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Mindset and measurement: They like to be challenged to keep getting better

This is the fifth in a series of articles about PDMP's Premier Partners.

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Special for Farmshine**

LITITZ, Pa.—We hear and read a lot about improving milk quality on the dairy farm. Goals for lowering somatic cell count usually focus on the financial benefit of achieving milk quality premiums.

But pursuing the next level in SCC reduction can often become a path full of discouragement, and the quality premium, or the way it is structured, may not be enough to promote persistence on the path.

All too often a dairy will find itself “stuck” between two quality premium levels, inclined to think they can’t get to that next level, so they opt to maintain what they have. Or they think it may cost more time and money to pursue the next level in relation to what the bonus will actually pay them for achieving it. If the bonus isn’t high enough, the producer can lose the motivation.

This kind of thinking completely misses the boat. What is often not fully appreciated is the profit boosting power behind quality-minded management.

Progressive dairy managers, who continually strive for lower SCC in their herds, quickly learn the quality bonus is only the tip of the iceberg. They also find there’s no silver bullet for improving udder health and reducing SCC. It’s a process of evaluating and managing a variety of things, and then monitoring the results with things they can measure.

“The milk quality bonus is positive, but I look at quality as our reputation. We want to put our best product out there on the market,” says PDMP member Justin Risser, herd manager at the Risser family’s 650-cow Meadow Vista Farms, Bainbridge. “When we talk about going to the next level in lowering SCC, my Uncle Don knows immediately what that is worth to our farm: \$3200 a month in bonus premiums for each level we achieve—based on an average month’s milk production of 1.6 to 1.7 million pounds.”

But Justin looks beyond the bonus to what SCC levels mean in terms of mastitis treatment and labor costs and the effect on the cow and her production when she is moved out of her

social group for treatment. “It’s really frustrating when mastitis occurs in cows that are just hitting the peak of their lactation,” he adds.

Frustrating, and costly. In fact, the single largest cost to dairies with elevated SCC is the lost milk production per lactation. Experts estimate the difference between a weighted herd average SCC of 100,000 and an average of 200,000 translates to an overall milk loss for the herd of 2.5 pounds/cow/day. At 300,000, the loss approaches 4 pounds/cow/day.

For PDMP member Tom Barley, manager of his family’s 1250-cow Star Rock Dairy near Conestoga, milk quality bonuses are the second motivation for reducing SCC. His number one motivation is all the other areas of profitability that are related to producing high quality milk.

In addition to lost production, he looks at the correlation between the herd’s SCC level and the rate of new infections.

“A good benchmark to strive for is a rate of new infections at or below 2% of the herd,” notes Dr. Adolph ‘Doc’ Dossman, DVM, director of dairy services for Lancaster Dairy Farm Automation based in Lititz, Pa., which includes the Oxford-based W&J Dairy Sales and Tri-State Farm Automation in Hagerstown, Md.

When Star Rock Dairy recently hit its goal of getting the Bulk Tank SCC to an average below 200,000, their rate of new infections fell below that benchmark, to 1.4%.

“Not only does this reduce the money spent treating cows, it recovers the production they lose when SCC is up,” says Barley. “It also reduces the amount of discarded milk.”

To reach that goal, Barley worked with Doc Dossman and Lancaster Dairy Farm Automation president Dennis Milhoan. Together they made more than a dozen changes in many areas by evaluating everything that affects the harvest of milk from the cow.

“It’s not just one thing,” says Barley. “It’s a lot of little things, all together.”

Milhoan agrees. “So many times people think if they simply change liners or change teat dip, the SCC will go down, and the mastitis will go away. But, unfortunately, it’s not that simple,” he explains. “There are so many factors affecting the infection rate and SCC. The solution often involves evaluating and tweaking a variety of things.”

“Persistence pays,” says Barley. “We followed the recommendations, and it helped to be working with people who stuck with us and were willing to try things. Lancaster Dairy started with a focus on milk quality years ago and has continued to be in the forefront, committing resources to help people achieve it.”

One of the biggest areas to keep in focus is employee training and udder prep procedures.

“Our prep has improved and also our ability to work with our Hispanic employees because Doc (Dossman) speaks their language,” Barley explains, noting that when Dossman comes out to do a milker training on the farm, “He doesn’t just tell the employees what we want by translating word for word, he organizes the information for them, and gives us ideas for our milking protocols.”

“I try to keep it fresh,” says Dossman, who spends about half his time doing on-farm milker trainings and the other half scoring teat condition and conducting on-farm evaluations.

At Meadow Vista, Dossman is currently working with the Rissers on strengthening their prep procedures for peak let down and reduced unit-on time.

