

## Managing Through Records

A quick glance through nearly any popular press dairy magazine will reveal what appears to be a peculiar fascination, on the part of the authors, with record keeping. They want records for monitoring animal health, breeding, milk production, BST, somatic cell counts, human resource management, nutrient management, financial records, and the list goes on apparently endlessly. It seems new items to monitor are invented nearly everyday. If you think about it, we no longer manage cows, we are managing their records. While some folks actually appear to be able to keep up with their records without too much fuss, the rest of us tend to approach record keeping as a necessary evil or an activity to be done only when we have a few spare minutes (of course we never have a few minutes).

In reality, time spent managing and analyzing records can be the most profitable time you spend working as “The Manager”. Why? This is the place where your cows or your farm enterprise “speaks” to you. Speaks? Yes, they can tell you what is the normal situation on the farm and when things are abnormal. Here is an example: During a routine herd check a dairy producer tells the veterinarian “I think we’re having more cows with heel warts than before”. “How can you tell that?” asks the vet. “Well, we just had the hoof trimmer in and she wrapped a lot of feet” indicates the producer. “How many is a lot? And what specifically were they treated for? All for heel wart, or some other problems?” asks the vet. “More than the last time she was here and mostly for heel warts, I think” the producer said. “How many did she wrap last time?” asks the vet. “I

don't know for sure, it's up in the house somewhere, I think. I can go dig it out if you want". Sound Familiar?

We can see where this is going. The question has become; not that there are more feet wrapped this month (and there actually might be more). But how many wrapped feet are normal for this herd and what they have been treated for? The records we would want from the last time the hoof trimmer was on the farm should include not only which animals were treated, but also what they were treated for. Then, the vet will try to determine if this is an issue of a contagious pathogen or perhaps an issue of nutrition or management. The veterinarian is thinking past the immediate questions and looking toward correcting the management, which led to this question. The wise manager could have reviewed these records prior to the veterinarian's visit and attempt to decide for him or herself if this was heel warts or heel abscesses or something else. This would lead to questions about what factors might have caused these signs to occur and what steps are required to correct the problem. What was done instead was to ask veterinarian to evaluate the cause of the problem for the producer and prescribe a bandage to cover the problem. The veterinarian is an expert in health-related problems, not making management decisions for the manager. Using this strategy, the person who should be managing the herd has abdicated his role. He is willing to let events decide his fate, not proactively seek the true nature of the problem. While the example of a herd health issue was used here the same can be said for nutritional, reproductive and production records. The "specialists" and consultants on the farm need producers to keep and understand their own records, before they are able to fully exploit their own knowledge and skills on

behalf of the dairy producer. Without good records you are asking them to go into combat for you without ammunition.

The term “putting out brushfires” is an apt one for this style of management. The fire (management or lack of it) will take care of itself whether we involve ourselves or not. Once this takes place it is very difficult to regain control of the management helm. The alternative to this is to set goals and utilize records in accomplishing them. Each year the state and national averages production averages increase, providing clear evidence that we have the technology and management knowledge to develop and maintain dairy herds with very high levels of performance. In Lenawee County, the top four dairy herds of 2001 (by \$ value), who were participating in the DHIA program, had milk production levels from 25,000 LBS to 29,700 LBS and ranged in size from slightly more than 50 cows to nearly 700 cows. This points out that profitable management is size neutral. Lots of high quality milk can be produced with any herd size. So what do these herds do differently? They realize that they are in control of the cows and the only way they can monitor the cows are through the records they develop.

Whatever they are doing, feeding the herd, breeding the herd or using production management tools like BST, they monitor and analyze the pertinent records of the cows for variation and opportunities to adjust their management. We need to remember management is a fluid thing. It needs to change as the situation changes. The needs of the animals always come first, but they should be allowed to speak through the use of records.