0809 PD: Timely marketing of dairy cows: Every dairyman's responsiblity

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Monday, 18 May 2009 04:00

At some point in every dairy cow's life, she becomes unprofitable. Due to a decline in milk production, difficulty re-breeding, lameness or a health problem, dairy cows are forced to retire. But, before issuing her a "pink slip," many producers try to squeeze a final drop of milk out of her. It's important to realize that the humane treatment of animals, and timely marketing of these veteran employees, is the best means of eliminating non-ambulatory (a.k.a "downer") cows at sale barns and harvest facilities, and that it's every dairyman's responsibility.

It can never be said enough: "dairy animals are also beef animals." In fact, the dairy industry contributes 15 to 30 percent of all the beef produced in the U.S. via dairy steers, cows and bulls. Historically, beef from cull dairy cows (referred to in a more consumer-friendly manner as "market" cows) only provided about 4 to 10 percent of the total income on a dairy. As a result, market dairy cows have not been viewed as a "product" to which value or quality can be added before harvest. However, with the recent decline in milk price and seasonal increase in market cow prices, upwards of 10 to 20 percent of a dairy's income can come from the sale of market cows and bulls.

Market cow values are rising

The trend for market cow values to increase, which have risen about 50 percent over the past 12 years, is expected to continue. This is primarily due to less and less beef from market cow carcasses going to ground beef. In fact, over 50 percent of a market cow carcass is fabricated into more than 20 different wholesale cuts of beef. These whole muscle cuts are sold to retailers, restaurants and food service and merchandised as many high-quality and high-value products. See Table 1*.

Even though these cuts are demanded by consumers, beef from market dairy cows is not as consistent or free from problems as it needs to be. Today's consumers are more concerned about their food, including how it has been handled and produced. As a result, beef packers are becoming more concerned with the quality and safety of beef from market dairy cows as well. Since dairy cows have been historically culled due to milk price, stall availability and the cost of replacement heifers, little emphasis was placed on their ability to produce a good carcass. For the dairy industry to remain competitive and take advantage of the increasing value of market cow beef, dairy cattle must be free of defects, tender and palatable, and free from drug residues and pathogens at harvest.

National market cow quality audits

Nationwide audits funded by the beef check-off were conducted in 1994, 1999 and 2007 to quantify quality defects and economic losses due to the inferior management, monitoring, and marketing of market cows and bulls. Data from the evaluation of live animals and carcasses have helped the industry determine specific quality and economic shortcomings that need to be addressed.

Based on documented packer/retailer demands, among the dairy cows evaluated, 73 percent had inadequate muscling and 5 percent had inappropriate body condition scores. Among all cow carcasses, 89 percent had muscling scores that were lower than desirable. Relative to carcass traits, 43 percent of cows were considered too light (less than 500 pounds). When defects identified in the audits were summarized, it was estimated that on average $69 was lost for every market cow and bull harvested in the U.S. See Table 2.

In response to these audit results, industry leaders relayed five major conclusions to the industry to address quality defects and economic losses. See Table 3 .

Since the biggest problem is that cows and bulls are not harvested in a timely manner, dairy producers have a great opportunity to easily improve the quality and value of their market cow carcasses. Shipping market cows earlier can reduce the incidence of light-muscled and light-weight carcasses, reduce lameness and downer cow occurrence, and ultimately provide an end-product that meets packer, retailer and consumer demands. Ultimately, the dairy industry can regain some of the economic losses (nearly $200 million among the 3 million dairy cows harvested annually) by improving the management, monitoring and marketing of market dairy cows and bulls.

Animals should be culled and harvested as soon as possible when a problem is first visible. This includes obvious "defects," such as cancer eye, lameness, injury and disabled or downer cows, as well as inadequate muscling or body condition score. If cows are not culled early, a dairy risks losing 100 percent of the value of that cow if the carcass is condemned.

Dairy producers should consider following these four key points in regard to selling market cattle:

1. Sell market animals before they become severely thin – disabled or downer cows often result from very weak or thin cows.

2. Do not send market animals to harvest that are near-downers or have advanced cancer eye.

3. Practice humane cattle handling and management to avoid lameness, bruising and injury.

4. Do not sell market animals that pose a public health threat or have a terminal disease condition.

Monitor body condition score (BCS) Declining body condition score (BCS), or external fat reserves, can result in several defects and value losses at harvest. Based on audit results, about 60 percent of market cows don't have enough BCS at harvest. In addition to producing a less-than-desirable carcass, a market dairy cow with inadequate fat cover and muscling is more susceptible to bruising, abscesses, swelling and being condemned, as well as more likely to become weak, disabled or even a downer.

Cows sold with a BCS of 2.5 to 3.0 will produce the most valuable carcasses for beef. See Table 4. However, in 2007, 63 percent of all dairy cows had a BCS of 2.5 or lower at harvest.

Unfortunately, nearly 75 percent of market dairy cows have inadequate muscling and about one in 20 cows is in a serious negative energy balance with a BCS of 1. These extremes can be prevented through better management and more timely culling.

Lameness and bruising

Lameness is a common reason for culling dairy animals. When cows become lame, they are more likely to have problems walking and being transported, and arthritic joints are more likely to occur and be trimmed at slaughter. In most dairy herds, a large number of cows are lame (nearly one in four, according to research in Wisconsin). The 2007 audit found that 49 percent of dairy cows at harvest were lame. Lame cows are more likely to have problems walking and being transported, and arthritic joints are more likely to occur and be trimmed at harvest. On average, over 39 pounds of beef per cow is lost due to trimming of arthritic joints and up to 30 pounds due to extreme bruising.

To avoid lameness problems, it is important to closely monitor cows for lameness. When a lameness problem is first observed, an effort should be made to avoid more severe problems and to consider marketing that cow immediately. Cows marketed with a severe lameness problem have a greater risk of becoming a downer during transport. Cows with severe lameness (i.e. they will place limited weight on one foot) should not be sold. These cows should be euthanized – they are beyond the window for profitable and responsible culling.

Conclusions

The timely marketing of dairy cows is every dairyman's responsibility, and it's the right thing to do. In light of all the recent publicity concerning weak and downer cows, we need to be especially vigilant about the condition of market cows that are sent to the sale barn or packing plant. The market cows that we ship are a reflection on all of us. If you are unwilling to harvest these cows for home consumption by family and friends, do not send them to market! The days of hauling spent canner cows to the sale yard and hoping to retrieve enough cash for gas are over. Prevent the problem cow – it's the right thing to do. ***PD***

**Tables and figures omitted but are available upon request to editor@progressivedairy.com*

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