Fresh cow concerns compound

by Steve Martin

WHEN one truly thinks about it, the early lactation period for a fresh cow is a time of high risk just like the early months and years of a new dairy farm. For both an individual fresh cow and for a start-up dairy, a solid start out of the gate is crucial for success. Let's explore that analogy a little further.

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In the unfortunate situation of a new fresh cow or a new dairy farm not having the desired success, several problems can probably be pointed out as the undoing of each.

If a dairy business were to get started and fail after a few short years, we would probably find that there were several things that went wrong. It would likely be described as the compounding of these negative aspects that resulted in the business failure.

Maybe it was two untimely years of drought that made forage quality and quantity a battle. Perhaps trade negotiations had a negative impact on dairy exports and the milk price suffered at just the wrong time for the new dairy. It could have been high feed costs, elevated interest rates, or an unexpected change in the needed labor force. The former dairyman might say something like this, "If we would have only had two or maybe even three of these unexpected negative impacts, we could've made it work."

For fresh cows, too

When we experience failure in the transition of a fresh cow, it's likely that there were several compounding causes as well. We like to use the term multifactorial for this principle. A good definition of multifactorial is something that involves or is dependent on a number of factors or causes.

When evaluating this topic with dairy producers, we list the risks for a fresh cow and think about which risks might be in play at a particular farm. We can't remove all these risks, but working to reduce the number of potential negative impacts is the way to win the battle.

As an example, we might say that an individual fresh cow has 20 risk factors identified on the dairy. We could then hypothetically surmise that a cow can handle or absorb the development of three or four of these risks. However, if the number goes up to six or seven, the cow will have problems and end up at a high risk for culling.

In describing these risks, we can make a few categories, but in many cases, they are interrelated, and one may even be causative of another. We can start with the metabolic diseases common to cows postcalving. These would include milk fever, ketosis, retained placenta, displaced abomasums, and metritis.

A second group of risk factors may be described as poor husbandry. Included here would be items like overcrowding, poor pen conditions, uncomfortable freestall beds, poor bunk management, extended lock-up times, and subpar animal care. Perhaps bad weather fits into this group. While no one can control the weather, dairy managers do have the ability to mitigate this risk by building facilities and procedures to reduce the impact of negative weather on fresh cows.

Another type of risk might be called individual cow factors. Maybe a cow is overconditioned, or less commonly, thinner than ideal at calving. Bad feet, dystocia, and extreme udder edema are all risks that can cause a fresh cow to start out with greater burdens.

Maybe feed quality issues fall into a category of their own. This could include anything from mycotoxins in forages to a poorly formulated close-up or fresh cow diet. A correctly formulated ration could still be a risk for fresh cow health if it is delivered unmixed or overly processed. Feeding errors, failure to include inconvenient bagged ingredients into the ration, and any other feeding irregularity presents risk for the fresh cow.

Stacking the risks

So, let's look at a hypothetical scenario that will illustrate the multifactorial nature of fresh cow problems. Assume we have a pen of close-up cows that ended up a little heavier than ideal due to a recent reproductive issue and a far-off dry cow ration that was a little too high in energy. As these cows are calving, the dairy receives an untimely run of wet weather. Though the facility has nice sized fresh pens with good slope and high-end pen management, the amount of rain simply overwhelms the system, and poor pen conditions result for the fresh animals.

Maybe, in general, these fresh cows are mostly getting along okay, but there were four milk fever cows in the bunch. It was discovered that the new feeder was not adequately trained on the importance of adding the close-up mineral during the week before these cows calved. If this feeding error occurred, and there were four clinical milk fever cows, there were unseen cows that had subclinical hypocalcemia as well. Though they did not go physically down and need subsequent treatment, they did have poor intakes and thus developed ketosis. And, to top it all off, all of this effort working on fresh cows overwhelmed the fresh cow team and the fresh pen was routinely locked up for a full hour.

You would expect that in this hypothetical scenario, the fresh cow culling goals would not be achieved. The resulting discussions might have statements like this by a producer, "Last time we had a run of wet weather, we didn't have near this level of fresh cow problems." Or one might say, "I know for sure we have successfully transitioned overconditioned cows before. Why was it such a problem this time?"

The obvious answer in this situation was the feeding error in the close-up ration. It was the tipping point for cows, pushing them in the wrong direction. The extra lock-up time needed for the additional work on sick cows compounded the problem.

Here is the multifactorial detail — an overly conditioned fresh cow was the unlucky recipient of a significant feeding error and muddy pen conditions that raised its risk of milk fever and ketosis.

What can we learn from this scenario? The answer is simple and starts with the fact that there are things out of your control that are going to have negative impacts on fresh cow health. Knowing that fresh cow problems are multifactorial and that there are other risks that you have the ability to remove from the equation, a "no excuses" fresh cow program is necessary for success.

Realize your risks

You might look at a cow that is a little heavy and also had a retained placenta. When you see that cow, you must acknowledge that it can't afford another negative impact if it is going to be successfully transitioned into the milking herd.

Additionally, if there is a negative transition program influence that isn't fully worked through, realize that this is still causing the fresh cows to start out with one strike against them. Let's say this negative influence is a fresh cow pen that was built to fit the dairy before it expanded. If you happen to have the bad timing of starting some new silage with a small mycotoxin problem and a new feeder concurrently, it could be "moderate" overcrowding is the thing that put the cows over the edge and at high risk of being culled.

Knowing the potential risks for fresh cow health and putting them into categories will help a dairy management team avoid these risks overwhelming fresh cows. Some things can't be controlled, but all things can be considered in order to minimize the potential impact on fresh cows.

Working closely with a veterinarian will be helpful in managing the various metabolic diseases. A good nutritionist will not only be sure to formulate the diets correctly to avoid nutritional issues, but they will also be sure the diets are correctly implemented on the farm. Cross training between the fresh cow health team and the feeders will allow both to see how feeding excellence gives fresh cows a much improved chance for good health and high production.

Maybe a better analogy to describe this principle is that we must work to avoid the last negative influence on a fresh cow that is the "straw that breaks the camel's back." We all understand this. Fresh cows are the most important animals on the dairy. Extra attention to detail will improve the chances for success in transitioning cows into the milking herd. WEST

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