the feedbunk and/or did you get enough to eat? Dairy cows need to have quality feed in front of them at all times other than the time they are waiting to be milked – hence 20 to 22 hours daily. If the feed is not there, feed intake may be limiting milk production. Stimulating cows to come up and eat can increase milk production, especially in fresh cows and early lactation cows, and help get cows rebred. Cows housed in confinement increase their feeding activity when fresh feed is delivered to the feedbunk and after they are milked. By feeding twice a day, timid cows, i.e. fresh cows and first-calf heifers, are pushed away from the bunk less and therefore, have an opportunity to eat more often and eat more feed. At the same time, providing adequate bunk space (24 to 30 inches per cow) decreases aggressive behavior and timid cows spend more time eating at the feedbunk.

Observation #4: Are the water troughs clean, easily accessible after milking, and provide adequate reserve of water for all cows to drink?

Importance: Milking dairy cows can drink 20 to 35 gallons of water daily with the amount of water they drink depending on their milk production and the temperature outside. Cows only spend about 20 minutes daily drinking water and thus drink water at the rate of 1.2 gallons per minute. Therefore, water reserve and flow rate are very important in providing adequate water intake. Milk is 87% water. Most importantly, the intake of clean, fresh and high-quality water drives feed intake and the amount of milk produced. The depth of water in the trough should be such that cows can submerge their muzzles 1 to 2 inches into the water and drink without gulping air. Waterers should be located close to feed (50 ft of feedbunk) and return alleys or areas cows are housed directly after milking. In addition, waterers should be emptied and scrubbed with a weak chlorine solution weekly to improve water quality and acceptance.