

DAIRY PIPELINE

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Your Dairy History: Tracking Dairy Management Decisions

—Dave Winston, Extension Dairy Scientist, Youth; dwinston@vt.edu

“...What changed or happened six months ago that might have impacted the SCS?”

Several years ago, another dairy extension specialist and I were conducting a DHI herdbook clinic for a dairy farmer in the state. During the records analysis, we noticed that somatic cell scores (SCS) at the beginning of the 12-month testing year were very desirable and that the herd was likely receiving milk quality premiums. However, midway through the year, SCS increased drastically and remained high for the rest of the year. This observation led to an interesting discussion with the farmer. We pointed out the issue as a concern and began asking questions to pinpoint the source of the problem. The first

maintaining a dairy management diary. A dairy management diary is a structured way of keeping track of changes made in the operation. One can then use the information to evaluate success/failure of changes, monitor progress toward reaching goals, and to aid in troubleshooting herd problems.

A dairy management diary can be as simple or as detailed as desired. For example, one could use a journal style notebook. Alternatively, handwritten notations in the remarks box on a DHI-202 Herd Summary report could also be an effective way to maintain a history (see example 1).

Both of these options are simple, but are not easily searchable. This is where a spreadsheet may come in handy. A great advantage of having data in a spreadsheet is the ability to search, sort, and/or filter information quickly (see example 2).

Types of information recorded in any kind of dairy management diary will vary from farm to farm. As one develops a personalized dairy management diary, it would be helpful to ask those who frequently consult with the dairy (extension agents/specialists, veterinarians, nutritionists, consultants, and/or bankers) to make suggestions on the information that would be most impactful for the dairy.

After a few moments, his eyes lit up and he recalled that he hired ‘Bob’ as a milker six months ago. After identifying the probable source of the problem, possible solutions were discussed that included retraining or reassigning the employee in question.

Winter is a great time to evaluate dairy management, recordkeeping practices, and information needs. In conclusion, a dairy management diary may be a simple, yet effective way to enhance information that is available for herd management.

Example 1: DHI-202 Herd Summary.



In this simple situation, the question of “what changed?” might have been answered a little quicker and with more confidence if the farmer had been

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	A	B	C
1	Category	Date	Action Taken
2	Employee	01/01/16	Suzie Smith hired as milker
3	Parlor	04/30/16	Milking equipment serviced
4	Employee	05/01/16	Henry Jones hired as calf manager
5	Calves	07/12/16	Automatic calf feeding barn completed; first calves in
6	Freestalls	08/15/16	Bedding changed from sawdust to sand
7	Feeding	09/15/16	Whole cottonseed added to lactating cow ration

Example 2: Spreadsheet.

Upcoming Events

See [VTDairy](#) for details.

January 3, 2017

Financial Workshops with
Alex White

•9:30-11:30 Verona
Government Center

•1:30-3:30: Harrison Farm
Credit

January 11, 2017

ProCrop meeting, Wyers Cave

January 16-20, 2017

[Area Dairy Conferences](#)

Mon. 16th--Culpeper

Tues. 17th--Franklin

Wed. 18th--Valley

Thurs. 19th--Amelia/Southside

Fri. 20th--Southwest

January 24, 2017

Virginia Dairy Princess
Pageant, Roanoke

January 26, 2017

Reproduction Meeting at
Select Sires in Rocky Mount
Night Meeting

February 15-16, 2017

[VSFA & Virginia Tech Cow
College, Hotel Roanoke](#)

February 22, 2017

No-Till Conference,
Rockingham Fairgrounds

March 2017

Hands-on Calf Workshop –
TBD

April 25-26

Grazing School

If you are a person with a disability and require any auxiliary aids, services or other accommodations for any Extension event, please discuss your accommodation needs with the Extension staff at your local Extension office at least 1 week prior to the event.

For more information on Dairy Extension or to learn about current programs, visit us at VT Dairy—Home of the Dairy Extension Program on the web at: www.vtdairy.dasc.vt.edu.



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Dairy Management is a Continual Progression

—Kevin Spurlin Extension Agent, Grayson County; spurlink@vt.edu

A heart monitor that “flatlines” indicates impending death if something isn’t done quickly. Dairy managers may be tempted to stagnate in the status quo, and that can

“Dairy managers may be tempted to stagnate in the status quo, and that can spell trouble for the dairy operation’s future.”

2016 than 2008. The lower number of herds on test is not necessarily an indication of herds which have exited the business, but we know many have in Virginia. Another fact from the Virginia summary is that the average number of cows in test herds has increased from 164 in 2008 to 215 in 2016, mirroring national trends in herd expansion.

The next set of statistics may be the most revealing about management trends from October 2008 to October 2016. First, the average cow is producing 2,487 more pounds of milk annually from 21,474 lbs. in 2008 to 23,961 lbs. in 2016. From October 2008 to 2016, services per pregnancy have declined (3.3 vs 3.0 on all cows), pregnancy rate has increased (14.6% to 16.6%), and average SCC score has declined (3.1 to 2.7). To summarize the past 8 years of Virginia herds on test, we can say there are fewer of them, and they are bigger and produce more milk. These herds have done so while improving metrics such as reproductive efficiency and udder health. It is not a simple fact that lower producing farms have exited and thus are not pulling the average down. If you look at the DHI rankings printed in the Virginia Dairyman, most of the herds at the top in both editions are not producing the same in 2008 as in 2016. Those herds

are consistently moving forward. That’s the point! Dairymen who were average in 2008 and are still at the same point are now

below average. This data alone does not help us explain cause and effect relationships behind the trends, but the average 2016 dairyman is doing a better job than in 2008. Notice I didn’t say they were perfect, just better.

Now it is time to critically consider your own operation. Which benchmarks are flat, not improving measurably in the last 5 or 10 years? Once you identify those, pick the one most impactful to your operation’s success and determine to do one thing in 2017 to make that benchmark move in a positive direction. If you are struggling to identify where to start because you know there are several areas you would like to address, it may be helpful to bring in an outside consultant to provide an honest, external assessment of your operation. Often the easiest way to start cleaning a house is one room at a time.

Another way a dairy operator may breathe new life into their own management is to simply get away. Everyone needs some time away from the rigors of their livelihood and business. It helps refocus, reassess what is important, and reinvigorate. Being away may make the heart grow fonder, stimulating new ideas and rekindling the fire for the dairy business. If being away feels too good, maybe it is time to think about a farm transition plan to bring in new energy or gracefully exit dairying.

Make a commitment as you start 2017 to progress in one area of your dairy operation this year. Pick one area in one room to clean, and you may find that the whole house gets a facelift because progression usually doesn’t happen in one big event, but in small steps over time.



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2017

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