

A Reproductive
Moment With

MEL

WHAT'S REALLY MOST IMPORTANT?

by Mel DeJarnette, Reproductive Specialist

It seems like everyone is burning the candle at both ends these days. There are more things to do than there are hours in the day to get things done. Demands on our time pull us in all different directions until it eventually becomes apparent that some of the things on our “to do” list just aren’t gonna happen. That almost happened with this article. When things begin to get overwhelming, it’s very important to slow down and sit down long enough to prioritize. If you’re like me, you always try to keep family at the top of the list, but after that, the lines begin to blur. A handy scale we often use around the office to prioritize various projects is the “must do,” “should do,” or “would like to do” scale. “**Must do’s**” are those projects that must be done and take priority over all others. “**Should do’s**” are fit in at the next convenient opportunity, and “**like to do’s**” are rainy day projects that often get shoved to the back burner for a while. If you’re finding there are not enough hours in the day to get all the chores done at your dairy, it may be time to prioritize to make sure the important tasks are staying up front and are not being pushed to the back burners.

HEAT DETECTION IS A “MUST DO”

I am both amazed and troubled by the frequency with which I find heat detection treated as a “**should do**” or a would “**like to do**” task rather than a “**must do**.” The number one factor affecting the profitability of any animal breeding enterprise (dairy, beef, pigs, chickens, sheep, goats, etc.) is reproduction. Each breeding age animal is a fixed asset that often carries a considerable financial investment. Maintaining a reasonable calving interval is critically important to the lifetime production, profitability, and potential return on investment for each cow in the herd. We’ve all heard the dollar values associated with extended calving intervals bounced around from time to time. Depending on input cost, output values and whose calculation method you use, these “costs of days open” can range from \$1 to \$5. Most experts accept \$3 as a reasonable number for the average herd. A missed heat cycle basically extends the calving interval by 21 days and, at \$3/day, costs the bottom line of the dairy operation in excess of \$60. And that’s just for one cow. Normally, 4-5% of your open and cycling animals will be in heat on any given day. Just for grins and giggles, take the number of open cows in your herd and multiply by 5% and then multiply by \$60. That’s a ballpark figure as to how much a day without heat detection may be costing you. Divide this number by two to get the cost of skipping just one of the two daily heat check periods. Not funny is it? When you sit down and run the numbers, it’s hard to imagine any job on the farm, other than feeding or milking, taking a higher priority than heat detection. Few jobs on the farm will pay a higher return on investment than the labor spent on good, sound heat detection. Keep heat detection a “**must do**” priority.

PROPER SEMEN HANDLING IS A “MUST DO”

When it comes to getting cows bred, there are often many things working against you over which you have little or no control including the weather, feed quality, stress associated with high milk production, and sporadic disease outbreaks. Semen handling may be the only aspect of reproduction that the inseminator has direct and total control over the outcome. All too often, technicians attempt to take shortcuts and deviate from recommended semen handling procedures which may save a few seconds to a minute at most. However, if the animal fails to conceive due to reduced semen quality as a result of these shortcuts, how much time and money will be lost as we attempt to catch her in heat again for rebreeding? Don’t let something so simple and easy to control as semen handling be the limiting factor for reproductive performance in your herd.

HERD HEALTH IS A “MUST DO”

Congregating a population of any animal species into close proximity without a sound program to prevent introduction and spread of diseases, is an accident waiting to happen. And sooner or later, it will happen. Even if you’re maintaining a closed herd and not purchasing animals, the bugs don’t know that and they wouldn’t particularly care if they did know. There are numerous other methods for them to get in and infect your herd. Birds, rodents, deer, raccoons, and vehicle tires or boots of friends and salesmen are but a few potential vectors. Work closely with your veterinarian to vaccinate against all diseases of concern in your geographic area. Be especially careful when introducing new animals into the herd. If possible, have them tested for diseases of concern while located at the farm of origin. Keep them

isolated upon arrival until convinced they didn't bring any unwanted guest(s). Isolate sick animals immediately and cull judiciously if necessary. Just like an insurance policy, we hope our herd health program is never needed and the money spent on premiums (or vaccinations) is basically wasted. However, not having an insurance policy or a herd health program when the circumstances arise where you do need them, can result in catastrophic financial loss.

NUTRITION IS A "MUST DO"

Maintaining top-notch nutrition programs is an absolute **"must do"** in today's high producing dairy herds. All too often, producers will balance a ration once and then continue to use the same formulation with constantly changing feed sources. Sooner or later, we finally notice there is a problem when the cows begin to tell us. By then it's too late. An improperly balanced ration or poor quality feed invariably lead to reduced milk production, metabolic problems, and poor reproductive efficiency. Work closely with a qualified nutritional consultant to stay ahead of problems. Test all new feed stuffs for nutrient content immediately upon arrival and re-adjust rations accordingly. If milk urea nitrogen (MUN) analysis is offered by your DHIA coop, take advantage of the opportunity to monitor the efficiency of protein utilization in rations. Test periodically for mycotoxins and anytime contaminated feeds are suspected.

Body condition scoring is an excellent means of monitoring the energy content in rations, however, make sure you calibrate scoring

techniques against an appropriate scale. Many herd owners appear to score their own cows about 0.5 point higher in body condition than would an impartial evaluator.

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Although a half point in body condition may not seem like a big deal, the difference in fertility between a 2.5 and 3.0 body condition cow can be tremendous. Researchers have developed

standardized methods of scoring cows for body condition and have correlated these scores with fertility time and time again. Don't allow yourself to reset the scoring scale to fit your herd, use the standard BCS scale to critically and objectively evaluate the effectiveness of your nutrition program. If body condition scoring is not a must do, it's extremely high on the **"should do"** list.

The main reason nutrition is a **"must do"** for you, is because reproduction is a **"would like to do"** for your cows. Due to the phenomenon known as nutrient partitioning, all mammals direct available nutrients to various bodily functions on their own priority basis. The first and foremost **"must do"** on the nutrient partitioning scale, is body maintenance. This is basically the energy required to keep the heart pumping, lungs breathing, and all other essential organs doing their daily routine to keep the animal alive. Any energy available over and above maintenance requirements is directed to the **"should do"** category of production. This energy will primarily be used for milk production and to increase body weight. Finally, any energy left over after the maintenance and production demands are met can now be directed to the **"would like to do"** category of reproduction.

Although we may not always have our priorities straight, you can bet your cows always have their nutrient priorities straight. If energy becomes limited in the ration, reproduction is the first thing to go.

Hectic life in today's large herds seems to make it impossible to get everything done. However, before you start pushing jobs or tasks to a back burner to simmer, prioritize to make sure you know "what's really important". ♦

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