Trouble Free Cows

By Dr. John Popp, PhD.

The amount of time that I have spent talking to dairy farmers in Canada, the United States and in Germany has taught me many valuable lessons. Recently I lead a group of 18 farmers on a trip to Germany to see pure Fleckvieh herds in Southern Germany (Bavaria) and Fleckvieh crossbred herds in Western Germany. Although we toured many dairies during this trip, I am going to share the lessons learned from three of these dairies in particular.

This trip provided an opportunity for participants to experience how farms are managed in Europe and compare European husbandry techniques to what they do on their own farms. No farms are alike when it comes to the challenges that they face and as a nutritionist I have seen cows produce more milk on a lower quality ration than comparable herds using higher quality feeds.

As one would expect, there were differences in management techniques but we found some common themes that were pervasive throughout European, Canadian and United States herds.

Herd One

One of the first herds we saw in Bavaria had been bull breeding for many years. They had a herd replacement rate of 17% and fed primarily grass silage and some grains. This herd focused heavily on good feeding practices using lower energy diets and they settled for average milk production. Cow health and reproduction was very good. Cow quality was not as high when comparing to other herds using top AI sires only, however, the productive life of this herd was impressive.

Herd Two

This herd was outstanding in many regards. Production of this herd was 75 lbs with a butterfat at 4.0% and protein at 3.7%. The cows were being fed a diet that was still 55% forage equivalent, however, corn silage was used heavily. Production of the herd was higher and as expected, herd replacement was approaching 30%. Overall appearance of the herd was youthful. The farm had a history of using high proof AI sires and it was well reflected in exceptional cow quality and production in the herd.

Herd Three

The third herd we visited had good production and quality cows to match but was bottlenecked in their young stock rearing operation. Calves suffered from poor ventilation leading to increased respiratory disease. Fermented feeds were also introduced too early to the young calves, hindering their growth and performance. The setbacks experienced early in life for these calves were reducing overall herd milk production when they entered the lactating string.

Key Messages For Trouble Free Cows Found In European, Canadian And US herds:

1. Manage and breed for cows that will have a long productive life.

2. Focus on providing young stock with a strong foundation to have a healthy future in the herd (ventilation, sanitation and calf nutrition and health programs).

3. Focus on dry cow rations and management such that cow groups are consistent in body condition and transition well into milking.

4. Place a strong emphasis on feed preservation, feed quality and feed out management.

5. Minimize crowding and maximize cow comfort.

A Common Theme

As a general rule, all three of these herds in Bavaria had an abundance of trouble free cows. These producers understand that trouble free cows are a product of the management system and nutrition long before they enter the milking string. Often times a nutritionist is met with... the cows are not giving enough milk...can you change the formulation for more energy? Of course with that approach to nutrition we understand that there will be more 'troublesome' cows. The real challenge is to find the balance point of where to push and where not to in order to maximize the profitability of each dairy.

Are the dividends always in the milk cow ration? The answer is 'no'. The farms that I have seen become the most successful in producing milk profitably are usually the ones that focus on the dry cows and invest time and energy in the farm's young stock. Use some of the lessons we learned on this trip and implement them on your dairy to increase the number of trouble free cows in your herd.