National Trends in Record Management Programs for Large Dairy Herds

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Modern dairying resembles a business enterprise today more than a family way of life. Economic factors dictate the way dairymen operate including his management practices. Dairying is a fast changing industry and is affected by many internal and external economic, environmental, and sociological pressures. If one is serious about staying in the dairying business and making dairying a sound business enterprise, he should organize himself in a way to consistently meet all the pressures pushing in on him, his financial obligations, and provide him and his family with a good standard of living.

Tools in Successful Dairying. The modern dairyman, large and small, must use every tool available to help meet the competition. Dairymen should develop an organizational structure to deal with the legal and financial problems that may arise and, yet, allow freedom for making decisions as needed. Another important aspect of running a successful operation is a good recordkeeping system. The legal requirements for reporting to the Internal Revenue Service also makes a good recordkeeping system mandatory.

Dairymen have three of the most powerful and effective tools known, all of which provide information to make wise management decisions. These tools are DHI production testing and recordkeeping programs, USDA-DHIA sire summary, and Artificial Insemination Program. Dairymen should learn to use these tools to his advantage. A dairyman that does not use these tools is cutting himself out of competition, yet he is expected to compete with dairymen that do use them. The national trend in dairy management is the heavy use and increased dependence upon these programs by dairymen everywhere.

DHI Production Testing and Recordkeeping Programs. Join your local Dairy Herd Improvement Association. Production testing is the foundation for a good recordkeeping system. DHIA gives valuable information for making wise management decisions. A dairyman without records has no idea of a cow’s production, product value, income over feed costs, reproductive record, health history, or her break-even point. The cows on test have a real economic advantage over the cows not on test. It is impossible to list all the reasons why you should be in the DHI Program, but any good dairyman can do a better job with DHI records.

USDA-DHIA Sire Summary. The USDA-DHIA sire summary gives the genetic ranking of bulls for transmitting milk and fat producing ability to his daughters. Genetic improvement is tied closely to the profit margin in your herd. Dairymen who use bulls of unknown or inferior genetic merit either are unaware of the real cost to them or simply don’t care.
The time a dairyman spends in sire selecting and mating his cows is the most productive and valuable time he can spend on the dairy. Suggested steps of how to use the sire summary might include the following:

1. Make a list of superior bulls with predicted differences above a certain level that have repeatabilities above 50%.

2. Determine the semen price and reproductive efficiency. Screen out the bulls that are over priced and those that are below average in reproductive performance.

3. Rank the remaining bulls on transmitting ability for economically important non-yield traits.

4. Use some young unproven bulls with superior pedigrees.

5. Rank cows on milk yield and same economically important traits as the bulls.

6. Plan the matings of each cow.

Artificial Insemination Programs. The AI industry provides semen from superior proven sires that you may select for use in your herd, the quality of which many dairymen cannot afford to own. The most important advantage of using AI is economics. Many dairymen cannot afford to own or house the number of bulls of the quality he wants to use in his herd. Safety is also an important consideration. There is also less disease transmitted with AI.

Animal identification is one of the most important factors in a successful dairy enterprise. Positive identification for each animal is assured in these programs and is essential for positive genetic progress.

National Trends. In discussing the national trend in record management in large herds, we need to recognize some changes or trends in the dairy industry itself. The number of herds continues to decline with environmental and economic pressures. The number of cows per herd continues to increase as the number of herds decreases. As herd size increases, there are increasing demands put upon management, capital, and labor. There is also a corresponding increase in the demands put upon production testing and record management systems. Dairymen are demanding better and more reliable records and more information for making wise management decisions.

In large herds, management necessarily becomes less involved with individual cow management. Systems of managing by groups of cows therefore have evolved. The managing of groups of cows has also increased the efficiency, utilization, and distribution of dairy labor. Dairy labor, however, continues to maintain the close personal contact with individual cows. Adequate and accurate records on individual cows must provide management with all the information needed to make decisions.

Systems of large herd management have largely dispelled the old adage that individual cow production would suffer in large herds because of lack of personalized cow attention and tender loving care required. The evidence is that the average production per cow has continued to increase as the average
herd sizes increase. This relationship can be explained largely by the fact that large herds can better afford the more capable and qualified management and that they make better use of the information available. It is important to point out that one should not increase size for size sake. The management skills of a dairyman do not automatically increase with herd size. True, dairymen with larger herds have greater opportunities for greater profit, but he also has greater opportunities for increased losses and problems. The income advantage of size comes from a greater income flow generated by more units of production and the reduced cost of production per unit. Maximum profits are the result of management in all operations and applied to all resources.

