

Walking pens provides different perspectives

by Steve Martin



Abby Bauer

RATION formulation is probably the most critical task for a dairy nutritionist. Of course, there are many other things that fall under my job description, but I need to be the best at deciding the details of my client's rations.

Many of the other tasks on my to-do list can potentially be completed by others on the farm. Those include evaluating forages and other ingredients, analyzing the large amounts of data generated by a dairy, or visually inspecting cattle. Although very important to my job, they can be completed either by myself, a team member, or even an employee at the dairy.

The paramount point is that these tasks be completed under the direction of the nutritionist who is actually building the diet. At the center of these efforts is the assurance that the diets being fed are performing the way they are intended. In many cases, things evaluated while at the dairy will challenge the current formulation and be a potential basis for a ration change.

Due to the importance of on-farm evaluation, the smart nutritionist will work to make this process as effective and efficient as possible. As dairies have gotten larger, the need for systematic ways to complete this task have become more important. The effort required to complete the list of evaluations of a client's total herd might now only equate to one out of a couple dozen or more pens on a larger dairy. Similarly, the approach must adjust.

No matter if this task is done with the aid of some technology or if it is

purely "old-style," the smart dairy producer collaborates with the nutritionist regarding what is needed during an on-farm evaluation. To think more deeply about this, it is important to decide what things a dairy nutritionist might need to evaluate when on the dairy. Obviously, much of the work of evaluating ingredient analysis, considering feed cost, ration modeling, and evaluating performance data can be done remotely. The things that the nutritionist must see, touch, smell, or even taste need to be detailed so that during the on-site visit, these tasks are completed.

Get in the pens

We have traditionally called this on-farm effort "walking cows" or maybe "walking pens." I think this is a pretty good description of the task, but it misses the chance to emphasize evaluation of the feeding area, the parlor, or perhaps the cropping fields. No matter what we call it, we know what needs to be done.

On most client farms, I am tempted to repeat the same procedure each visit, but it is probably a good idea to change this up a little to be sure the monthly look-around doesn't become stale or repetitive. I find also that doing the on-farm evaluation during different times of the day is quite helpful.

I really like doing my job in the summer. It is not that I particularly like hot weather more than cold, but rather I like the long daylight hours in the summer. My favorite time to really get a good look at the dairy is during the evening hours between when most of the employees have headed home for the day and dark. The ability to really evaluate feed quality without worrying about being run over at the worst or in the way at the least is best. A busy feeding area with multiple loaders and a delivery truck or two is not conducive to the important task of taking time to fully evaluate the

ingredients being used in the diets.

There is no bad time to look at cows. Many clients prefer the nutritionist evaluate cows early in the morning when they may be locked up for herd work or breeding. This is a nice time to see cow-to-cow body condition variation and side-by-side manure consistency. It is not good, however, for evaluating cud chewing, mobility, and general animal health.

My personal preference is to look at cows when they are loose, walking around, standing, lying, chewing, sleeping, and so forth. In reality, on a large dairy that takes the better part of a day to get around, you will get to see some cows on the stanchions and some cows at more of a resting and social time.

I also like to watch cows walk to and from the parlor. This is a great time to evaluate overall locomotion and general cow appearance. Cows coming back from the parlor can be evaluated for appetite, water consumption, and so forth. The first few in and the last few out of the parlor are where you might find problem animals. During a cow walk, following a pen or two to the parlor is a great way to get from one side of the dairy to the other.

Comparing notes

One topic that comes up often is the question of doing this walk alone or along with the owner, herdsman, or manager. There is probably no right or wrong answer here, but there are pluses and minuses with each. Maybe alternating this is best. I probably see the cattle a little better when doing at least part of this walk by myself. This should be an individual decision made with each client and operation in mind.

There is also an opportunity that exists to improve the efficiency and timeliness of the formulating nutritionist. Others on the team can complete part of this evaluation and report back. That alternate evaluator could

be a dairy employee, a co-worker of the formulating nutritionist, or even another professional that works with the dairy and is willing to collaborate. The point is that the animals, feed, pens, and entire farm need to be evaluated. The observations need to be documented and actionable items need to be addressed.

To have success in a team approach, the dairy evaluation process should be standardized, and numerous individuals can contribute to the task of a good on-farm evaluation. Setting standards can help avoid bias by any one individual as well as build a good database for historical trends for body condition, cow comfort, manure health, and ration presentation.

Though we may call it "walking cows," it is really much more involved than a stroll through the pens. Each dairy needs its own set of specifics for what items might be a little different from the norm. Every dairy is different, but a standard form could be employed to be sure important items are not missed during a farm visit.

Strategize your evaluations

For a nutritionist, it is impossible to say if the on-farm portion or the time behind the computer is most important to building a ration. Can they both be the most important? One will likely not be successful without the other. These tasks can successfully be completed by multiple team members if a good structure is in place to bring some standard terms, measures, and expectations to the process. Formulation is also possible in a team environment, but it is likely best that one person "own" the formulation and be ultimately responsible for it being correct.

Ration cost is the largest single investment in a dairy operation. Taking time to be sure it is built as close to perfect as possible is crucial. But, formulations, just like milk, have a shelf-life. The formulation that is perfect when the report is emailed to the dairy will not stay perfect for very long. Things change on a dairy as in any biological system. It is the on-farm evaluation process that offers input on when the current diets need to be made perfect again.

Some dairies are proud to say that they have not changed their ration in a really long time. I get the positives in that and agree that changing rations too often is a problem. But, we know for sure that forages are changing as well as seasons, weather, intakes, and more. Additionally, the visuals on the cows are changing if you are paying close enough attention.

Building an on-farm evaluation system that is effective in tracking and documenting visual changes at the dairy and having the knowledge and experience to make appropriate ration adjustments as needed is truly feeding for the bottom line. **WEST**



Martin