

ASSISTING FARMERS

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When a dairy consultant is involved with a farmer who has concerns about animal health or production problems, determining how to provide assistance is an important initial step. Dairy farms are fairly complex operations. Even for an experienced farm service professional, it can be risky to assume that animal health and performance concerns are simple to identify and resolve.

There are hazards in presenting specific suggestions of how to assist farmers. Those involved with assisting could use these suggestions to jump to quick decisions and away from taking the NECESSARY time to listen to farmers and observe the situation.

Listen and Observe

Offering quick and easy advice is an all too common disservice to farmers. A farmer may or may not have interpreted the cause of their concerns correctly; but a farmer's ability to recognize a change in the herd is excellent. It may be easier and quicker to present pat answers but if helping is actually the goal, it is essential to spend the necessary time listening and observing. The two important goals of listening and observing are to learn:

1. What is the Farmer Concerned About?

The "problem" as you see it could be different from what concerns the farmer. Even if a problem is evident to you, unless the farmer is concerned about it, the opportunity to provide service may not exist. Identifying the farmer's concern is important.

2. Who is Involved & What has Been Done?

It is likely various individuals before you have been involved with the concern. Being able to recognize what basic information or services have not been provided is the key to giving effective assistance. Everyone's frustration increases when decisions are made with inadequate or inappropriate information. The most effective assistance is given by pointing out what information or service is missing –filling in the gap between what has been provided or known and what is needed to get to the root of the problem.

Indicator Questions

Indicator questions help in determining what information or service gaps need to be filled. Some useful indicator questions can be found on the following pages.

Indicator questions generally do not identify or resolve problems. However, they can help to better direct assistance where assistance is most needed. The consistent use of indicator questions during the initial contact with the farmer can improve the service you provide.

SAMPLE INDICATOR QUESTIONS FOR ASSISTING FARMERS

Milk System Service (Critical Knowledge to Know)

If any dairy farmer is asked if their milk system has been checked, the answer will almost always be yes. However, that can mean anything from casual observations by someone on a soap route delivery stop, to a complete system analysis. The better question to ask is, “Do you know what your milk system’s effective reserve is?” This type of question is an indicator question. Indicator questions help in determining what information or service gaps need to be filled. The effective reserve is one of many measurements that comprise the National Mastitis Council’s (NMC) industry standard for the evaluation of a milk system. (See attached NMC milk system evaluation worksheet.) If a farmer knows, or has some record that indicates what the effective reserve is, then it increases the chances that the system was evaluated properly (according to NMC recommended procedures).

Somatic Cell Count (SCC) Concerns

The most common gaps in knowledge or service that directly relate to resolving a SCC concern can be determined with these indicator questions:

- 1) Has a bulk tank milk culture been done?
Each cause of mastitis has its own specific response. Not knowing the cause of the elevated SCC makes resolution very difficult. See attached pages on the collection and interpretation of bulk milk tank cultures.
- 2) Do you know what the effective reserve for your milk system is?
The effective reserve should be at least 35 CFM + 1CFM/milking unit for systems using less than 16 units. Even though this question will give a good indication of whether a system has been evaluated according to industry (NMC) standards, it tends to leave out the commonly neglected issue of proper pipeline slope – 1.5”drop/10’ length.
- 3) Do you know what the vacuum at the claw during milking is?
If a farmer knows this number, which is much more important than system vacuum, it also usually implies that someone has measured the system performance and observed milking procedures during milking. Average vacuum at the claw during peak milk flow should be 11-12.5” Hg.

Production, Reproduction, Animal Health, and Cow Behavior

These issues are usually interrelated and associated with nutrition, facilities, population density, and animal-to-human dynamics.

- 1) How is production monitored?
Management Level Milk (MLM) is the most valuable indicator of an actual change in milk production. Many of the other measures of production can appear to change for reasons other than an actual drop in production (See attached article on the interpretation of dairy records.). For herds not using any dairy record keeping service, encourage such farmers to make notes on the bulk milk weight chart as to how many cows and heifers are contributing to each date’s pick up.

Note: For herds on DHIA the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine (800-386-8684) has created an excellent set of templates for computer downloading of a farmer’s DHIA data into Excel. A booklet for interpretation of these graphs is available also.

- 2) What is the typical (summer or winter) milking and feeding schedule?
Noting when things are done on a farm (See attached worksheet.) can be a useful tool. The timing of a number of events influence a number of very powerful health and performance related concerns. Look for these influences as you review the schedule:
- Is feed available for 20-24 hours in a day?
 - How frequently is feed delivered or pushed up?
 - What is the sequence of feeding?
 - Where is feed delivered?
 - Do the cows get outside and off concrete?
 - Does the feeding sequence create grain to forage (or fiber) problems?
 - Are dry cows and fresh cows handled differently?

- 3) During periods of inactivity, what percentage of the herd that could lie down is lying down?
This is a particularly good indicator question to ask about a facility. Cow comfort has a powerful influence on health, production, and behavior issues. Cow comfort is excellent when 90% or more of the cows that could lie down are lying down.

Facilities evaluation is often best done by on-site observation.

- At the manger/bunk is there:
 - ~ enough room (2'/cow),
 - ~ enough light,
 - ~ a smooth eating surface at the right height (4" above standing surface)
- How fresh does the air smell?

Service Providers

Professional veterinary, nutritional and milk system support varies considerably from farm to farm. Ask who has been trying to help the farmer with this concern. Contacting the individual professionals that a farmer uses can usually give a more complete picture of the problem and a better idea of what support is being provided.

In addition to the many private farm service professionals supporting the dairy industry in Wisconsin, the following public providers offer diagnostic support services:

UW School of Veterinary Medicine: 800-386-8684

State Diagnostic Laboratories at:
Madison: 800-608-8387
Barron: 800-771-8387