Managing dry dairy cows

Source: Donna Amaral-Phillips, UK Extension Dairy Professor

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, dairy farmers may have more dry cows than usual. It’s a good time to think about how you manage dry cows.

Remember with summer coming soon, dry cows subject to heat stress give less milk during that lactation and that means their calves and even grand-calves give less milk. Heat stress impacts immunity in calves born to heat-stressed mothers. Ideally dry cows should be under fans in a barn, but rotation of shade trees may help.

Another thing to watch for in dry cows is mastitis. They are more susceptible two weeks after they dry off and then again two weeks before calving. You need to work to decrease mud and prevent cows from congregating around a shade tree. Those things are always important, but even more so during their dry times. Some of the highest annual bacterial counts in a cow’s environment can occur during the summer.

You should feed dry cows a diet that provides adequate, but not excessive, amounts of energy. Diets should contain 0.60 to 0.62 Mcals NEL per pound of dry matter. You also should aim to maintain body condition so that dry cows calve in a body condition score of 3.0 to 3.25. Feeding excessive amounts of energy has been shown to increase fresh cow problems and, in today’s financial situation, wastes financial resources.

If you are vaccinating dry cows to prevent diseases in the calf or to decrease the severity of environmental mastitis (E.coli), make sure to provide all of the boosters needed so that these vaccines will provide the expected protection.

If you have made the decision to dry off some cows early due to lack of milk demand, place them in a separate group from your regular dry cows who are pregnant. Feed them a maintenance diet so they don’t get fat. They may need a special ration, so work with your local county extension agent to develop one if you need help. This strategy can help reduce your feed bill.

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