

Summertime Management Practices for Getting Dairy Cows To Milk

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With the temperatures and humidity on the rise, now is the perfect time to review your management practices and see what changes can help your dairy cows cope better. Cattle are the most comfortable when the outside temperatures are between 40 and 70 F. As the temperature and humidity rise, cattle are subjected to heat stress. Cattle that are heat stressed, eat less and do not milk or grow as well. By altering management practices, we can reduce the amount of heat stress on cattle.

Ways to reduce heat stress in the milking herd:

1. Rations should be rebalanced for summertime feeding. Dry matter intakes and mineral needs, for example potassium, change with the hotter temperatures. Rations should provide adequate nutrients to support milk production, but, at the same time, contain adequate amounts of effective fiber or chew factor.
2. Feedbunk management is most critical during the summer months. Cows need to be fed earlier in the day so that the heat of digestion does not peak during the hottest part of the day. The heat load from digesting feed peaks 4 hours post feeding. In addition, feed bunks need to be cleaned out daily to prevent feed from heating up and discouraging intake. Feeding cows more times a day encourages cows to eat more often and helps prevent feed from heating in the feedbunk.
3. Fans and sprinklers which wet the cows' coat decrease heat stress on cattle through evaporative cooling. These systems should be used when the temperatures climb above 75F. Fans and sprinklers should be located in the holding pen to cool cows waiting to be milked. These systems placed over the cows at the feedbunk can help encourage cows to eat more feed. Additional fans placed in the freestall area will encourage cows to lie down and ruminate or rechew their cuds.

When it comes to ways to reduce heat stress, make sure you remember heifers and the dry cows.

1. Don't forget to minimize stresses on cows 2 to 3 weeks before calving by preventing overcrowding and reducing heat stress. Overcrowding of loafing areas and feeding facilities increases competition and may increase the incidence of various metabolic diseases, such as milk fever and displaced abomasums or twisted stomachs, around calving. Systems need to be in place to help cool these cows with fans and sprinklers to ensure a smoother transition back into the milking herd. This may be as simple as allowing dry cows and cows close to calving access to the holding pen with the fan and sprinklers turned on for an hour or two.
2. Heifers and dry cows need shade during the heat of the day. Cattle on pasture which were provided shade tend to graze more during the daylight hours. This is especially true of cattle grazing endophyte-infected fescue. It is important that these cows do not congregate under a few shade trees and create a mud hole. These conditions can greatly increase the chances for mastitis. Also, it is important to control flies to prevent mastitis problems later.
3. Water sources should be shaded and provide clean, fresh water. Water that has been heated by the sun's radiation can decrease total water intake, decrease feed intake and thus decrease growth and body condition stores dramatically.
4. Manage pastures to ensure that cattle have quality pasture forages to consume. Cool season grasses such as fescue and orchardgrass do not grow appreciable during the heat of the summer. Thus, other forage crops or hay are needed to ensure these animals get adequate forage to eat and grow or maintain body condition.

By taking a few minutes to review your summertime management practices can greatly improve your cows' ability to cope with the heat and humidity.