Computerized Dairy Records. The most significant trend in dairy records is the use of computerized dairy record systems in the DHI Program. The DHI production testing and recordkeeping programs have evolved into the most successful computerized recordkeeping systems in agriculture. The dairy industry must not be locked into management systems that do not give dairymen the information needed for making decisions in his herd.

The DHI system is the result of expressed needs of dairymen for more complete, accurate, and reliable information. As a result, it includes a lot of information, probably more than any individual dairyman can possibly use. He quickly learns, however, to manage the figures and papers well in order to get the information he needs and lets the rest fall, so to speak, between the chairs.

The requirements of, and use of, different information by different dairymen is an indication of variations in the needs and type of management skills in the dairy industry today. The level of management ability and skills of dairymen is higher today than it has ever been. Most dairymen in the computerized dairy record program are making good use of their records in management. Of course, many do not.

There is a strong feeling against the sentiments held by some to force all dairymen to use a single or the same type of program of identical information. This would be a real mistake as there is a great range in the different kinds of information needed by different dairymen based on the nature of their operation, management skills and objectives.

There are three basic categories of options or decisions that dairymen should have in order to receive the type of information he desires which include: instructions to the computer options, management and summary options, and special service options.

Instructions to the Computer Options. An effective computerized record system should provide dairymen with choices or options in the way he wants his records processed reflecting his needs and management skills. In this way, the dairyman's records become personalized taking on the unique characteristics of the herd and of the management and reflects the type of operation, conditions of herd, herd size, and composition, breeding and health problems, labor and external influences, and the immediate objectives and long range goals of the dairy.
We must constantly strive to make the computerized dairy records system fit the needs of dairymen. We must never make the dairymen conform to the demands of the computer, lest initiative and progress be stifled and result in mediocrity. We must be sensitive to the needs of a dynamic and fast changing industry and be willing to change when need dictates.

Options might include whether or not a dairymen wishes to manage by strings of cows (groups) that are in some way similar. Each string may be handled and processed individually as a complete herd and all groups combined. Another option may be the type of animal identification he wants printed - cow, sire, dam, name, or number depending on the one most beneficial to him and his operation.

He might specify the number of days after calving that he wished to breed his cows. He may pre-determine the requirements and level of feeding as well as the number of days dry and days open that he wishes for the cows in his herd. He may also specify his own minimum culling level or break-even point and choose between several feed and accounting systems.

He may also have his cows ranked or compared by milk, fat, fat corrected milk (FCM), solids-not-fat (SNF), or dollar value of product produced. There might also be a management or miscellaneous column. Any information not already specified to enter the computer in other areas may enter the herd. Dairymen may also design any additional program important to his operation and report information through this channel.

Management and Summary Options. This category includes analysis and reports of all management information in addition to production data. There may be management reports for cows to dry, to breed, to calf, cows that may be potential culls as well as strings and herd summaries. Extra reports might include other services such as CMT, SNF, classification or type scores, sires selected, cows diagnosed pregnant, number of times bred, services per conception, or herd reproductive status.

Herd summaries may also show the deviation from the goals expressed as options. It may show in a distribution chart the average days to first breeding and by age group. It may further show the number that were bred to soon and the number that exceeded the option. Herd summaries may also include the average age at calving, calving intervals, days in milk at first breeding, and the number of days open. Monthly production totals and averages are shown for all cows and for milking cows, for the test interval, and a 30 day interval, and on a rolling 12 month basis. Several of these optional reports also included suboptions that still give more refinement to the information essential to dairymen.

Special Services Options. Special service should enable a dairymen to request from the computer information on his herd that is not provided on a monthly or routine basis. Among the most popular of these reports are the comparisons of daughters by sire groups and dam groups. The current enrollment status report is an important option when enrolling a new herd. Other reports might include the list of cows by milk, fat, FCM, SNF, days in milk, days carried calf, age at last calving, lactation number, index numbers over all strings, registration or ear tag numbers, CMT groups, cows to check for pregnancy, and the mature equivalent of cows by milk, fat, or FCM.
Since there is a tendency to manage by strings, there is also a need to provide herd and string summaries. These summaries are an attempt to analyze the group or herd of cows as a unit. These could more appropriately be considered a measure of progress or analysis of the management to determine if the goals and objectives are being achieved. Is the dairyman accomplishing what he thinks he is? What changes in management are required to achieve the objectives? Should the objectives be revised to be more realistic?

Most of our testing and recordkeeping programs and management recommendations were developed years ago when herds were small, production was low, and the knowledge of nutrition and genetics somewhat limited. We must now work hard to develop new methods, procedures, techniques, management recommendations, and testing and recordkeeping systems more applicable to our large modern dairy herds.

The best way I know to assure that dairymen use their DHI computerized dairy record management system is to provide the information that he feels he needs to make wise management decisions. This information may not be the same information desired by all dairymen.