

## **“So How Do You Like Summer Now?”**

By Brian Reed DVM, MBA

I remember thinking about how nice summer would feel one day last winter on a particularly nasty, snowy and icy day while driving between herd checks. As I write this column, in the middle of our fourth heat wave of the summer, that day has turned to refreshing and brisk in my memory, compared to a few of the hot, humid and oppressive days this summer. How have you and your herd been dealing with the conditions on your farm this summer?

As a veterinarian, I think of the summer heat stresses that farms feel on their farms from three different perspectives. First, I consider the effects on the animals from the perspective of short-term daily struggles. I am concerned about animal suffering, animal production and heat-related animal health struggles. Dairy farmers need to focus on doing everything they can to minimize these effects on their animals and their bottom lines. Heat stress leads to lower dry matter intakes, weakened immune systems, elevated body temperatures and increased bacterial growth in their surroundings. These situations lead to lower milk production, increased susceptibility to diseases like mastitis and pneumonia, and a potential increase in metabolic conditions for transition cows. Dairy farmers need to be extra vigilant with their fresh cow and milking procedures and protocols, adjust feed bunk management, and make sure any cow cooling systems in place, such as fans and sprinklers, are working optimally. Once the heat stress conditions are in place, it's often too late to implement or install major changes. Instead, it's all hands-on-deck to make sure you can do the best you can with what you already have for resources.

The second perspective I consider when working with farms in the summer is the longer-term effects that are often seen following major heat stress periods. From a production perspective, it's often difficult to get all the cows back to their previous levels, especially after several bouts of severe heat stress in one season. Early lactation cows may not peak as we would like, tail-end lactation cows can just sort of give up, and the cows that came through the dry period during the severe heat can have increased metabolic problems and other adjustments to lactation. Other longer-term effects can include a decrease in breeding efficiency, increased lameness issues, and sometimes an increased somatic cell count due to higher rates of clinical mastitis during the heat events that turn chronic. It is important to work closely with your nutritionist, hoof trimmer, and of course your veterinarian during and after these heat stress events to deal with and prevent the specific issues affecting your farm.

The third perspective to consider when dealing with summer heat stress is that of learning during the difficult times to improve your performance in the future. Now is the time to be considering what the weaknesses are on your particular farm that allowed your situation to be worse than it could have been if everything was optimal. It is always important to keep moving forward with improvements to your cow care and comfort, environment, preventive strategies

and nutrition programs. Maybe you should add more effective ventilation with more or different fans, or open up your sidewalls. You might have sprinklers at the feed bunks for your lactating herd, but not your dry cows. If you don't have sprinklers for your lactating herd, maybe you start there. You may have been considering switching to sand bedding in your free stalls, but this may be the impetus needed to do so. Maybe the areas for you to focus on are your footbath capabilities or improvements to your breeding or transition cow programs.

Now is the time to plan for changes, when summer's effects are still top of mind for you. Additionally, there is an opportunity to apply for Dairy Excellence Grants from the Center for Dairy Excellence to help pay for some of the improvements you may desire for your farm. These grants open on September 1. Wherever you see opportunities to improve, put plans in place now before you forget. It won't be many months until next winter when our short-term memories will be dreaming longingly for those beautiful summer days to come!