

STRESS ON THE FARM

One of the presentations at the 2009 Western Dairy Management Conference is being referenced quite often in dairy circles. Dr. Robert J. Fetsch, Extension Specialist, Department of Human Development, Colorado State University, presented on topics most of us wish to ignore. In referencing the difficult economic condition of the dairy industry, Fetsch spoke of stress, anger, depression and suicidal thinking.

The joys and discomforts of agricultural life can be both idyllic and distasteful. The experience of watching crops grow and baby animals being born are examples of enjoyment. Uncertain economic and market conditions, increased workloads, growing government regulations, and unpredictable weather are illustrations that cause tension and constant worry. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has identified farming as one of the top 12 high stress occupations.

A recent report on ABC World News declared that dairy farmers have been hit by the global recession as hard as any single segment of the economy. Anchor, Charles Gibson, said America's dairy farmers are losing an estimated \$1 million a day. An ABC correspondent visited Machado Farms and Dairy near Fresno, California, which recently sold off their herd after losing more than \$2,000 per day. Though it was an emotional decision to sell the cows, owners could only borrow time and money for a limited time. The reporter declared that the typical dairyman is losing .50 cents for every gallon of milk produced.

I spoke with a local dairyman earlier this week who expressed frustration and discouragement over the status of his dairy business. Last year he could see being totally out of debt by 2011. Now, after losing much of his equity and borrowing additional money just to survive, he will be paying his lender for at least 12 more years. We have all seen ups and downs before, but this is as tough as it's ever been on dairy farms.

Fetsch said the first step to helping each other during economic downturns is to recognize signs of farm and ranch stress in a friend, neighbor, spouse, family member, or oneself. Examples may be the farmer quits attending church, no longer stops at the local feed mill or coffee shop, appearance of the farmstead declines, livestock are not properly cared for, fails to wave. Other indicators may be a sad face, slow movements, unkempt appearance, feelings of hopelessness, discouragement, and often alcoholism. Depressed people typically feel guilt and low self esteem. Their inability to keep the farm or ranch together, especially if it has been in the family for multiple generations, is sometimes more than they can bear.

The second step is to take action. Find out what resources are available in your area to assist folks with high levels of stress, anger, depression, and suicidal thinking. That may include clergy, therapists, psychologists, social workers, mental health counselors or crisis intervention centers.

The third step, according to Dr. Fetsch, is to connect. Make an excuse to stop by and visit with the person you are concerned about. Sit down with them face to face and talk. Fetsch said the conversation may go something like this. "Joe, how long have we known each other? We've been friends and neighbors for a long time, and I have to say I am worried about you. I see your sad face. I

hear how hopeless you sound. When you say some of the things you say I become concerned. I am afraid you may be thinking about hurting yourself. Are you? Tell me about it. I've got all the time in the world. Tell me what's going on." Then listen.

Do not moralize. Don't say, "Cowboy up, Joe!" Don't say, "You've got to look at the bright side." Those comments may set up roadblocks so that Joe will stop talking with you. Instead, paraphrase what you are hearing. Many times, having someone to talk to can reduce much of the stress a person is feeling. At other times, it may be necessary to refer a friend, family member or yourself to professional help. Fortunately, we have many skilled professionals within our area that can be very helpful.

I once attended a seminar where the speaker said; "Never correlate your self-worth with your net-worth." You are always more valuable than your financial resources, especially to those who know you and love you.

I always enjoy a good visit. If someone needs to talk, I am willing to be a patient listener.