For a long time, the SCC average in that herd had been 110 to 120,000. “Then we started to see it creep up into the 140 and 150,000 range,” Justin Risser relates. “We were concerned about losing our 60-cent bonus, but we were even more concerned about starting to see more clinicals (mastitis). We weren’t meeting our farm goals of staying consistently under 150,000. We were at that threshold with the numbers going the wrong direction, and we wanted to get ahead of it.”

For the dairy, the goal is to regain a consistent Bulk Tank SCC under 150,000. For Justin, his personal goal is to try to hit 100,000.

“I feel we can do it by tightening the nuts and bolts around here. But the main thing is we want to reverse the trend of going upward,” he explains. “We saw the best method of attack as improving the teat end condition in the herd. So we had Lancaster Dairy come out and do their ProfitMax evaluation.”

Risser explains the evaluation as “going at it from a lot of angles.” For example, sand samples were cultured, as were the prep towels in the parlor. A complete system analysis was performed according to National Mastitis Council standards, and udder-prepping procedures were evaluated.

But the big thing was: “They actually came out and scored the teat ends,” he adds. “It’s good to have access to Doc Dossman, because he’s a veterinarian who does nothing but focus on the milking process. I know what it takes to make good quality milk, but he scored our first group of 150 cows, and we had only 20% with good teat end condition (1’s and 2’s). We had a lot of 3’s and 4’s. That’s pretty far from the benchmark of having 80% 1’s and 2’s.”

“They have really good management of the cow’s environment and the milking process,” says Milhoan about Meadow Vista. “Their management was making up for the herd’s poor teat end condition, allowing the dairy to still have those good numbers, with SCC at 140 to 150,000.”

“But the poor teat end scores explained why we were starting to see our good numbers go the wrong direction,” Risser relates. “That became the focus of their recommendations for us, and they are monitoring those scores now every four weeks.”

Several weeks after some key changes were made, Meadow Vista’s most recent milk pickup was 98,000: Their first double-digit SCC report in over four months.

Teat end condition is important because it affects the ability to properly sanitize the teat during udder prep. For PDMP member Byron Graybeal, herd manager of his family’s 650-cow Graywood Farms, that was the concern. “We were seeing a lot of hyperkeratosis, which has dramatically improved,” he observes. “Keeping SCC below 200,000 is a primary goal here because everything from production to mastitis falls under that umbrella.”

“Dennis came to us with an absolute wealth of knowledge and found solutions for our problem,” adds his sister Lisa, who manages the milking employees and takes care of the young stock. “They were vigilant, professional and willing to really work with us.”

“It’s a comprehensive philosophy,” says Milhoan about the evaluations he and Dossman perform on dairy farms. “What we find and recommend is not the same for every farm.”

The recommendations vary because they are based on a process of discovering what’s going on, making changes and adjustments, and then keeping the measurements going to see what happens to the teat scores, somatic cell counts and rate of new infections.

Milhoan stresses that whenever a dairy makes a change it is important to, “Have measurables because you need to know where you were before and after you made the change.

“We believe all dairies have the ability to be more profitable by improving udder health, milking performance and milk quality,” he adds. “Our dairy industry here is sustainable and offers a future for success and growth. The key to that lies in having a process for enhancing performance. Our personal goal is to surround the dairy with a system of support.”

As a former high school ag teacher, Milhoan is a big believer in education. Over the past 25 years, his company has presented more than 100 milk quality seminars. “Our approach is more targeted now. With the great programs put on by PDMP, Dairy Alliance and others, we invest in sponsoring those educational efforts and spend more of our time delivering resources and support at the farm level,” he explains. “A consultant can speak at a meeting or visit a farm and make recommendations, but then it’s all on the dairy producer to follow it through. By having our people with them in the implementation and follow-up, they are more likely to see positive change.”

Teamwork, resources, measurement and mindset: These are all critical elements for success on today’s dairy farms.

“There are new recommendations coming out all the time as far as cutting edge technologies and ways to improve the milking process,” Risser observes. “We like to be very proactive and aggressive here, so we want to work with professionals, like Dennis and Doc, who stay ahead on these things and continually challenge us to keep getting better.”

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Photo Captions:

Photos from left:

1) Dr. Adolph “Doc” Dossman, DVM (left) looks over the numbers on a recent parlor report with Tom Barley at Star Rock Dairy. 2) Doc Dossman (left) reviews udder prep procedures with a milking employee at Frey Dairy Farm. Dossman, a veterinarian who grew up in South America, has experience as a former practitioner, researcher and dairy herd manager. Today, he focuses 100% of his time on udder health and the milking process. 3) Byron and Lisa Graybeal talk about improved teat condition and the effect on udder health at Graywood Farms. 4) Justin Risser is motivated to keep the milk quality and udder health indicators moving in the right direction at Meadow Vista Farms.