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**Increase the rank of proven AI bulls.** DHI summaries for several years show that Virginia dairy producers breed about two thirds of their cows to proven bulls, 15 to 20% to AI sample sires, and the remainder to "other" bulls. The proven AI bulls used are at the middle of the pack, with an average rank for Net Merit of 50 to 60%. Herd bulls and low ranking AI sires both reduce genetic progress for lifetime economic merit. Producers have to control days open, labor for heat detection can always be used in other ways, high producing cows can be tough to get settled – there always seems to be a reason for some folks to have a bull around. While some natural service by some producers may be inevitable, it is difficult to understand why producers use AI bulls that rank between the 50$^{th}$ and 60$^{th}$ percentile. Almost HALF of the active AI bulls on the market are genetically better than the AI bulls used in current matings in Virginia DHI herds. The labor required to breed a cow to a low or high-ranking bull is the same. Semen prices are similar for superior bulls and lower ranking bulls if a little discretion is used. High-ranking bulls are routinely available, in large quantities through the AI studs that market semen in this state. The first step to address this problem is to be aware of where the bulls rank before the purchase. Check out the Virginia Tech Top Sire list at http://www.dasc.vt.edu/sires/index.html. Bulls on that list are in the top 15% or so of all active AI bulls. We update it with each new sire summary, four times a year, so it is always current. Don't use the web? Ask your area dairy Extension agent for a copy, or call me. All it takes to solve the problem of low rank on service sires is to buy semen on bulls that are the current version of this list and then to use that semen immediately. Producers should take responsibility for the selection of service sires. Don't assume that a mating program will insure the use of better bulls – lots of Virginia herds rely completely on mating programs and the results cited above speak for themselves. It's up to the producer to use the top ranking bulls.

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**The National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) conducted a survey of dairy operations in the United States in 2002.** The survey was conducted in 21 major dairy states including Virginia in order to study animal health in dairy operations. The percent of herds on DHI test was 44.8% accounting for 50.2% of cows. This is below the Virginia average of 57% of herds on test and greater than 60% of cows. Approximately 19% of herds had on-farm computer record keeping with Dairy Comp 305, PC DART, and DHI PLUS being the most common. The rolling herd average of all herds was 18,235 lbs. of milk per cow. Rolling herd average increased as herd size increased and herds greater than 500 cows averaged 21,902 lbs. Average days dry was 60.6 and age at first calving was 25.4 months. Overall 47% of operations were feeding a total mixed ration (TMR). This was 90.2% for herds over 500 cows but 36.6% for herds less than 100 cows. Higher producing herds were more likely to use a TMR and 65.7% of herds over 20,000 lbs. of milk per cow used this method of feeding. These results demonstrate the acceptance of the total mixed ration for supplying a consistent, high quality ration to lactating cows. Over 70% of operations used forage test results to balance rations. Eighty-eight percent of herds of greater than 500 cows tested feeds versus 66% for smaller herds. The good news is the majority of herds regardless of herd size recognized this practice as being

important. Bovine somatotropin (BST) was used in 15.2% of operations representing 22.3% of cows. In herds over 500 cows over 50% were using BST versus 8.8% of herds under 100 cows. There tended to be more herds in the west using BST than in the midwest, northeast, or southeast and is mostly related to herds being larger in the west. Average days in milk before initial dose was administrated were 81 indicating producers were adhering to the products label. Pasture was not used for lactating cows in 52.4% of operations, but 32.5% used pasture and moved cows at least once a week and 15.1% used pasture but did not move cows frequently. Oral drenching at time of calving was done on 20.1% of operations. This drench is typically an energy source such as propylene glycol or calcium propionate and is used to reduce energy deficits and improve milk production in early lactation. These results reinforce the idea that there is more than one way to be profitable in the dairy business. Even the most established concepts such as forage testing and TMR feeding are not practiced on all operations. Every herd is unique with their own unique set of constraints.

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**** Upcoming Activities****

Professional Dairy Heifer Growers Association Annual Conference, *Green Bay, WI.* Mar. 27-29

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