

INCREASING MILK FLOW

With escalating feed, fuel, and labor costs, dairy producers are constantly asking how they can improve narrow profit margins. Unfortunately, breaking even would be an improvement for some. It is relatively easy to increase production, but often the costs of added inputs are greater than the value of augmented outputs. Successful producers will always be looking for ways to improve.

Canadian researchers identified a simple thing most dairymen can do to enhance production, and there are no additional costs with implementation of this practice. Researchers reported on the correlation between how cows are handled and the amount of milk they produce.

Cows that were handled gently, spoken to and touched more often were less frightened, more easily moved and had higher production and conception rates. They also had a smaller flight zone, meaning we can move closer to them before they move away. The study even suggested that 30 percent of the variation in milk production between farms could be explained by the manner in which the cows were handled.

As I read the report I thought back to my younger days when I used to accompany my dad on farm visits when he was a relief technician for Cache Valley Breeders Association. At that time I did not know very many local dairymen, but I did note a significant difference in how their cows responded to strangers. On some dairies the cows would come up to the manger, contentedly chewing their cud while looking at us. In other cases, the cows would get as far away from us as they possibly could. Some of the producers would use quiet voices when getting their cows in for service while others would yell or even use a stick. There was a marked difference in how the cows stood and acted after being locked in a stall.

The researchers studied the idea that cows could become fearful of one individual and not another. During the study, two individuals repeatedly handled the cows for several days. One individual was gentle, always speaking softly, stroking the cows and rewarding them with feed. The other individual was always abusive, occasionally striking them, shouting and sporadically using a cattle prod. After several days, the cows' response to the individual was evaluated by having them simply stand near the cows during milking, so they could be seen. The simple presence of the abusive individual increased the residual milk by 70 percent. This observable fact indicates that just the presence of an abusive individual significantly inhibits milk flow.

One may ask what all of this means on the dairy farm. It indicates that everyone who has any contact with the cows should handle them in such a manner that they do not frighten the cows. Impulsive, short tempered individuals should be retrained to eliminate abusive behavior, or completely removed from all contact with the cows. This may sound like drastic action, but the research indicates a noteworthy increase in daily milk production, all at no additional cost to the owner.

An added benefit is an increase in consumer confidence in how dairy producers care for their animals. It is seldom we can find a practice that is economically feasible, technologically possible and socially acceptable.