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Identify bottlenecks, evaluate

For dairy producers and their nutritionists, veterinarians, milk processors and business consultants, Dairy Herd Information (DHI) records provide a wealth of information about herd performance and financial results. Whether a herd's challenge is high somatic cell count milk, fat:protein inversion and/or low pregnancy rate, DHI data help dairy herd consultants identify bottlenecks, troubleshoot problems, evaluate interventions, make sound culling decisions and assist with day-to-day management.

"Simply stated, you can't manage what you don't measure," said Mike Hutjens, University of Illinois dairy science professor. "DHI records are essential to balancing rations and optimizing performance."

With today's tight financial situation, every cow must earn her keep on the farm, Hutjens commented. "The 'team' (dairy herd) is only as strong as each 'player' (cow)." DHI data offer objective production, milk quality and health status numbers that are vital in making economically correct culling decisions.

Discover valuable information

"If a dairy producer is not testing for milk production, he is missing out on a large amount of useful herd management information," stated John Ellsworth, a strategic and financial consultant with Success Strategies, Modesto, Calif. Additionally, he is lacking information to provide guidance in the culling process. "Given the high cost of feed the past two years, the culling information and guidelines have been critical to keeping producers profitable."

Bradley Hilty, Penn State Extension information management specialist, noted that we live in a knowledge-based world. "Management by observation is no longer adequate. Producers who acquire the knowledge they need to manage their operations more aggressively are more likely to be successful. DHI records can be a valuable

management tool if producers take the time to read and understand these records."

Find obvious cows to cull

"DHI records – particularly reproduction and milk quality – will direct you to very obvious culling choices," explained veterinarian Keith Sterner of Sterner Veterinary Clinic, Ionia, Mich. Make more intelligent decisions regarding who stays and who goes to town. Reproduction and milk quality are the areas that count the most in making culling decisions. "Don't make monitoring and evaluating DHI records more complicated than you have to," he remarked.

"DHI records provide vital information for cash flow projections," stated Robert Tigner, Iowa State Extension farm management field specialist, New Hampton, Iowa. Additionally, the DHI system allows you to record accurate breeding dates (for heifers and cows), accurate pregnancy dates and pregnancy checks. "Dairy producers need accurate records to make accurate cash flow projections."

Hilty believes that a majority of producers just look at the rolling herd average on a DHI report. He encourages producers and consultants to not just look at past and current performance, but to



DHI data, records and graphs provide a wealth of information that allow business-minded dairy producers to monitor and evaluate many management areas, including rations, milk quality, reproduction and inventory.

interventions with DHI records

use these records to anticipate future performance. “DHI transforms data into information that producers and their advisers can evaluate and use to make proactive management decisions so the herd can perform at optimal levels.”

Don't cut testing costs

Tigner said it's easy to look at those things you write checks for, especially during challenging economic times.

“But, don't cut milk testing costs. Information is necessary to make decisions. Dairy producers and consultants need DHI records to manage cattle and the dairy operation, and to effectively use resources. The only way to manage a herd successfully is with records, especially DHI records.”

DHI milk testing is a very small portion of a dairy's total cost picture – costing only a penny or two per cow per day. “If you're able to in-

crease dry matter intake by effectively monitoring and evaluating DHI records, and making appropriate changes, you may be able to add 12 cents to 24 cents per cow per day on the revenue side,” Tigner commented.

“Dairy producers need to be on DHI test to figure out where the herd is experiencing problems,” said Alan Udy, field rep, Gossner Foods, Logan, Utah. “It's hard for me to understand how you can dairy without records. DHI data, records and graphs tell you a whole lot

of information.”

Due to the vast amount of information available through DHI records, Hilty developed a systematic approach for examining and interpreting DHI data. The approach focuses on the big picture of herd performance in four key management areas: milk production, reproduction, udder health and culling/replacements. If the key indicator of any of these management areas

indicates a possible problem might exist, evaluating a series of diagnostic indicators can help determine the problem's origin and severity. Then, producers and/or consultants can identify and implement corrective intervention strategies.

Set clear, attainable goals

According to Andrew Holloway, Elanco Animal Health technical consultant in the Northeast USA, every successful dairy producer sets

goals that are clear, measurable and attainable. “DHI testing helps monitor and measure progress on goals, such that intervention can take place. Without DHI records, dairy producers are missing out on accurately measuring progress.”

When time is limited, Sterner encourages clients (and he does the same thing himself) to look at two key areas – milk quality and reproduction – on DHI records. If a cow is not producing salable milk, even if she's

producing a lot of milk, she should be a candidate for the culling list. A high-producing cow that pumps out poor quality milk is a double negative to the dairy because she's eating a lot and her milk is not salable. “A cow producing salable milk at a sufficient level is very valuable,” he stated.

Look at cows with chronic mastitis. “Those are the ones who should get on the bus and visit the career counselor at Burger King,” Sterner added. “If a cow is not making break-even milk production and open, she should also get on the bus. Her genetics don't matter if she's open and producing below a break-even level.

“DHI records allow dairy producers to sort the wheat from the chaff,” Sterner added. “DHI records are a very important tool for making herd management and business decisions.”

Legitimate, accurate data

Holloway finds DHI records extremely helpful in evaluating dairy herd performance because he knows they're legitimate and accurate. “I feel confident in interpreting DHI data. I'm not as confident in on-farm generated data.” In addition, he uses the data to find opportunities for improvement. Successful dairy herd managers use their advisers and records to optimize the herd's reproductive performance, maximize udder health and minimize the impact of metabolic disease on their dairy.

The bottom line is that DHI records aren't a cost; they are an investment in credible information to provide data-driven decisions to manage today's complex dairy farm operations.

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Bradley Hilty
Penn State Extension
information management specialist