

What to do?

By

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What to do next? That is a question many dairy producers (and others in agriculture) are currently asking. Low milk prices and increasing feed costs are not a pretty picture. Add in the generally sluggish economy, increasing insurance rates and the host of other negative factors out there and things can look really bad. Some will choose (willingly or not) to fold the tent and move on. Some will decide now looks like a good time to retire. But most dairy producers are optimists at heart and are in it for the long run. What should they be doing to help their operation weather this bad period? Yes it is a period, not a permanent condition, prices will rise again in the future. There are still 260 million people out there (and more every day), most of whom consume milk products or by products on a daily basis. So there exists and will continue to exist a market for milk. But that is not what we're talking about here. The question remains what can be done to help perpetuate a sound business while waiting for the situation to improve?

The thing not to do is sell the cows short in order to cut costs. In fact maximizing milk flow right now is arguably the best thing to do. On the face of it, the purchased feed bill often sticks out like the proverbial sore thumb. So it might appear easy to cut some of it off to ease expenses. Unfortunately, purchased feeds are generally a major source of critical nutrients that are directly partitioned off for milk production. These feeds contain high levels of energy or protein and are utilized in combination with homegrown forages to get that "last bit of production" out of the cow. Without them production (and income) will probably be reduced.

Don't be confused here, reviewing the ration(s) used on a dairy to see if savings can be gained from adjusting ration formulation or feed bunk management is a sound and advisable tactic. But the wholesale removal or substitution of ration ingredients without studying the consequences can be devastating to production and by extension farm income. In fact, if feed ingredients are reduced or removed from a ration and production does not drop, then money was being wasted on those feed ingredients anyway. So there is a good reason to review the rations being fed and their ingredients on a regular basis, low milk prices or not. To help in this area, it is almost universally recommended that producers work with a competent and reliable dairy nutritionist in formulating and monitoring the rations fed on Michigan dairies. Another way to help make the most of milk flow is through milk quality.

The part of milk quality we will consider for our purposes relates to the Somatic Cell Count (SCC). By holding the SCC below certain specific levels most milk processors will reward the producer with a cash premium added to the milk check. The lower the average for the herd, the greater the reward. Lets consider an example. In the case of the largest milk purchaser in Michigan a SCC of 176,000 to 200,000 cells/ml SCC results in a premium of \$0.15 per CWT being added to the milk check. For a 151,000 to 175,000

cells/ml SCC, the premium rises to \$0.20 per CWT, and so on. While \$0.15 and \$0.20 don't seem like much, it adds up quickly.

For example, a 100 cow herd milking 65 lb. per cow per day with an average SCC of 180,000 cells/ml, would be receiving an extra \$292.50 per month (\$3510 per year) in premiums. If this herd were compared to a similar 100-cow herd with a SCC of 120,000 cells/ml, the owner would be receiving a premium of \$598.50.00 per month (\$7182 per year). In this example the herd's premium level has doubled to \$0.30 per CWT, but the reduced SCC should also produce approximately 1.5 pounds more milk per head per day than the 180,000 cells/ml SCC herd. This is because the herd owner has improved overall udder health, as evidenced by the reduced SCC (Health udders make more milk). So they receive an extra \$13.50 per month or \$162 per year just due to better udder health in the herd. There is also the issue of the income annually generated by the extra 547.5 CWT of milk from the additional 1.5 lb per day production. No matter how you cut it, reducing your somatic cell count will generate more income. Plus, keeping bacteria counts low will also generate extra income through a small premium as well.

Several areas of herd management come into play when considering SCC. The area many focus on is the level of mastitis in the herd. Generally the higher the SCC, the greater the level of mammary infection in the herd. The reason for this should be fairly obvious. Somatic cells are basically the white blood cells with which the udder is trying to fight infection. The larger the infection, the more white blood cells. But, there are also other things which effect SCC such as stress, cleanliness of the cows and their surroundings, milking procedure and udder prep, cleanliness of the milkers hands and equipment.

When considering the cows surroundings, ask yourself some questions. Are the cows getting to the milking parlor with a clean udder or is it wet and covered in manure? Are the cows comfortable in their stalls or does the housing situation produce stressed out cows? Do your milking procedures meet the National Mastitis Council Guidelines (www.nmconline.org)? Is it possible that the milkers are carrying mastitis bacteria cow to cow or is your clean-in-place equipment doing the job it should? A frank and honest evaluation of these things can point to problems. All of which, are also issues and questions to be considered when managing a contagious, type mastitis.

Evaluation of these factors can help identify ways in which somatic cell count can be managed and reduced. It is easy at this point to get lost in trying to tackle and manhandle a mastitis problem into submission and ultimately lose track of the SCC problem. But, sometimes a mastitis problem can looked at as an offshoot of a poorly managed somatic cell count. Then we can break the problem down to smaller parts and evaluate the practices related to an elevated SCC. At the same time the opportunity exists to work with your veterinarian or other consultant to develop a management plan to monitor, treat and/or cull the cows with the worst chronic mastitis problems. But the key continues to be a focus on management. Without a comprehensive management strategy to achieve these goals it will be difficult to remain focused on an eventual outcome. But having a

planned outcome will help provide you with answers to the question of what to do next.
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