

Straight to the Bottom Line – July 1, 2011

By: Steve Martin

### Investing in Technology

These are certainly interesting times as it relates to feed and milk economics. With the realization of high feed and milk prices, we are being required to think harder, buy smarter and be more creative than ever before. These price relationships have resulted in a new directive that we discuss over and over again with our clients; “with \$20 milk, we can’t afford to leave any milk on the table, and with \$300 corn and \$285 alfalfa, we can’t afford to over feed any cow on the dairy”. So, we are looking hard at lactating and non-lactating diets to be sure we are investing feed dollars for the maximum return and at the same time cutting any un-needed nutrients. Two examples come to mind that I wanted to discuss today. First, on the over feeding nutrient issue, if there was ever a time to be sure and not over condition late lactation cows and dry cows, it is now. There has never been a time to watch long days in milk cows body condition more closely than now. We have cut feed cost in cows over 250 DIM and can see no ill effect. In fact these cows look trimmer and in better shape to dry off and get rested for their next lactation. So, watch closely the body condition of late lactation cows and especially at dry off. Use a good dairy nutrition model to balance these diets to meet the needs for their actual milk production using actual intakes. Be sure to allow for a small but reasonable rate of gain. Find out what is needed, and don’t over feed! Over feeding these cows will cost now in wasted feed dollars and it will cost you again in a few months when you freshen an over conditioned cow with a higher risk of various metabolic issues.

Now let’s discuss the investment angle. It may be a good time to give another look at various feed additives that you have considered in the past, but have never pulled the trigger to include. With the realization of the higher milk value, the potential return on investment is better than ever. I hesitate to call these feed additives and prefer to call them investments in technology. The amount of research that has been completed to look at ways to improve the health of or increase the production of a dairy cow is staggering. Many of these technologies offer ways to increase the energy density of the diet in the bunk. Or, they alter the science in the rumen to

allow for a more complete digestion of the nutrients already in your ration. As well, there is a whole industry it seems that is built around the task of alleviating the negative impact of many anti-nutrients that exist in normal feed ingredients. Related to that is the effort to include technology in the diet that improves the overall health status of the animal. These technologies find compounds in nature that tend to improve cow health. We know that a healthy cow that is burdened with fewer issues will give more milk.

One more area that could be improved by including some of these technologies in the diet is reproduction. The longer I work in the area of dairy nutrition, the more convinced I am that getting cows pregnant in a timely manner is quite possibly the best road to true profitability. The rate of the slope of the backside of a standard lactation curve proves this fact. Many of the technologies I mentioned can result in improvements in the overall reproductive success of the dairy. Some technologies can address this directly. It is certain that healthy cows get more out of the feed they already eat, if we can limit the anti-nutrients and add back some extra energy they will also breed back sooner.

So, as you navigate these truly intriguing times in the dairy industry, be sure that you are not wasting any feed dollars and at the same time don't be afraid of investing in technology that can result in improvements in cow health, reproduction and milk production.