



In good times and bad, these areas deserve major attention

by Charles E. Gardner, D.V.M.

MANY farm managers are scrutinizing their operation, looking for ways to cut costs or boost income. Because cutting costs provides tangible, quick results, that area may get the most attention. But be very careful that you do not lose production as a result. It is very difficult to recover even a couple of pounds of lost production.

The long-term survival and growth of your farm depends on continuous improvement in key areas. These key aspects are just as important in times of high milk prices as in low. The best managers work at them continually, always seeking a way to make things a little better.

• **Provide a continuous supply of a high-quality ration** — A high-quality ration consists of at least 50 percent quality forage that is properly supplemented with sources of energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals. Besides being well balanced on paper, it is properly mixed and delivered to the cow in a very consistent manner. Cows have easy access to it throughout the day and are able to consume many small meals as they choose.


• **Have a sound and consistent milking routine** — Be sure that your cows are being milked so that units are attached to clean, sanitized teats one to two minutes after adequate stimulation. Also, be sure that they are being removed properly and that vacuum levels and pulsation are correct. Somatic cell counts consistently below 200,000 are a reasonable goal for most herds.

• **Optimize cow comfort** — Comfortable cows milk better, conceive better, are more resistant to disease, and stay in the herd longer. Keeping them comfortable includes having them lie down when not eating or being milked. Relief from heat and good ventilation are important. Avoid long periods (more than an hour) of standing in the holding pen. Don't forget dry cows and springers when addressing cow comfort.

• **Follow an effective reproductive program** — Whether you go 100 percent timed A.I., use traditional heat detection, or some combination of both, you need to be getting 75 percent of your cows bred back within 150 days after calving. Follow protocols that prevent cows from “slipping through the cracks” and going long periods of time without an insemination.

• **Have a sound transition cow program** — This means continuous access to properly balanced rations, excellent comfort, and minimal stress. Over 80 percent of fresh cows should proceed smoothly into lactation with no metabolic disease. Depending on your production goals, first-lactation Holsteins should be producing 70 to 80 pounds of milk after 40 days and older cows over 90 pounds.

• **Have a consistent source of high-quality replacements** — Raising your own, contracting them out, or simply buying them from a reputable supplier can all be successful. The important thing is that they stay in the herd and make a meaningful contribution to the bulk tank. I like to see the 305 ME for heifers to be the highest of any age group in the herd. Over 70 percent of first-calf heifers should remain in the herd to have a second lactation.

The best managers never stop looking for ways to improve in these key areas. Through reading, attending meetings, and visiting other farms, they get new ideas. They ask their advisors for ideas, as well, and then they take action. They have methods in place to track results and don't hesitate to abandon ideas that simply don't work out. How about you? What are you doing to ensure you are thriving in the future? 

The author, from Orefield, Pa., is a veterinarian with a master of business administration degree (MBA). He is a business development manager with Cargill Animal Nutrition Consulting Services.