

Management Practices Associated with High-Producing U.S. Dairy Herds

The NAHMS Dairy '96 study assessed dairy cow health and productivity in 20 states that represented 83.1 percent of U.S. milk cows. Over 2,500 producers participated in this USDA project. For this analysis, only herds with 100 percent Holstein cows were compared. Results from three sizes of herds (100-199 cows, 200-499 cows, and 500 or more cows) are shown in the 2 page table printed in the newsletter insert.

Within each size category, herds were ranked by milk production per cow. For each size category, the top 25 percent of herds (top or highest quartile) based on milk production were compared to the bottom 25 percent of herds (bottom or lowest quartile) by management practices used. Across all size categories, there were 446 herds in the top quartile and 460 herds in the bottom quartile. As herd size increased, so did average milk production per cow.

Producers in the top milk production per cow quartile were more likely to engage in a variety of management activities designed to improve milk production or maintain animal health than those in the bottom quartiles. Such management practices started with record keeping where producers in the top quartile were more likely to have DHIA or on-farm computers for record keeping that allow them to make better informed decisions. Good records can help producers evaluate the effectiveness of management practices, such as use of bST and systematic prostaglandins which were used by more producers in the top quartile.

Top quartile producers engaged in more practices designed to improve herd health. They used veterinarians more often as herd health consultants. They practiced more progressive neonatal calf care than bottom quartile producers to ensure newborn calves received adequate colostrum. For heifers and cows, top producers made greater use of vaccines than bottom producers. Biosecurity was a weakness for both top and bottom producers. Few tested new arrivals for common health problems or quarantined new arrivals, but the majority had their new arrivals vaccinated before allowing them onto the operation.

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