

DAIRY HERD HEALTH AND PRODUCTION SURVEY FINDINGS

*Dairy Health and Production Survey
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Owners of Minnesota and Wisconsin dairy operations were surveyed in late November 1996 by the National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, on behalf of the agencies and organizations listed on this letterhead. The main purpose of the survey was to collect more comprehensive information than had previously been available on the general health and milk production status of Minnesota and Wisconsin dairy herds. All of the groups involved in the development of the survey share the goal of improving the quality of information and services available to dairy herd owners. Surveys were mailed to a random sample of 2,500 dairy operators, 1,250 in each state. Post card reminders and follow-up telephone calls were used to encourage response.

Thirty percent (752) of the surveys were completed and returned. This large number of completed and returned survey responses means that the results are truly representative of all dairy herds in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

General Information

-- Responses from dairy herd owners in Minnesota and Wisconsin were similar for almost every parameter addressed in the survey, thus data presented in this summary are averages of all responses. The average reported herd size (milking and dry cows) was 56, with a range of 10 to 385. Average daily milk production at the time the survey was taken was 52 lbs./cow/day for cows in milk and 42 lbs./cow/day when dry cows are included. Data for 1996 indicate an annual mortality rate for adult cows of 4.3 percent and an annual dairy cow culling rate of 20.6 percent.

Clinical Signs of Herd Health Problems

-- Herd owners were asked how often each of 22 clinical signs of health or production problems were observed in their herds over the last 12 months. Respondents reported poor heat (estrus) expression, poor conception rate, and mastitis as the most frequently observed signs. Some of the least frequently observed signs are unhealed sores on cows' legs and bodies and various behavioral patterns (e.g., unusual behavior at water cup, nose pressing, and excessive kicking).

-- Ten percent of all herd owners, or 3,600 of the approximately 36,000 in Minnesota and Wisconsin, think that cows in their herd now have persistent health and/or milk production problems. These dairy herds tend to have lower rolling herd average milk production, higher somatic cell counts, and more frequently display certain clinical signs than herds for which no such problems were reported.

Perceived Causes of Herd Health and Production Problems

-- Herd owners were asked how significant each of 26 factors is in causing animal health and/or production problems in their herds. Some of the factors rated as being more significant (top one-third) are forage quality, fresh cow performance, cow comfort, heat

Minnesota Department of Agriculture

Minnesota Department of Public Service

Minnesota Farmers Union

Minnesota investor-owned utilities

Minnesota Milk Producers Association

Minnesota Public Utilities Commission

Minnesota Rural Electric Cooperatives

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Wisconsin Farmers Union

Wisconsin Federation of Cooperatives

Wisconsin Public Service Commission

detection, and animal housing or environment. Some of the less significant factors (bottom one-third), according to herd owners, are soil type, quality of outside experts' advice, stray voltage and other electric phenomena, and chemical contamination of feed or water.

STRAY VOLTAGE SURVEY FINDINGS

Some of the agencies and organizations that collaborated in the development of the Dairy Health and Production Survey are particularly interested in dairy farmers' experiences with stray voltage and related electrical phenomena. Thus a follow-up telephone survey was conducted in which all dairy herd owners who completed and returned the written surveys were called and asked if they would answer some additional questions. A 90 percent participation rate was achieved for this follow-up survey.

Highlights of survey findings:

- Thirty percent of the dairy herd owners reported that at some time they had a herd health and/or production problem they thought was caused mainly by stray voltage or other electrical phenomena.
- Sixty percent of all dairy herd owners reported that their farms had been tested at least once for stray voltage and 15 percent for other electrical phenomena, such as magnetic fields, electric fields, EMF, ground currents or earth currents.
- Most reported stray voltage testing was performed by utility employees (60 percent). Electricians (30 percent) were the next most likely to have conducted such tests. Milk processing field representatives and dairy farm owners were also reported to have conducted stray voltage tests relatively frequently (10 - 20 percent of the tests).
- Nearly 50 percent of the dairy herd owners reported that the persons who conducted tests on their farms informed them of stray voltage or other electrical conditions on the farm that should be corrected. Herd owners have been responsive to such recommendations, with 87 percent reporting that something was done to correct the conditions.
- Overall, 87 percent of dairy herd owners are satisfied with investigations and attempts to correct stray voltage or other electrical conditions on their farms.
- When asked if they think uncorrected stray voltage or related electrical conditions are presently having negative effects on the health and/or production of their dairy herds, 80 percent of the herd owners responded "No," 10 percent responded "Yes," and 10 percent responded "Don't Know."

The results of these two surveys will be used by participating service providers and organizations representing farmers to improve services, education and outreach activities. Participating universities and government agencies intend to use the results to gain a better understanding of health and production issues so that future research can be more effectively focused on such concerns and serve greater numbers of farmers.

For more information on these surveys, or to obtain copies of the survey questions and the figures and tables describing the data set, please contact one of the individuals listed below.

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