

Fresh-Cow Programs Can Fit Herds of All Sizes

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You don't have to run a large-scale dairy to reap the benefits of a freshcow monitoring program. Every cow- whether she has 80 herdmates or 800 - will be better protected in the critical early weeks of lactation with daily temping and evaluation for the first 10 days after calving.

"A lot of smaller-herd owners have found they really appreciate being on a fresh-cow program because it eventually helps free up their time," says Dick Wallace, DVM, MS, associate professor and Extension dairy veterinarian at the University of Illinois. "By paying careful attention to early fresh cows, producers can manage more efficiently because they invest their time in the animals that need it the most. Plus, the program helps avert most of the major 'crashes' that can require a lot of time consuming, intensive care."

Wallace says the nature of fresh-cow diseases makes monitoring necessary even for the most involved herd manager. "Sometimes producers say they know their cows so well they don't need a formal program like this," he explains. "But the fact is fevers can signal onset of disease up to two or three days before outward signs appear."

When temping, the veterinarian says he has seen several methods that work well for small to medium-sized dairies. Tie stalls provide ideal, easy access to cows. In open housing situations, many farms have palpation rails, which also can be used to restrain cows for temping. New, digital thermometers also can provide reading in about 30 seconds, so cows often can simply be evaluated at the feed bunk or in a freestall.

When starting a fresh-cow program, the herd veterinarian's role is critical. "It is important to set up realistic cut points at which treatments are initiated," notes Wallace. "Producers just starting the programs sometimes become frustrated because they suddenly feel like they're treating more animals than before. A veterinarian can write protocols, and help determine when those treatments are most appropriate."

Once the program gets rolling, the herd veterinarian also serves an important diagnostic role. Especially if data is recorded electronically, the veterinarian can observe disease trends and make suggestions to improve herd health. For example, a high incidence of metritis may point to changes in the calving area that can reduce the incidence of infections.

"One of the neat things producers find over time is that they have fewer and fewer cows that need treatment," says Wallace. "A real benefit of fresh-cow monitoring is that it not only identifies the sick cows early; it also helps pinpoint what made them sick."