

10 Profit Priorities

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Here are 10 points to consider while you try to improve profitability on your dairy farm.

1. Optimize pregnancy rate

Get cows inseminated in a timely fashion, find open cows quickly and get them rebred. A reasonable goal is a pregnancy rate greater than 20 percent. Remember that the future result of this will be more calves on the ground, which will increase heifer-rearing cost (not an excuse to let pregnancy rate slide).

2. Decrease calf mortality

Calf losses are unacceptable on many dairies. Strive for a dead-on-arrival loss of less than 4 percent and a pre-weaning death rate of less than 3 percent. These goals are achievable with proper care and nutrition.

3. Optimize milk components

If your bulk tank average is not at least 3.5 percent fat and 3 percent protein (5.5 to 6 pounds of solids per cow per day), then your cows are telling you something. Ration formulation, forage quality and feed delivery are obvious places to start, but don't forget about cow comfort and heat stress.

4. Increase marginal milk

The last pound of milk is where the profit (or at least extra money) lies. Strategies like 3x milking, shorter dry periods, recombinant bovine somatotropin (if your processor accepts its use) and Rumensin all allow for this immediate return. The last pound of milk produced does not cost the same as the first pound!

5. Evaluate ration cost

Produce and feed the highest quality forages to cut purchased feed cost. As always, the least expensive ration may not be the most economical. Calculate income-over-feed cost on a monthly basis. Evaluate additives and supplements carefully. Does research exist and are you really getting a return on their use?

6. Decrease 'broken cows'

Review your involuntary cull rate for the first 60 days in milk. Is it greater than 6 percent?

Transition is the most vulnerable time for cows, but we still see unacceptable levels of metabolic disease. Work to improve nutrition and cows comfort to reduce versus treat disease.

7. Remove low-profit cows

Given the low milk price, this is an opportune time to evaluate which cows are worth keeping. Cull low producers or dry off some cows early. You are likely losing money feeding some cows a lactating ration. In many instances, reducing overcrowding increases overall herd production and health. Don't keep cows around just for numbers.

8. Maximize comfort

Stall design, bedding, stocking density, heat abatement and feeding management are the aspects of a dairy that make the real difference. Embrace the current concepts not only from a profitability standpoint, but also to maximize cattle welfare. You will see the immediate returns of increased production, increased components, reduced disease and lameness and overall improved longevity.

9. Manage & train employees

Allow your employees to strive for success. Institute training in proper techniques for all aspects of your dairy. Set goals to reduce employee turnover, improve efficiency and ensure proper welfare for your cattle. But, don't be afraid to cull. A bad employee can ruin your operation.

10. Find the bottlenecks

Find the rate-limiting steps that prevent you from reaching performance goals. The bottlenecks will be found in one of three areas – equipment (barn, stalls, feed and cows), people (lack of skill) and policy (lack of written or unwritten farm policy). Use an advisory team to help prioritize opportunities.

Of course this list can go on and each dairy is unique.

These points provide a place to start. What are top profit priorities on your dairy?



Pregnancy Confirmation

Embryonic mortality can vary from herd to herd, but studies have shown that a rate of 10 to 20% after the first early pregnancy check (around 30-35 days) is not unusual. Gone undetected, these pregnancy losses are very costly as it delays rebreeding and eventual successful pregnancies, or even worse, leads to the involuntary culling of cows.

The Milk Test a Convenient Option for Rechecks

Producers have many options when it comes to which cows to milk preg test. They can select specific cows on test day, or have cows selected automatically based on days bred.

For example, if a producer would like all cows automatically rechecked at so many days bred (60, 70, 80, etc.), they simply have to indicate the recheck days bred to their DHI staff and the computer will then automatically flag those cows that qualify on each test day, to be milk preg tested.

Likewise, as a dry off check, DHI staff can calculate based on each herd's testing frequency, the days since last bred to use to ensure that all pregnant cows get a final recheck on their last DHI test before they are due to be dried off.

Of course, complete breeding and pregnancy confirmation information must be provided to your DHI staff in order for the automatic enroll options to function properly. The enrollment only needs to be done once, and then cows will be selected automatically on each test day. The auto-generated list of cows can then be reviewed quickly by the customer to ensure accuracy and to add or remove cows as needed. It's that easy!

British Columbia 2013 Reproduction Benchmarks for DHI Herds

Percentile	Pregnancy Rate %	Heat Detection Rate %	Conception Rate %	DIM at 1st Bred	% Cows Pregnant at 150 DIM	Cows Times Bred	% Cows Pregnant to 1st Bred	Days Open	Calving Interval (Months)	Age @ First Calving (Months)
25th	12	32	33	102	32	2.0	32	131	14.3	26.8
50th	15	40	39	93	45	1.9	40	120	13.8	25.5
75th	18	48	46	82	55	1.6	46	111	13.3	24.8
90th	20	54	52	75	62	1.4	53	103	13.0	24.1

For more on how DHI can help you manage your herd for increased profitability, call us today at 1-800-549-4373.