

Monitoring Fresh Cow Health

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One of the most crucial aspects of dairy herd management is fresh cow health. Cows that get off to a good start produce more, need less care and medication, and are much less likely to be culled prematurely. Yet I find that many dairy producers do not monitor the level of fresh cow problems. There is a saying that “you can’t manage what you don’t measure.” How about the measurements in your herd? Do you know how many of your fresh cows suffer from milk fever, ketosis, retained placenta, metritis, or mastitis? It is quite easy to track these numbers, with or without a computer.

As with many other things, I learned a very easy and effective way to monitor fresh cow health from one of my dairy clients. Fred kept a “calf book,” which was simply a record of every calf born, with the date, the sex, the dam, and the eartag number assigned to the calf. In addition to the calf information, Fred also wrote information about any problems the cow had. So by checking the calf book, we could quickly see how his fresh cows were doing. At his monthly herd check, Fred and I would go to the calf book, see how many cows had freshened, and note how many had problems. Our goal was to have 80% of fresh cows having nothing recorded as a problem.

You can do the same thing if you keep a calf book, or you could simply use a spiral ring notebook. Use a ruler to create ten vertical columns. At the top of the columns, enter the headings: Date, ID, Milk Fever, D.A., Retained, Ketosis, Mastitis, Metritis, Calving Score, and Other. Leave the Calving Score column blank if no assistance was provided, and go from 1 to 4 as the difficulty with the delivery increased. On the example page shown, the farm had experienced very good fresh cow health from July 10th to October 4th. One cow, #1421, had a lot of challenges, and another had a retained placenta. Of course, there are computer programs, such as Dairy Comp 305 or PC Dart, which will allow you to keep the same records, but you still have to enter the data.

If your book looks “clean” (meaning very few marks in the columns), then you can be confident your transition cow program is working well. If at some point you find yourself making more marks than you had been, you need to figure out what changed. The nice thing about having records is that you can find the date when the shift occurred, which can help you pinpoint the cause. From there, you can make the needed corrections with minimal losses.

The two most common areas to check when you see fresh cow problems would be nutrition or cow comfort. Did a dry cow forage change? Is a new person mixing feed? Did you try a new ration formulation? Did you get a new dry cow feed delivery? (Yes, it is possible that either your nutritionist or the feed mill made an error).

In the area of cow comfort, did your facilities become over-crowded by a “slug” of animals? Did you have unusual weather? Is there a plentiful supply of clean water? Have you been too busy to keep bedding clean and dry?

Whether you use a computer program or my simple notebook method, it is very important to monitor fresh cow health and be able to find the answers to some of these questions. Being able to spot a

problem quickly and correct it can be the difference between a minor and a major impact on both your profit and your satisfaction from what you do.