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## PDMP Forums are a great way to “learn from one another”

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BELLEFONTE, Pa.—Operating a 1000-cow dairy, the Craig family is not only focused on quality milk production at their Murmac Farms, Bellefonte, Pa., they also pay attention to the quality of the beef produced from their dairy herd. Their culling rate, at 28%, is right in line with benchmarks, and the beef value of the cows marketed generates about 10% of the dairy’s annual income.

Tom Craig and his wife Sherry, son Brian and daughter Pamela together manage the farm. They have been members of the Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania (PDMP) since its inception in the mid-1990s.

This week, they hosted the afternoon session of PDMP’s summer Issues Forum—Making Your Investment in Animal Welfare Generate a Big Payback—where producers learned they can be losing as much as \$300 to \$425 in beef value for every cow they sell at Body Condition Score 2.0 and below.

“That’s the cow that’s been milking her heart out, had a problem and wasn’t eating. By putting a cow like that in a ‘holding’ group and feeding (but not milking) her, she’ll be able to increase her body weight and generally improve her condition score to classify as a higher quality beef animal,” notes Tom Craig.

A National Dairy Market Cow and Bull Quality Audit—conducted by seven universities, including Penn State, on behalf of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA)—revealed 41% of all dairy cows marketed for beef in 2007 were at Body Condition Score (BCS) 1.0 to 2.0, and 63% were at or below BCS 2.5. This represents a considerable amount of unrealized dairy income.

“Dairy producers don’t always see themselves on the ‘beef side’ of the house,” says Craig. “But, we are being looked at with a critical eye with the recent videos on YouTube and other computer avenues. The Humane Society has brought to light things that can go on in getting cows from one place to another. Trying to get a cow off a truck can be a difficult chore, but it has to be done the right way.”

Getting her off the truck starts with a commitment to having her in adequate condition before she gets on the truck. The nice thing about this commitment is “it pays,” says Craig.

He should know. For nearly 10 years, he’s been “feeding” his cull cows to optimize their condition, mobility, and value before sending them to market. These cows are grouped separately from the milk cows and are not milked.

“It does not cost much to feed this group of animals,” says Craig. “We move cows into this group once we determine they are going to be culled. They’re housed and cared for in a bed pack situation with access to pasture. We feed them the weigh-backs from all the other cows. Instead of putting that feed on the junk pile, we use it for these animals to improve their value.”

Currently, he has 12 cows ‘on-feed.’ He likes to see the cows reach a BCS of about 4.0 before sending them down the road.

“One of the critical things is, this allows us to take advantage of the high markets, to control when we market the cows to get the best price,” Craig notes. Higher seasonal markets are one of the criteria he uses for determining when to sell cows from the holding group.

“We go through the group periodically to pick out the ones we should sell, and we target the spring and summer to get them sold before the beef cows hit the market in the fall,” Craig explains. His holding group is a mixed population of animals, including non-breeder heifers coming back from the grower. The amount of time they spend in the holding group varies accordingly.

Those who attended the PDMP forum on Thursday, August 7, learned about substantial premiums paid for what beef processors and USDA market reporters call ‘White’ cows. These premiums are based on quality factors —like beef marbling, the brighter color of the beef and the whiter color of the fat cover—indicating a well-nourished market cow with some grain in the diet.

“I have a mental picture of a cow that I think is a ‘White’ cow, and I know how I want the cows to look before they leave our farm,” Craig explains. “Body Condition Score is only part of the inspection. The biggest thing is the cow’s mobility at the time of sale. She has to be able to get on and off the truck without any problems. I keep an eye on the holding group, and when they get to where I feel their ills are cured, the skinny have gained weight, and the lame are getting around okay, we put them on the next available truck to the beef plant.”

Craig knows if he targets a ‘White’ carcass, he’ll end up with that, or something close. Either way, he’ll get a better price and weight for his investment of pennies on the dollar.

“It’s not just based on weight,” he says. “It’s also the higher price for a more valuable beef animal.”

Feeding simply the bunk refusals from the milking herd accomplishes this. “In the milk herd, we feed to 5 percent refusal and 90% of the time, we have enough refused feed left in the feedbunk, with enough choice, to give the holding group a good ration,” Craig explains.

This holding time before market also helps cows that may have a foot problem. “We give them some time to heal up so they can get on and off the truck and are mobile at the slaughter plant,” he reports. “Beef processors are implementing programs where they put the financial burdens on dairy producers if their animals take special handling or if they can’t walk at a reasonable pace.”

The Craigs sell their market cows direct to Cargill Meat Solutions (formerly Taylor Packing) in Wyalusing. The cows are priced on 'hanging carcass' weight, grade and yield. But the price beef processors pay is also becoming more economically dependent on how their personnel have to handle the animals.

"There's just too much at stake (for beef processors) to mess around with one cow and take a chance on mishandling her," says Craig, adding that the economic incentive to send a 'well' cow to market has never been greater than it is today.

"Processors and livestock markets are becoming even more careful about how they handle these animals and what animals they will accept," he observes. "If a cow falls down on the truck and is down when the truck backs up to the dock, they'll try one time to get the cow up. If she doesn't get up, they'll condemn her. Weak, questionable cows will be held for a veterinarian or inspector to make the determination. If the cow is condemned, the producer will be paying \$100 for the rendering, plus the trucking he has already paid."

The recent negative attention given to market cow issues has prompted more educational initiatives for producers and consumers. Producers have improved market cow condition in several important areas over the past 15 years since NCBA started its Quality Audits. For example, the incidence of down cows in 2007 was notably less than in 1999.

Craig has found there are economic benefits as well as a social imperative for continually improving these statistics.

"As dairy producers, our goal is to use the beef market to supplement our milk income and maximize our return from the beef side by sending a better cow to market," he explains. "At the same time, we're promoting the idea that even though this is the cow's last walk, it has to be handled humanely."

While the trim losses for arthritic joints, bruises and injection site blemishes were all notably lower in 2007 compared with 1999, lameness has increased among market dairy cows from 1994 to 1999 and again in 2007.

Market cow prices do not just reflect beef quality, but also food safety and animal welfare risk at each step in the marketing chain.

When producers market cows that are mobile and have adequate body condition, they make the job of moving these cattle easier for handlers and easier on the animal. They also demonstrate their commitment to animal well-being, not just through the cow's milk-giving years, but including her final crop: beef.

"Education is a large part of what PDMP does," notes Craig. "This forum is one opportunity to bring to the membership an issue like this, to talk about what is being done on a government level and an industry level, and to bring to producers ways to take care of our animals and be successful."

The Craig family values their membership in PDMP. "Our time is limited, so I like to use it meeting with people I enjoy being around and who I can learn things from," Craig reports. "Everyone has a different way of successfully completing the same tasks on their dairies. I enjoy hearing solutions to different problems we face. We can all learn something from one another and by sharing as a group, we help our state have a stronger ag sector."

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